

MEASURING SPIRITUAL SUCCESS

(Prepared for Fairview Memorial's winter Bible study 2-13-2018 by J. A. Reynolds)

Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) Jesus said this to His model church which He shaped with his own hands to appear like Himself before the world! They would soon be multiplied into countless local churches to fill the inhabited earth and "salt" it so as to make countless communities more palatable to God. Did he not intend for them to project that same model perpetually?

"For ye see your calling (to be saints), brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yea, and things which are not (highly regarded), to bring to nought (nothing) things that are (highly regarded): That no flesh should glory (boast) in his presence." (1st Corinthians 1:26-29) Do we really see our calling to sainthood, as Paul instructed the carnal Corinthians who apparently had not very well perceived it, or are we ignoring what Jesus also taught about **what real Spiritual and eternal success** is in preference to our fleshly instincts? Do the most of those on our membership rolls understand this message and strive to be like Jesus commanded?

"If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19)

"Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets." (Luke 12:26) This is the greatest indictment I can find against Billy Graham and other "Fundamentalist" and "Pentecostal" "evangelists," and the mass evangelism they represent, and the megachurch fad they encourage, and also against many of our present religious generation of nominal "church" members. Most of popular worldly society admires, honors, and exalts them.

"And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19) The kingdom keys of binding and loosing were to be given to the same entity to which the Father desired to give the prophesied Spiritual kingdom which Jesus "set up", that is, the church, and the countless "churches" it would soon become. This is confirmed by Matthew 18:18 where the very same promise regarding the same two keys are promised to a plural pronoun, that is, **whatever local church is using the key of loosing as the ultimate extent of the church discipline process.** *"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye (PLURAL) shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:17-20)* As hard as it proves to be in many times and places to get those who are really saved with a genuine born again experience to follow the Lord in baptism and church membership and continue faithful until God calls them to their eternal home, **faithful church members tend to be hesitant and neglectful to discipline each other in a timely manner for fear of driving people away.** Perhaps this is why Jesus followed His command to use the key of loosing with words of reassurance that the resulting numerical loss would not diminish the power and success of the church body. Perhaps these two verses may also indicate to us the **minimum size for a scriptural church, as "two or three?"** At least they assure us that the power of the church in the hands of the faithful few will not diminish, unless their faith wavers because of what they can see with their eyes instead of their spirits.

A Biblical example may edify this thought. **Aquila and Priscilla, Jews expelled from Rome by Claudius Caesar, met Paul in Corinth and entered close fellowship with Him and the new church there. (Acts 18:1-3)** Later they sailed to Ephesus with Paul and landed there and dwelled for a brief period while Paul went back to Jerusalem and Antioch before coming overland to Ephesus to begin his ministry there. (Acts 18:18-23) Before Paul

rejoined them in Ephesus these two encountered a disciple of John the Baptist named **Apollos** who had become a mighty eloquent preacher of the gospel, and **"took him unto them and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."** Apollos already had scriptural baptism, but he had apparently left Judea before Jesus gathered and organized His church. After he had joined the fellowship of the church, learning of its mission in the household of Aquila, and **"was disposed to pass into Achaia"** (the region around Corinth) **"the brethren wrote exhorting the disciples to receive him"** a letter of recommendation for Apollos to carry to the Corinthian church from whence they had recently departed. Apollos proved to be a big help to that church. (1st Corinthians 18:24-28) Later when Paul wrote his letter to the Roman saints, he included in it a **greeting to "Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house...."** (Romans 16:3-5) By that time this Christian Jewish couple were back in Rome maintaining a "church" within their household. It is a reasonable assumption that they also had maintained a household church while in Ephesus also, where they had instructed Apollos so well.

Philemon also maintained a church in his house when Paul wrote to him and them and sent it by the hand of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway former slave, exhorting them to receive him as a Christian brother which he had proved to be in service with Paul. (Philemon 1:2-19)

"And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you. But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do." (Luke 17:6-10) **LEAVE THE REWARD, AND INCREASE, AND GROWTH IN GOD'S HANDS!!**

When we labor expecting a certain reward or a visible victory, and we do not get it immediately, if our faith is extinguished or impaired in this disappointment, we are not approaching Our Lord's service properly as His humble bond-slave which we are, but rather presumptuously! **"God gives the increase"** which is **His** goal when, where, and how His wisdom sees fit. He will give us and others what we need when we need it. **"In due season we shall reap if we faint not!"** (that is, quit by reason of weakness - Galatians 6:9)

"I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that plants anything, neither he that waters; but God that gives the increase." (1st Corinthians 3:6-7)

Is the increase we desire and expect, or demand, the same as what God's wills?

Carnal minds think and talk about how to **"grow their church"** in the same way businessmen seek to **"grow their business!"** Is this what God wants? (Both are advertised by experts offering their services!!)

What is the sum total of what Jesus and His apostles taught about growth?

God wants each of his churches **"buildded together for a (special) habitation of God through the Spirit."** (Ephesians 2:22)

"But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: (Ephesians 4:15)

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:" (1st Peter 2:2)

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen. (2nd Peter 3:18)

"Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:" (Ephesians 4:13)

"And he (Jesus) said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: But when it is sown, it grows up, and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it. (Mark 4:30-32) This is the manner in

which Jesus' one little model "little flock" in Jerusalem would soon become countless such "little flocks" located in countless places worldwide. WHAT WAS GOD'S PROCEDURE IN BRINGING THIS ABOUT?

GOD FIRST SENT A PHENOMENAL REVIVAL TO THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM (ABOUT 120 MEMBERS ASSEMBLED) WHICH WITHIN A VERY SHORT WHILE SWELLED ITS MEMBERSHIP INTO THE THOUSANDS! BUT, natural immaturity caused thousands of converted Jews to stay too long in the church at Jerusalem which membership temporarily swelled into thousands. There they continued "in one accord" to learn from the "apostles doctrine and fellowship" what they needed to equip them to do what Jesus had already commanded the church (and soon to be churches) to do, to go out and "disciple all nations," baptizing those saved and instructing them in all that Jesus taught, forming them into churches in countless localities where each one of them would serve as the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world." In less than a hundred years there tens of thousands of localities within the Roman empire and beyond were blessed with little flocks which was a near replica of the model "little flock" which Jesus built with His own hands, all chosen and hand-picked and prepared living stones. Thus perhaps 10,000 scattered saints grew into 10,000 local churches "everywhere."

This was the way in which Jesus willed His kingdom to grow and fill the whole earth, fulfilling the prophecy of the "stone that ... became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth." (Daniel 2:35)

The last Biblical picture we have of the Lord's churches are the "seven churches of Asia" all clustered around Ephesus, and all closely resembling the first model church Jesus built, (Revelation 1-3) despite the errors which had crept in upon five of the seven, but which Jesus yet claimed as his "golden candlesticks."

During the second century and thereafter the bishops of many of the larger metropolitan churches began making an effort to CENTRALIZE Christianity around themselves, and so by the middle 300's A.D. these had gained legal status from the emperor. This growing, increasingly centralized Catholic (universal) "church" was endorsed as the state religion of the empire after about 400A.D. By this erring power the "little flocks" yet following Jesus were driven into hiding by persecutions from this false "church," in like manner as they had been persecuted when Rome was formerly ruled by pagans.

]More than a millennium later, after the great Protestant Reformation began breaking out of the corrupted Catholic mold, God sent a great world shaking revival in which countless thousands were saved, especially demonstrated in a new nation then building of small decentralized colonies on a sparsely inhabited continent previously unknown to the European and Asian world. Ultimately, the greatest growth came among the remnants, offspring, and converts of His preserved true churches, and the resulting phenomenal growth of Christ's kingdom was not big churches, but ultimately ten-thousands of little flocks gracing as many local communities in this new nation where local rule had become the preferred government and these "little flocks" could often serve as the primary Spiritual and moral influence in each of their respective communities.

In 1906 the U. S. Commerce Department undertook to count the numbers of churches throughout our nation. Approximately 50,000 Baptist churches were counted with average memberships of a little more than 100. Of the three largest groups the Southern Baptist Convention claimed almost 20,000 churches with an average membership of 106 members per church.

During the first Great Awakening revival which occurred during the colonial period and early statehood, churches did not long retain the momentary large swells of members for two reasons. Normally when a church swelled to 100 or more, many members moved to form new churches and so this progression went on. This had been the pattern from the Pentecost revival of Acts 2 all through the ages, and so it continued to spread abroad the faith and kingdom rapidly even while revival fervor greatly increased the numbers being saved and baptized.

Here are some reports from Morgan Edward's "Materials..." on the progress of two of the oldest Baptist churches in America. Providence and Newport Baptist Churches in the Rhode Island Colony, supposedly first formed about 1638 and 1644, were assessed in 1771 after the first Great Awakening had been proceeding for about fifty years in New England and the middle colonies, and during the peak of that great revival in the Southern colonies. "The families belonging to them (of Providence Baptist Church) are about 250, whereof 118 persons are baptized and in the communion," that is, were actual church members. (Page 167, Edwards' Materials) "The families belonging to the congregation (of Newport Baptist Church) were about 50, whereof 37 persons were baptized and in communion." (Page 175, Edwards' Materials) By this time there were many Baptist

churches in the tiny colony, it alone having the only government on earth to that time where total freedom of religion was guaranteed to all citizens.

Is it not significant that 135 years later, in 1906, when most of the 50,000 Baptist Churches in the U.S. remained fundamentally sound in doctrine and practice, that average SBC membership was only 106?

In 1827, the original Old Union Baptist Church reported 60 members to the Drakes Creek Baptist Association. Old Union at that time reported the largest membership of any church in that Association.

"For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." (2nd Corinthians 10:12) If such measurements are not wise between Christian brothers, are they any wiser between churches?

"For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God. For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit." (2nd Corinthians 4:15-5:5)

"... he (Moses) endured, as seeing him who is invisible." (Hebrews 11:27)

"And after six days Jesus taketh with Him Peter, and James, and John, and leads them up into a high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured (μετεμορφωθη = metamorphed in English) before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them." (Mark 9:2-3)

"And (Jesus) was transfigured (μετεμορφωθη) before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light." (Matthew 17:2)

"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass (mirror) the glory of the Lord, are changed into (μεταμορφουμεθα) the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2nd Corinthians 3:18)

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be you transformed (μεταμορφουσθε) by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Romans 12:1-2)

This is the way in which we can have the most success in our earthly mission! What if all of the church members displayed this image before each other, and the world, much of the time?

It is not quantity we lack, but quality. If the quality of each member's personal life, and each church collectively in one accord, radiates the glory (Spiritual brightness) of the Son of God, we can not achieve greater success than this! While we look at the unseen (invisible) things of God while planting and watering, GOD "gives the increase" which pleases Him, both visible and invisible!

Gideon starts with 32,000 troops against 135,000 Midianite enemy troops, but enters battle against them with only 300, and wins!

Zechariah (one of a very small remnant of faithful) never faltered in his priestly duties after 400 years of prophetic silence during troubled times of waiting for the Messiah, when suddenly God's angel appears to announce his part in the Messiah's introduction to Israel.

Solomon said "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falls; for he has not another to help him up. ... And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) If 2>1, & 3>2, & 4>3 ... where is the limit of this progression? In church fellowship, it appears to be that point where members begin to trust what they can see in place of the invisible power and presence of the Almighty God.