



## The *Pulpit Exchange*

It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1 Corinthians 1:21).

So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading (Nehemiah 8:8). Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend (Proverbs 27:17).

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### **Maintaining Cohesion With Growth**

I find this subject very challenging to look at. I would like to look at a number of principles from the Scripture that help us to understand how this can be a reality and to maintain it in our congregational life. Ephesians 4:3 I would use as a text verse. I will not look at this passage necessarily other than noting verse 3 and maybe a few surrounding verses. Then I would like to draw our attention to Acts 15 for

somewhat of the primary emphasis of the message. “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This verse came to mind as I was considering this subject. As we think about cohesion, we think of maintaining the growth process that does happen, and is happening in our congregations. It is important that we as God’s people are united around the Spirit of God and are in that unit-

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ed stand with the presence of God with us.

It seems to me that is the primary emphasis. Verses 4, 5, and 6 would also bring the idea of the oneness of the body, the oneness of Christ, the oneness of the Lord, and the oneness of God. Unless that surrounds our experience and we are together united in that cause churches will not blend together. It is somewhat that framework that I was thinking about as I was considering

this subject.

When we think about cohesion, the dictionary simply says it is, “the art or state of sticking together tightly.” When you think of that you probably think of some kind of glue that you can use. Maybe you can glue some wood or paper together. It is sticking together tightly. Often a glue that is good will not break. It will break somewhere else, rather than where it is glued. Then, it had this comment as

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well, “— unity.” We are thinking of unity. That is the idea as well, while there are maybe some varied aspects in relation to the cohesion part of it.

Maintaining is the idea of, or the process of “keeping something from default or failure. Keeping in good repair or order.” All of us who are involved in any kind of work or have a property or anything, there is a maintenance that must go along with it. It does not take long after something is new and built that it soon needs some maintenance. It soon is going down the process of decay.

Growth, as we think of it is, “the natural result of maturity, simply growing or expanding.” I think all of us would understand that our church life is a growing church life. It is expanding. Our church houses are getting full. I was impressed again as I moved in the area here that one of my first times moving in this circle was in the building across the road. The work has grown beyond that. The same is true of some of the other congregations as well. I thought back to my first initiation into our particular church group at Culbertson. We met in the school house and it was only a few families there. Today that has grown to where the present church house is full.

We set up chairs in the aisle practically every Sunday morning. It is growing. Our congregation is growing. That could be said with many other congregations. The work is growing. Along with that growth it is important that there is a process whereby we can continue to move together.

This subject brings into focus one of the increasing challenges of a growing work whether local or churchwide. We know that as any work expands the process of keeping it moving together will always be a continuing challenge. Why is that? Is it not because with expansion always comes varying ideas and opinions as to how a given matter should be handled? That is the way it will always be. When it was only one or two people to decide something, it did not take much to decide it. However, whenever you have a group of many together deciding on a given issue, whether it simply is the colour of the carpet, it takes longer to decide what colour it will be if you have ten people than if you have two. That goes along with every issue related to church life.

It is also a present challenge because a new generation is growing up among us. Helping to blend and move everyone together is a work that is impor-

tant for us to relate to in a right way.

It is also a challenge because a growing work does not go unnoticed by the enemy of our souls. Let us remember that we have an enemy that is intent in destroying church lives, congregations that are interested in serving God. Therefore, whenever there is a group of people who want to go right, there is an enemy that will do his utmost to destroy it. In whatever way he can get that done he will work at any means possible so that will happen.

The subject also implies that for cohesion to be a continuing reality (as we noted) there must be proper maintenance. That is the burden of the subject. I would use this aim as we look at the message. We would like to evaluate what is necessary to keep moving together as a group, united in faith and practice. What is necessary to keep moving together as a group, united in faith and in practice?

I will use this outline now. I) I would like to look first of all at the importance of cohesion. II) Secondly, how is cohesion maintained. Then, III) The results of maintained cohesion. I) With regard to the importance of cohesion, we may somewhat have been alluding to already. I will simply share two more in relation

to this thought of the importance of cohesion. Maybe before I would answer that question, I would raise this question here. When would cohesion be wrong? Would we not say that cohesion is wrong when the unifying goals are not Scriptural? Whenever they are not based on the Word of God then that cohesion is wrong. When individuals are simply together, whether it is for a social cause, and when there is no centre that calls them to an underlying principles of God's Word, cohesion can be wrong.

Now, let us look at the importance of cohesion. 1) *Cohesion is important because it is necessary for continued growth and stability.* That is maybe an elementary statement but it is simply the way it is. Remember, when lack of unity prevails church houses become empty and families become disenchanted. They are not sure where to go and how to proceed. Youth grow discouraged and finally they give up in their pursuit of serving God. Cohesion is necessary for continued growth and stability.

2) *Cohesion is necessary because this generation has a responsibility to preserve wholesome and Biblical church life for the rising generation.* Let us remember we, who are a part of the church, have a responsibility

for those who are growing up among us. It is our responsibility to preserve wholesome and Biblical church life for them. Remember, if this generation fails to preserve it, there will be nothing for the rest to build upon. There will be nothing for the next generation to build upon. Therefore, it is a challenge that we are preserving the kind of church life that the next generation has something to build upon.

3) *We must understand that the Hezekiah mentality will cause havoc and ruin for God's people.* If we are only satisfied that things are okay today and not really interested in the future or the rising generation, finally the church will be lost and many will be lost to the faith.

II) Let us look a little more practically at the subject. *How is cohesion maintained?* I would turn now to Acts 15. Acts 15 is the apostolic counsel at Jerusalem. It is a very familiar account for most of us. Nevertheless, as I was pondering this subject, my mind again went to this chapter. There are a number of principles that I think are noteworthy for us to consider. How is cohesion maintained? As our work grows, as congregations get full, and as new works begin, there are some important principles that must be in place in

order for the congregations to move together as a unit, and so that there can be a love and a loyalty to each other. In Acts 15 we see some of the principles in focus. I have not put these in order necessarily as to importance, but I put them in order as it is outlined in the chapter.

In this chapter (I will not take the time to read it) we will simply notice a few things, somewhat of an overview before we look at the points in focus. Remember, there was a group of people that were saying that circumcision needed to be experienced in order to experience salvation. That problem was surfacing in the Church. The group was brought together and they enumerated all that God had done for them. Then, then they shared this matter together and came to some proper conclusions in what to do about the situation and how to bring the churches to rest. In the end of this chapter we see a bit of contention developing. In chapter 16 they went through the churches and shared the decision that was made and the rest that it brought to the churches.

How is cohesion maintained?  
1) *In verses 1 and 2 cohesion is maintained by staying alert to trends that threaten unity.* One of the things that was happening

here was, as I noted, the idea was surfacing that circumcision needed to take place. This idea was directly in focus to threaten the unity and the cohesion that was moving the group together. In this case it was a doctrinal issue that was in focus. There could also be areas such as standard issue violations and a general anti-authority spirit. All these things relate to trends that can threaten church unity. I thought about the Korah, Dathan and Abiram spirit. I thought about Absalom when he sat by the gate and in his subtle way called a people after himself. Let us remember that if we will stay together we must be alert to trends that threaten unity. Keep in mind that allowing trends that are a deviation from the agreed upon practice to go unchallenged and unresolved will eat like a cancer until a situation develops that is nigh impossible to reverse.

We must understand that as a people, if we will move together we must be alert to the things that will finally take us down the road of apostasy and ruin. We must be alert to trends that threaten unity. That can be a very broad base. Whether doctrines, standards or that anti-authority spirit. We must be alert to those areas.

2) *Cohesion is also maintained in verse 5 by united doctrine.* We

said in verses 1 and 2 that the trend in focus in this case was a doctrinal issue which needed attention. If cohesion will be maintained there must be united doctrine. "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." Remember, doctrine will always bind or divide. The basis upon which we are able to move in our appreciation for the Scriptures and our appreciation for any given group is as determined by the doctrinal belief and basis which we hold to. Unless people or groups are together on the basic doctrines of the Scripture there is no appeal to cohesion. There is nothing solid to bind them together. Therefore, we must be united in the doctrine of separation. We must be united in the doctrine of nonresistance. We must be united in our understanding and appreciation for the church and the authority of the church. We must be united in our understanding of the doctrine of nonconformity. There must be united doctrine if we will move together.

This also relates to the authority of the Scriptures. One of the major concerns that brought the apostles together here was a deviation in a clear Bible doctrine

regarding what constitutes salvation. When that base is eroded the practice becomes diverse and finally cohesion is nigh impossible. Therefore, we must be united doctrinally in our churches, whether locally or churchwide. As our church houses get full, we must continually go back to the Scriptures and build our faith on the doctrines of the Word of God. Unless we are sound in that basis then we really have no premise whereby we can even move out and start new works. We must be united doctrinally. In that way then we can be united in our practice. United doctrinally is a very important issue as it relates to our cohesion.

3) *In verses 6–10 cohesion is maintained by keeping a clear focus.* “And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.” I would like to notice what Peter said in verse 7. “And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us.” The phrase I want to lift out of here is “that a good while ago.” We must keep a clear focus. A clear focus requires a goal and a vision that is not distorted or clouded by various issues that could arise. We must have a clear focus. We must have a goal in

mind where we want to go and where we want to be.

Distorted vision always makes the goal obscure and cloudy. I would raise this question, as we think about keeping a clear focus. When we think of this thought where Peter said, “ye know how that a good while ago.” What has God done for us a good while ago? Have you thought about that lately? A good while ago in the midst of many losing the faith, God raised up a faithful few who were ready to bear the reproach of separation. Therefore, God, a good while ago, provided the privilege to have a conservative church life in the midst of apostasy. God provided that for us. We ought to ever appreciate what God has done.

A good while ago God provided the opportunity for us to have our own Christian day schools. God also made a way for us to exercise the Biblical brotherhood assistance plan. That all has happened many years ago. Nevertheless, unless we remember why we exist, unless we appreciate what has been handed to us, and show that by a willingness to stand for truth today, we will develop a distaste for conservatism. We will lose our united base upon which brought us together from its beginning. Let

us understand what God has done for us a good while ago. Then, as we branch out in our works, we must ever remember that what God has done, you and I are responsible to preserve and maintain for a rising generation. We are responsible to help them embrace a church life where individuals love the Lord, where individuals are ready to bear the "reproach" [see Luke 6:22; 1 Timothy 4:10; Hebrews 11:26] that is involved in a separated stand, and are willing and ready to bear the cost necessary to have our own Christian day schools. This includes all that surrounds that in having schools which are under the blessing of God where they learn what they need to learn without the emphasis on professionalism and all of that.

We must remember that a good while ago men sat together and put some principles in place. Unless we are ready to stand on that, finally things can fall apart and cohesion will not be the reality. Let us remember that we must keep a clear focus. Where do we want to go? What brought us to this point and where are we going from here? In any new work that begins, we must understand that it is probably much easier to begin a new work than to keep it going. We must go back, different and various times

in our experience and again, as it were, refocus. Where do we want to go? What were the purposes that brought us here? Are we maintaining that goal?

4) *Cohesion is maintained by remaining a spiritual people.* Verse 11 says, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." That could probably have a number of other applications to it. However, I would lift this thought out of verse 11: as we think of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ, we must know what it is to be saved. We will only stay together and be united in our doctrine and in our practice as we remain a spiritual people. We must continue to emphasize and bring into the Church those who are Spirit filled and those who give clear signs of being born again. Our statement of standards says when we baptize individuals that we bring into the Church, "penitent, believing members." Individuals who come into the faith and who will be an asset to the cause of God and to the strengthening of the Church, must be individuals who know what it is to have died at the foot of the cross. They must know what it is to be born again, where their sins have been dealt with. They must know what it is to have stepped from

the old life into the new life of Jesus Christ. Unless that happens, mark it down, we are heading for havoc in our churches. When people are not born again, finally they cannot work together.

We must be spiritual. I know today there is probably a lot of emphasis put on spirituality and some of that spirituality is off base. Nevertheless, brothers and sisters, we must be spiritual. Unless we are spiritual, it will be impossible to move together as a people of God. Spiritual people are individuals who are anxious to go right and to be led right. They are ready to be shown areas of need without becoming quickly upset and deterred from the right. There must be spiritual people. We must be spiritual.

5) *In verses 12–21 cohesion is maintained by Biblical preaching and teaching and then by practical applications.* That maybe could be two different points but I have coupled it together in one. Notice in this passage here that after they had discussed this issue that James stood up and shared some things with them. In fact, he went back through the Old Testament and he brought them up to the present.

Then, James made some practical applications as to what was necessary to do. “Wherefore my

sentence is . . . But that we write unto them.” He gave them some applications as to what was necessary to bring this thing to rest. Keep in mind that which we preach and teach must be Bible centred. Then, it must be applied to daily life and practice. I suppose that is a challenge for anyone involved in preaching. It is a challenge for anyone involved in teaching whether in our Sunday Schools or whatever it is. Our teaching and our preaching must be Bible-centred. Then, we must apply it to daily life and practice.

In our teaching and in our preaching it is important for us to explain the doctrines of the Word of God. Then, we take those doctrines and say, “Now, this right here is how it applies today.” It applies right here. When we think about modesty or separation, we talk about dress standards. We talk about people who should be separated from the world. We say that these areas apply even to the kind of dress material we wear, the way it is made and we give applications to those issues. We must be doing that if we will help lead our people right. Remember the Scriptures must be the focal point of that which we preach and not the philosophies of men. We must be people of the Book. In that it is not man’s work, it is

God's work. It is important that we continue to preach the Word of God. We must draw from the Scriptures.

One of the things that has been a help to us is our Sunday Schools. Have you thought about how much help our Sunday Schools are to us in taking us to the Scriptures and drawing out of the Scriptures what it means presently today? That is why those who are involved in that work have always resisted a permanent curriculum as it relates to the upper levels because there is always changing in application and we need to stay current. We need to stay current in that. Applied Bible principles produce a united force that enables cohesion to be a reality.

6) *In verses 19 and 20 we notice that cohesion is maintained when obvious areas of need are given positive direction.* "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: (20) But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood." Notice the positive direction that was given after they had discussed this issue. Need always requires attention whether it is in the farm, the home, or the church.

When a need arises some attention must be given to it. Left alone will only get worse and become deadly.

We know how that can be in a natural sense. If around your farm, let us say for example, that you are out, or right now in the middle of our busy schedules of planting and things like that. Let us suppose you are out now in the middle of the field and you are planting corn. Suddenly some steam rolls out from underneath the tractor radiator cap. There is a need, right? What will you do? Will you decide, "Well, it is about an hour until dinner time and I will take care of it then," so we simply keep on going. What finally happens? Well, the whole thing comes to a grinding halt not very far down the field. Need always requires attention. The sooner we meet the need, the less damage is always done. We stop immediately and put a little water in it. Then, we go on. We drive to the end of the field, make another round. The tractor became extremely hot. You probably blew a head gasket, or ruined the engine and you are down for days.

Let us keep in mind that if cohesion will be maintained then obvious areas of need must be given positive direction. In our homes, our children become

frustrated if that which needs attention, is simply left undone and we do nothing about it. Let us understand that direction which is needed to correct the problem may be difficult and may be unpleasant but, at least, the solution is being found to remedy the problem and again bring things to rest. It is never nice to solve a problem. It would always be nice if we could simply go on without any problems existing.

Let us understand that while it may get our hands dirty, while there is some effort involved in taking care of the problem, the only way the thing will be brought to rest is if, when there is a need, we address the need. It would be extremely nice if we could simply agree one hundred percent on every issue and there would never be any areas of need. That would be wonderful. However, the fact is that it has never been that way and never will, and we might as well admit that. It will never be that way. In every issue we will highly likely, seldom ever get a hundred percent.

When there are needs arise we must be willing and we must be ready to give positive direction so that rest can be found. Needs will always arise. What we do about it will finally produce rest

or will finally produce more need. I suppose a challenge rests with us, which do we want, rest or more need? Let us keep in mind that in maintaining cohesion there will be needs. We must be willing to work with those needs so that rest can be a reality. The need is not necessarily disgrace but finally what we do with that could be. May God help us in those areas when obvious areas of need are given positive direction.

7) *In verse 22 cohesion is maintained is see here by united leadership.* “Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren.” We can look at this as a united leadership and as a united Church. Both of those certainly come in focus here. I was looking at it from a united leadership standpoint. As I was reading it, I was thinking about the united church life. If we will maintain cohesion, first of all there needs to be a united leadership. Growth always demands more leadership and also it brings change in leadership. That is the way it has always been.

There is a sense that (and I

think all of us are somewhat made over this pattern) we are a people who are never excited about change in leadership. We become accustomed to those who are called to lead and we do not like to see that change. We would like if they would simply be our leaders as long as we live and as long as our children would live. Nevertheless, the fact is that will not be the way it is. We are in a growing work and all of us are getting older. There will be change in leadership and that is the way it will always be. Leadership will change, but to make those transactions as smooth as possible, those in leadership must be united in their basic goals and outlooks. They must be united in their practice and administration. They must be united in their mutual trust and loyalty to each other. Those three must be in place if there will be united leadership which will lead the people right and finally have a united church. United leadership.

I thought about the time when Moses and Jethro were together. Jethro was looking at all Moses was doing. Jethro said to Moses, "Moses, this finally will not work. You will finally 'burn out' in this work. You will need to bring some others in. You will need to bring the right kind of

men in so that the right things can happen." The Scripture says, "able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness" (Exodus 18:21). Or, like in Acts 6:3, "men of honest report," men who were full of faith and so on. That was also seen in Acts in the choosing of the deacons. United leadership must be in place.

Now, when those who are called to lead pull in two different ways, the sheep become scattered and lose the way to safe and green pastures. That always happens. Oh, brethren and sisters, I would challenge all of us as we relate together, and as we share together, we must be united as leaders who are called to shepherd the flock. Then, we must be united as congregations. We must be united as families in our homes. If we will be able to have the rising generation embrace what we love and hold dear, we must be pulling together for the same things. How is it in home life if father and mother are pulling away from each other and do not have the same goals and the same aspirations? Children do not know where to go.

When leaders are not pulling together finally churches become empty. Churches do not know what is right. They do not know who is right and they become people focused rather than God

focused. There must be united leadership. That is a challenge for all of us who fill that position. May God help us to be united so that the right things can happen and God's people can be led in the right and safe way.

8) *In verses 23–29 cohesion is maintained by consistent application of, and an appreciation for our statement of standards.* In verses 23–29 they wrote these things down and then shared with the churches what they were to do. Let us remember that our statement of standard is the rallying point from which we remain united in practice. We said earlier that our doctrine becomes the basis upon which our practice will unite us. Is it not also true that our statement of standard then becomes a rallying point as to what we really agree as relates to doctrine? Therefore, if it will be that rallying point which helps us to be united in practice, then there must be consistent application as relates to our agreed upon standard. This is true whether it is from congregation to congregation, district to district or from family to family.

It is also true that there will be some variations. That is the way it would be. The Bible talks about difference of administrations, and so on. It is true there will be some variations.

However, when the variations become too broad, cohesion is lost because our rallying point is no longer focussed. It is an area that all of us need to understand. The agreed upon standard that we hold as our practice, we must be willing to support and appreciate it and be willing to administer it. Whenever individuals become lax in the application of the agreed upon standard then, I think, we know how that works, does it not? People begin to look over here and say, "Well, in that congregation they do not do anything about it, and in this congregation they do not do anything about it. Therefore, why are you trying to tell me that I need to do this?" In most cases they may not understand that highly likely they are working on those situations there.

Nevertheless, what I would like to say here is if we will be united, and move together as a group, then those deviations cannot get too far apart. People look over here and say, "Well, they do it over there, and over here they do it over here," and when you try to hold the line here, you cause people to become disenchanted and dissatisfied with leadership. Finally, they drift off here and there rather than being willing to come to rest with the agreed upon standard.

I would also say, that it is important that we as congregations have a high appreciation for our statement of standard. How often do you read it? Do you only read it when it is read before counsel meeting? Do you have a copy? Do you know where it is? How often do you read it? We ought to have an appreciation for our statement of standards. Have you ever thought about what you would do differently if you did not have a standard that keeps you in a right way? Let us appreciate our statement of standards. Then, let us be willing to apply them to where it touches our lives and willing to make the necessary adjustments so that we can move together as a group. We must have consistent application and an appreciation for our statement of standards.

9) *Cohesion is maintained by maintaining an appreciation for the Church and her authority.* I thought about three areas here which I would briefly mention. We must appreciate the Church, and what she has done. It seemed in this situation here the churches found rest in chapter 16. We will come to that here shortly. I have not tied any particular verse to this in this passage. Nevertheless, it is obvious that there was an appreciation for the Church and for the authority

rested with the Church. Let us appreciate that we are a part of a fellowship that is a conferring fellowship.

We know that in a conferring fellowship sometimes, it seems, it takes a while to get everything worked through. Nevertheless, is it not a blessing to know that in a conferring fellowship there is more than one person who decided what needed to be done. Let us appreciate a conferring fellowship.

Let us also continue to respect the offices that comprise the Church — the three office ministry — the bishops, ministers and deacons. Let us continue to appreciate that. In the offices that compose our congregations and our church life, let us continue to remember that each one has a responsibility to fulfill in their given sphere of responsibility. Let us also respect our brethren in their responsibilities that they have.

We also need to appreciate the various committees and boards that make up the functional aspects of the church. Sometimes, one gets this feeling that some feel that there are too many committees and too many boards, and that if only this thing would dissolve, some of these issues, some of these areas our people who are spiritual could be

able to get along without all of these things. Let us remember that if we will appreciate the church and her authority, and if we will be able to have anything to pass on to the next generation, we must appreciate a conferring fellowship. We must have respect for the offices. Then, we must have a respect for the committees and boards that make up the functional aspects of the church. The work that they do often goes unnoticed by many. Nevertheless, are we glad that in the midst of their work, it is that which is bringing rest and helping to bring the church united and helping it to move forward in their efforts and in their labours?

We believe that the Church is a called out people separated from the world, separated unto God. The Church is vested from God to establish guidelines for the well-being of its membership. We ought to ever appreciate what the church has done. When appreciation is evident then we look positive toward those who are called to shepherd the flock and toward the direction they give. However, the reverse is also true when that appreciation is finally lost. We must appreciate the church and her authority.

10) *We maintain cohesion by keeping a close tie with the broader church.* As work

expands and as new congregations are formed there must be a close tie with the broader church fellowship. We must see the value of maintaining that tie and the exchange. I thought about the exchange we find in all day meetings, the exchange in our winter Bible schools, the sharing in informative meetings and things of that nature. The exchange is so necessary if we will be able to continue to maintain appreciation for each other. The tie is necessary in beginning new works. There must always be that overlap of committee work from the sending church and the members from the established congregations — those who serve on the school board, those who are the Sunday School superintendents, those who are involved in pastoral committees. All of those works need to find its base from those who are a part of the sending church. In the establishing of a new work when its base is found in the church that is sending out then, it helps to bring the new church, the new areas, the outlying areas along and helps them to be patterned after that which is the established norm.

11) *We maintain cohesion by genuine brotherly love in verses 36–41.* In these verses remember there was a bit of contention

developing between the ones that were involved here in the work. I would like to bring this into the reverse. If we will be able to maintain cohesion, then there must be genuine brotherly love that is permeating our church life. We must love each other and be loyal to each other. Our love gets tested along the way, but let us remember that when brotherhood love is lost, it becomes nigh impossible to move together as a group. It is true that we will not all think alike and that we will probably not do everything alike and do everything the same. Nevertheless, in our relationships with each other we must always understand that our brother and our sister, as it relates to church life, are endeavouring to go right and we appreciate them for the contribution that they make. In loving each other, we help each other to find our way to spiritual life and stability and spiritual maturity.

Whenever that love is lost and we begin to look at each other sideways and say that the only reason that they are doing this is because they have some agenda planned over here and we look at each other and say that this person no longer appreciates what I do we are headed for trouble. We know how it is. They go down at

the sides of the mouth and suddenly they fail to appreciate each other and fail to shake each other's hand and they are sure that they despise me. When that love is lost it is nigh impossible to have churches move together. We could say that overshadowing everything that I have talked about from Acts 15 is the brotherly love principle. We must love each other. We must be loyal to each other. In that love and loyalty then we can move and have God's blessing.

What are the results? Acts 16:5 says, "And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily." I see two things that were the results of churches that were blending and sharing together. When cohesion is maintained there is established faith and there is an increase in number. The faith will be established and there is a church life that is attractive to the rising generation. That is the result of churches and people that love each other and are making every effort to make it so that we can move together on the premises of the Word of God.

May God help us to be united around the Book. Let us love the Word of God. Let us love our Lord. Let us love His body the Church. Let us be willing and

ready to stand together as a group so that we can move together such that the rising generation that is growing up among us, the ones whom we take by the hand can have a church life that is sound in Biblical faith and practice, and that they too can be a part of a growing work that will

help their posterity. Then, finally the world around us has a haven to come to because individuals love the Word of God and love God's people and are willing to stand together faithfully serving the Lord. May God help us to that end.

## **Patterns in Establishing Congregations**

We have been studying in the book of Acts, I thought as an introduction it would be good to go back and think about some of the principles that we have been studying in relation to establishing congregations and let that be somewhat of a spring board then for some further consideration. I have several verses that I would like to have you turn with me. Turn to Acts 1:8. This, you will recognize as the commission from our Lord. It gives us some direction as to the pattern for establishing congregations. This is our Lord speaking to His disciples, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

I picked out a few verses that we would have studied in our Sunday School lessons more

recently that lift out a few principles. Another one would be in Acts 13:2, 3. There is much that one could reflect on between chapters 1 and 13, but I am trying to confine our thoughts. "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." *The principle that I see here is that the Church moved.* The work was authorized. It was not only of the Lord but of the Lord through the Church, through the body. We see that principle established.

In Acts 15:2 we see another. We see these brethren going out and establishing a new work. As they did that they faced some difficulties and some questions. What I see in this verse is that they maintained a relationship to

the base. They felt an obligation to that. They looked to their brethren and to the broader brotherhood to help maintain a sense of direction. “When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.” *They understood their relationship to the broader base and their sense of not only obligation and accountability but they saw it as a resource as a help.* That is a principle as we establish congregations.

Acts 15:36 is another verse that I felt led to bring to our attention, “And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.” We have some emphasis today of going out and preaching and having the masses respond. Then, we leave their nurture to others or they are left to themselves. The principle we have as we go is to take responsibility for the nurture for the establishing of a new work and then taking responsibility, keeping in touch and making sure that the right things are happening.

Acts 16:9, 10 is another principle that I would like to look at. This one we will quickly recognize, “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.” *Another principle as we establish congregations is to be responding to the Macedonian calls.* We need to sense the leading of the Lord and these activities and these movements.

The last one I will refer to is Acts 18:23 which is a bit the same as 15:36, “And after he had spent some time there, he departed, and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.” *Certainly there is that principle again of nurturing a continuing relationship, and making sure the outlying areas have the needed fellowship and oversight so that they are protected from the forces about them.*

I) Leaving that as somewhat introductory, I would like to pick up *why congregations have been established.* I would see various reasons and that will help us to begin to see some patterns. Why,

over the years, have congregations been established? What motivates? What is our purpose for establishing congregations? I have seven different reasons why we might establish a new congregation and what would be behind that. There will be some history brought into focus here. Possibly then that will serve as a further basis to draw some conclusions for how we might do for today.

One of the first things that we see in history as we look back is that one reason for establishing new congregations was 1) *fleeing from persecution*. We see that even in the Early Church. They spread because of persecution and as a result, new congregations were established. I was thinking mainly of our forebearers coming to this country. You can go into, for example, Franconia or into the Lancaster area, even this area and there were many congregations started as a result, new congregations started, because people, brethren were fleeing from persecution from Europe. They were fleeing from what was back there. It was not only persecution but hardship. Sometimes we take all that for granted and then we do not realize all that went into that.

I remember sometime ago reading an account of some of our forebearers who were chased

out of Switzerland. They went into South Germany. After they were there, there were some hardships (the Thirty Years' War). Some of the armies saw-sawed back and forth creating not only some religious persecution, which they were they facing but even some economic hardships and the motive to live out the faith and to have a place to live where they could raise their families. This historian gave an account of a shipload of some our forebearers I would well expect there are descendants of these people probably here. They boarded the ship. As they were going down the river, they looked back for the last time on their homelands. We can hardly fathom that. They did not have a jetliner that they could return in a couple of hours to check on things. It was departing forever, and for the sake of the faith and fleeing persecution, coming here and establishing new congregations naturally as they came here.

Another thing was that they did not have a mission board that sent them. They did not have a district that was able to send forth. The thing that is so interesting (and I would say this very quickly) is that while in the heat of persecution they were not able to maintain the exact structures that maybe we have today. They

no more than had their feet on Pennsylvania soil and you saw some of those things coming forth — conference and structure in that sense. Therefore, they understood the principle of it. They were fleeing from persecution, and so they came.

It is also interesting that the Lancaster settlement had more leaders with it. Therefore, it became stronger. There is a principle and a pattern. We will be touching that a little later. Leaders came along and there were more leaders, strong leaders which helped to make that a stronger settlement.

It is true that what happened in those early days as our ancestors fled from persecution, hardly serves as a pattern for us today. The Lord blessed their efforts because, really, they had no other option. However, if we would go about it the way they went about it, the Lord would probably not honour that today. When we have the opportunity to give a little more forethought, a little more care, a little more structure, and a little more carefulness. Nevertheless, we see congregations being established because fleeing from persecution.

2) *Another one which we see is the expanding settlements.* This has application to us. That is probably what is in focus here.

Some congregations are full and what will you do? Some face that more than others. That is a good problem. That is a problem, but it is a good problem. It is the kind of problem we like to have, and we need to face it. We need to work through it. Again, I come back to our forebearers and some of the patterns in the early times of this country. Again, I was impressed recently in reading some history of the Lancaster settlement. There are some things that we do not maybe think about. Our forebearers came here and they started some early congregations in what is now the West Willow area.

It was kind of a new thought to me. I knew it and yet somehow I did not realize how it impacted history. When they arrived, they did not have a hardware store that they could go to and get some bolts and nuts and boards. They did not have that. They could not go buy food at a grocery store. They were carving out a life in the wilderness. That is something to think about and ponder. What I really want to get to is this: boat load after boat load kept coming. What will we do? There was forced and rapid expansion. Again, they could hardly do it systematically as we believe the Lord would have us do it today. Boat load after boat

load kept coming to the US shores. This rapid growth forced communities to push into new communities and of course congregations were started.

You probably remember the story of how the Groffdale congregation was started. That was a unique thing. Maybe it does not bear directly to the subject, but one Mennonite farmer's cattle wandered away and he chased (I think it was a heifer) her and tried to find her and went and went. As a result he arrived in the Groffdale area. He discovered that there was some beautiful land to expand into. Therefore, boat load after boat load began to push into that area. Of course, a congregation was started. Sometime read that new book which came out on the Lancaster Conference *The Earth is the Lord's*. You can trace this. It was a result of expansion, the rapid growth. Farm land soon ran out and they needed to push into new communities, and so forth.

We have the opportunity to give a little more forethought, to be a little bit more orderly in our expansions, and to consider all the aspects. Again, maybe what happened there is not a perfect pattern for us in that regard. Sometimes the general direction that a community develops determines the placement of congre-

gations. That is some natural growth. We will enlarge on that a little later as well.

3) *Another reason why there might be the establishing of congregations is colonization for economic purposes.* Our people are agriculture oriented. The need for land which is reasonably priced sometimes has dictated such moves. Sometimes that is reflected against. Nevertheless, is not guarding our economic interests really a part of passing on the faith? We cannot separate the two entirely. For example, we started churches in Illinois. One of the reasons behind that (not the full reason, but I will touch on that in the next point) was to provide the opportunity for the younger generation to be involved in agriculture.

Recently, I heard of a church community (not our group) which sent a committee of brethren to Iowa for this very purpose to see whether there would be some opportunity. That is something that recently happened, to see whether there would be some opportunity for the young brethren to remain in agriculture. We might say, "Well, that is materialistic interests." I would simply say again that our economic interests, the way we go about making a living, does have a direct bearing on

preserving and maintaining the faith. Therefore, we cannot overlook that issue entirely. We should not be ashamed of that. In fact, there were some brethren talking recently that maybe what was done in Illinois, “x” number of years ago, maybe there ought to be some consideration of that again. Some of us, in our communities, farms are being sold for prices that no one can buy tomorrow. It is a pressure, something the church needs to face.

4) *Another is the evangelizing interests.* I would tie into what has been said before. Even back in the expanding interests, back even in our forebearers, they were trying to take care of the boat loads after boat loads, even then as they moved in to make room, there were some evangelizing interests driving that. Also, as Illinois was considered, there had been some evangelizing interests involved as well. That is often an underlying driving force, even though maybe there are some other things that are in focus. I have a book in my library on the Lancaster Conference home missions. I began to read through that in light of this message. I was impressed with the driving force back in the 20’s and 30’s that caused some of the home missions, some of the congregations

that were started back then, for example, Miner’s Village and Texter Mountain. One could go on and on with congregations that were started out of going into the community and touching areas that were a bit unchurched. It was a challenge to me. Are we doing as much of that as we should? It was congregation after congregation and often the pattern was that someone who had mission interests became acquainted with a given community. They realized that these boys and girls did not have Sunday School. Therefore, they discussed it with their local leaders and it grew into mission efforts of that nature. Today, possibly there are not as many communities untouched as there would have been back in those days for various days.

Foreign mission interests were also involved here. Often some spark of interest somewhere prompted such a move. In our day it is amazing what the Lord has done, for example, through some of the conservative church’s publishing interests, and the calls that come from all over the world to start churches. It is impossible for our conservative churches to meet all of those requests. There, one needs to be discerning. One needs to somehow decide where the Lord

would have us go and so forth. Nevertheless, the evangelizing interests have often been a motivation for starting a new congregation. Other times, areas were sought out which had needs, and I think that I already referenced.

5) *Another reason for starting congregations is reaching to interested or isolated families or family.* Sometimes there is a response and it is at a distance, and the person is not able to move where our people are. Some of that has been through the publishing interests. Some of that is simply due to the broad travel and communication that we have today. Nevertheless, we face starting congregations on that basis and for those considerations. Often associated with that are evangelizing interests as well, and sometimes even economic opportunity. Sometimes those things converge, and seem to be a call and a reason for establishing a congregation in a given area. There are times where there are families from settings that are less ideal and they are concerned for their families and for their futures that reach out to us. That is also involved in this consideration. These offer a special challenge to orient those to our group, and to our brotherhood outlook and approach. That can provide a

special challenge.

This is true especially of some who and have been strong enough and have fought on their own enough to be able to come out of settings and to embrace Bible convictions and then to find themselves fitting into the brotherhood. Learning how to blend after they have been through all of that is another challenge that we face. Nevertheless, reaching to interests and isolated families is another reason for establishing congregations.

6) *Another area is providing fellowship for isolated congregations.* We said that Illinois started, for example, the churches there, to help to meet some economic interests and to provide opportunity for young families to be involved in agriculture. However, another leading factor was to provide a sister fellowship relationship with Mount Pleasant that had already been there. That happens sometimes. I can think of some other situations where there is a congregation a bit more isolated and there would be interest in starting a sister church where than can be some back and forth and some support in that way. That can be another motivation. Sometimes congregations are started in outlying areas then later there is a deliberate

purpose to start to provide for fellowship needs.

7) *The last one that I would give would be providing for regrouping.* There is a number of our congregations that were started due to the need for regrouping. We understand that and hopefully that is not an ongoing driving force. However, sometimes there are those that reach out who come from settings where they feel the need to start over, to do something that is more safe and more sound, and they may call for our help. That has been another reason for the starting of congregations.

Having said those purposes, I realize that what I will say next I will need to generalize. Some of the principles and points that we will outline of what I would call a plan or a pattern for establishing congregations as we would do it today may apply more to this reason for starting congregations than some of the others that I finished mentioning. There has been some variation over the years from district to district and we are not saying one way. In fact, when I was given this assignment I felt like I needed, maybe I should have been listening rather than sharing it. I feel like there is so much to learn in this regard.

Furthermore, depending on

which circumstance we just outlined it will alter the approach we use. Nevertheless, here are II) *some general guidelines that we need to keep in mind as we establish new congregations.* I would also say that if we will start a new congregation twenty miles from the home congregation that will influence how you do it. If you will start it eight to ten hours from the home congregation that will bring some different things into focus. What I have to share is probably focussed a little further from home than twenty miles. Nevertheless, some of the principles will still apply. Some of these are self-evident. Some I would simply share to stimulate our thinking.

1) *Provide a sound sponsoring base.* Proper authorization is important from either a congregation or a district. It is so important that there is a sponsoring base. Outlying areas will need ministerial oversight. Even if there is a minister sent into the area, he will need ministerial support from a broader base. Therefore, we provide a sound sponsoring base. Acts 13 would be our Scriptural platform for that. They had a base from which they were sent out. Often outlying areas need support for school operations. Many of our new congregations being estab-

lished are not able to support their own schools the first years. Having a sponsoring base can help to compensate for that.

Brotherhood assistance is another area of need where a broader base is important. What is everyone's responsibility becomes no one's responsibility. Therefore, it is good when a new work is established that it is understood that this district is taking responsibility for that, or this particular congregation is taking responsibility for that. That is important so that it does not get neglected.

2) *Provide seasoned leadership.* We do not ordain usually a new brother and send him to the new work. Since we embrace this principle of sending seasoned brethren, then the home congregations will need to understand that principle. They will need to understand that sometimes they will need to give permission for one of their ministry that they dearly love and feel they can hardly do without. They will need to give him up for the sake of the work moving forward. It is a principle. We have embraced sending the seasoned brethren and it is a right principle.

The ideal is if a seasoned brother could be permanently released. However, that has not

always been possible. I can think of several occasions. I could name two congregations right now where they were started years ago, by having brethren being released for two years at a time. Nevertheless, a seasoned brother was always present. As the years went by, they eventually ordained some from among themselves. The time finally came when the seasoned brother did not need to live there. He might still serve as a senior role. I think of Wolcott. Wolcott has been established for many years but brother Elmer Martin still serves as a senior minister there. It is a principle. It is one way of accomplishing this. Even if one does have a seasoned team in place in an outlying area, it is still good if some brethren relate ongoing even if they are not living in the immediate area.

Illinois is another example of that. I suppose you are aware that there are still two districts in the East that regularly send ministers into the Illinois district and that has been going for how many years? Mount Pleasant was there before the Eastern Church. I am not sure when the other congregations were established, but it has been a while. That principle is still occurring. They are maintaining a tie. It is so vital and important. That is

done for Gray's Prairie, TX. It is a principle that is important to maintain as we establish new congregations.

3) The next one is one which varies maybe from district to district. You will understand the emphasis. *Form a committee of ordained and lay brethren to see after the details of the new work, especially if it is at a difference.* Ordained brethren oversee the work directly. That is good. I know presently in the Ohio work (Riverside — Kenton) we are in the start-up stage and there are four ordained brethren that oversee that. There is always one of them present every service. There have been one or two exceptions to that but there has always been one of them, so that there is continuity until it is established and up and going. It is a principle that is important.

A lay committee is so vital (we have found) in starting a new work. I can think of one brother in particular in the work in Ohio, for example, who took a real interest. The committee in general took an interest in developing a community awareness. Where is the good farmland? Where do you need to be a little cautious? Which townships will let you do this? Which townships will not let you do this? Community awareness is so vital

as individuals think of moving in. If someone has been there and has researched it and knows what is going, he can help to guide and counsel those who have interest in moving into the area.

I can think in the case which I relate to where one brother, we call him our real estate agent. He takes a real interest in keeping after the available real estate. He is in touch with the real estate agents. He knows what is available and about what the prices are. It is a tremendous benefit for families that are planning to move in. That committee can help families to move in. They can see to it that if there is some building needing to be done or remodelling before they move that there would be some help there to get that to happen. Maybe even in some cases, I know in some of the other congregations (I am thinking of Mendon, MA) even the lay committee could help even with maybe some financial end of the thing a little bit. I know in the Ohio work for example, the brethren moved in, they had families. Immediately a school needed to be started. However, they were in the midst of building and getting organized and set up and getting going, and they could not bear the burden of running a school. Therefore, the lay com-

mittee could run it. Even though they were at a distance, they could run that school. Then, that could be transferred as time goes on. It is another way to relate to it. A good lay committee that takes an active interest can be a real blessing especially if it is removed from our church centres in helping to get a work established.

4) *Another thing that I would recommend as we look at establishing new congregations is to monitor for the first couple of years personnel moving in.* Monitor that for a period of time. It is important. In other words it is understood that the church will select the first families to move in and then it is confined to that for a period. Or, at least, not anyone from random can move in without at least some understanding. It is important that in these new works, especially if they are removed from our centres that there is a core present there that will help to establish the right patterns up front. The patterns, and what happens in those early years can affect the work long-term.

I can think of some situations where there were some bad things happened in those first years. Even today yet sometimes those things surface. Therefore, it is important that the right

things happen up front. A leader left too much to himself in the early years of an outlying work can make it hard for him then to know how to relate as fellow leaders are ordained. That has been observed already. Therefore, monitor the personnel moving in for a period. It is a principle that has some merit. A number of works have taken that approach.

5) *Provide an ongoing support system.* We touched on the fact that there is ministry travelling to Illinois regularly, and I understand to Gray's Prairie regularly, Mendon, Wolcott, that is happening on a regular basis. However, I am talking about something more than that. I can think of a congregation where every month there are four Sunday School teachers from the district back home and every month, one of those travels to teach Sunday School. If there are four of them, and there are twelve months, four divided into twelve is three right? Therefore, each one would go three times a year. It makes some continuity and it helps to provide some fellowship where a congregation is isolated and it helps to provide that. It is something that can be helpful.

Also, we can rotate the ordained committee through even after it is established. I have

already referenced that. That is also a help. Our outlying congregations need the stimulation of regular visitors. The regular District rotating of the ministry can also apply also in these. We need to provide an ongoing support system that outlives the startup phase. It is so important to keep that in mind. With the opportunities that we have today for quick travel it is a resource that we should utilize.

6) Provide a spread in the social structure — the spread of the age groups. Maybe this is a little hard to achieve. I like to see in our new works that are starting a young family, I like to see a couple of middle-aged families, and I like to see a sprinkling of grandparents. There is something about that which is healthy. It is good for various age groups even in those settings to relate to each other. Families that have teenagers will need another family or two with teenagers to meet the needs especially if they are removed from the centre. A young married couple will need at least another married young couple to relate to. It is something to keep in mind as we start up these works. The opportunity for interchange of the various age groups is important.

7) *In our long term planning keep in mind the need for an iso-*

*lated congregation to sometime have a sister congregation.* This district is doing that in relation to Gray's Prairie. It is a healthy thing. It is a thing we ought to plan as we are thinking about starting new works, if they will be isolated. It is something we ought to think about and should be part of the planning. Sometimes maybe that is not always practical. I could name a number of congregations that wish they had a sister congregation and it has never worked out. We know that. It is something to think about.

In conclusion, I would like to pick up a few what I would call miscellaneous comments or considerations to think about as we start new works. Sometimes you hear this emphasis that we ought to be spreading out. After all, we should not all live in one county. I agree with that. I remember one brother some years ago he said, "If you have too much salt on a pile it kills the ground. It makes it so it will not grow anything." I understand that too. On the other hand, as we think of reaching out, this principle I would like to emphasize, we do need though some larger stable communities. Let us not unduly reflect on that. Let us understand the need for that. If we all dispersed and all of our congrega-

tions would only have ten or twelve families and we all were hours apart from each other, something will be lost. Let us keep that in mind. It is a principle to guard. Even though I am for reaching out and spreading around, we probably could be doing more of that.

We also need to watch the dividing of congregations. As we said, a number of our congregations are facing full congregations that will need to do some spreading out. We do need to evaluate that, especially as administration. It is good for our people to understand this sometimes. Every congregation has what I call a core. Follow me through this and do not make conclusions till we are done. Every congregation has a core — a core of membership. What we mean is that they are families who understand the position of the church. They not only understand it, but they believe in it themselves. They not only understand it and believe in it themselves they know how to articulate it and they know how to “sell it,” if I could use that term. They know how to live it. They are getting it across to their families. They are what we call the kind you build on. That is not reflecting on everyone else. Nevertheless, every congregation

has a core.

The thing that needs to be evaluated, if we will divide a congregation, we must be sure that before we divide, the congregation has a large enough core such that when we divide the core we have something left to build with. You see, numbers is not the sole factor. Therefore, that it something to consider.

I will say this also. One can delay too long in proceeding if everything else is in place. I am a little concerned sometimes and I am struggling with this in some of my own congregations where they have grown rapidly and now you have a situation where there is an element — where you cannot use everyone. If you are not careful, there is an element that are not exercising themselves as much as it would really be good and healthy. Therefore, I think we need to watch that and see to it. Sometimes there is talk about maybe building on some of our churches. One brother said that rather than build on, he would rather build another one. That way we can involve and keep exercising the gifts and the qualities of the brotherhood. That is important.

I would also feel that we can grow too rapidly. There is such a thing as that. We have watched some groups do that where they

ordained so fast that it tended to topple when it was all done. We do not want to do that. We always need to understand that especially in the ordination work. There is a certain amount of acclimation time that is necessary, lest things can happen too fast.

One other thing I would point out (and we cannot always control this) but we need to, as leaders, be mindful of the fact that while you can ordain too fast, and you can start congregations too fast, and that it is possible that it may tend to weaken, on the other hand we need to be sure that we have enough faith to be ordaining fast enough.

One of the things, if you know your history of Lancaster Conference was that in the 30's

and 40's they grew so rapidly that they were not able to keep after ordinations fast enough. Historians, looking back on that period of time would say that it was one of the contributing factors that resulted in her losing her unity. Therefore, there is that side as well.

I trust these few thoughts will stimulate our thinking. Sometimes it is always more comfortable to simply have it like it is. It is like one person said one time, "When you build a ship, really the safest place for the ship is to stay in the harbour." However, ships were not made to stay in the harbour. Therefore, let us by faith move forward and allow the Lord to use us to His glory.

## **A Growing Church: Facing Issues Related to Growth**

Our title would suggest that we are presently in a period of growth. Also, growth brings a set of challenges to the church. It is so important in church life that we rise to face the issues of our time in a God honouring way. Growth in the church would suggest a number of things to us. 1) It would suggest an increase in membership. 2) It would suggest an expansion in a geographical

way. 3) It also would suggest some advanced age. Along with growth there is an aging process. 4) It may also suggest a greater pool of resources that is available.

One of the bishops involved in the formation of our church group, Simon Bucher (in I believe it was his last testimony to the former group) spoke of little scattered churches springing

up in the area of the former group. The church today has grown beyond what brother Bucher envisioned and what the rest of the leaders involved at the beginning of the group also envisioned.

I want to give a few facts, largely from our church directories in relation to growth. The Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church began in 1968. It is presently approximately 37 years old. The first directory (our church directory is published yearly) was printed in 1970. That directory listed four districts in the church. The 2005 directory gives seven districts in addition to three foreign areas sponsored by the Mennonite Messianic Mission (MMM). Several districts like our own Denver district are in the process of forming new districts because of growth.

In 1970 there were 27 congregations spread over five states. In 2005 the directory lists 67 congregations in fourteen states and four foreign countries making a total of 13 foreign congregations. The 1970 directory listed a membership of 1178 with 63 ordained. The 2005 directory 4767 members with 211 ordained.

Now, a few facts in relating to the Denver District (West) [now

Allegheny] of which many of us are a part of. In 1970 it listed under the Culbertson congregation with 16 members and ordained. In 2005 there are now five congregations listed with 427 members served by 15 ordained men. The geographical spread of the present churches is somewhere around 400 miles.

The growth of the church has been especially pronounced in recent years. Here are some issues in relation to growth. 1) *The first issue I want to mention is the issue of having a sound view of a church growth.* I want to use the book of Acts for somewhat of a background to some of my points here. Let us notice in Acts 2:47, first of all. The Early Church that is pictured before us in the book of Acts was a growing Church. Not all the conditions we find there are similar to what we face today. We can make some applications. Notice it says in verse 47, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved," or such as were being saved. The Lord added.

A faithful church grows because of the blessing of God upon her. Also, in relation to growth there needs to be adherence to Gospel principle and commitment to truth. When a church group builds upon truth and upholds the Scriptures, it is

growth because God blesses truth. Recall that at one point, Martin Luther would have liked to have had a church that was built on the Scriptures. However, he feared that he could find no members for a group like that. In contrast, our Anabaptist forefathers, as they began the separated church of their time said, “We must build upon the Scriptures and leave the results to God.” As they did that the Lord blessed the church.

We do recognize that groups who offer a weakened Gospel in relation to cross bearing, personal obedience, and holiness may grow initially but the end result is finally slippage and apostasy. The Church in the book of Acts was built of those who were ready to embrace the course of radical obedience. In verse 38, to those who responded with the “what shall we do?” (in verse 37) Peter said, “Repent.” He called for a change of life. “Be baptized.” The thought there is that it is an unconditional surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Notice verse 41, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized.” They received the word that Peter had given as a leader of the Church. There was submission to the Word. They gladly received His Word.

2) *Another issue is the issue of*

*communicating burden for, and a love of the Church.* Notice verse 46, “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.” That reflected a deep appreciation for the Church and devotion to Jesus Christ — gladness and singleness of heart.

With the passing of time and of some of leaders that were involved initially in the beginning of our group, we can forget the burden and the conviction that gave rise to the church. It was the burden to be free of apostatizing elements and to have a church that is based solidly on the Scriptures even though that way was costly. There is always the tendency to forget the burdens and the convictions of the past. The challenge before us as a group that is growing in age is to keep sharp and clear the vision of a separated, holy church.

I will mention two areas in relation to this. One is the need to keep alive a knowledge of history and the burden that gave rise to a group. It is the burden to be faithful to the Scriptures and to be a separated church in the last days in which we find ourselves. Then, the other area I want to mention is the unique opportunity before us as parents to instill a

love and a zeal for the church. We have but a brief opportunity to do that, do we not, as our families grow up? However, to do that, we must be convinced. We must be supportive. We must be those who throw our weight behind the church. We are here in a moment of time and this is our moment to build a church.

3) *Another issue is the issue of continuing to carry out effective discipline in the church.* We must continue to see the positive result of exercising Scriptural discipline within the Church of Jesus Christ. In Acts 5, we have what we might call a “divine discipline” that was carried out in relation to Ananias and Sapphira. Notice the end result in verses 11–14, “And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. (12) And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s porch. (13) And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them. (14) And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women).”

The result was a fear, a holy fear of displeasing God. The exercise of sound church discipline helps to instill that type of

fear. Another result we notice here is in verse 14, “believers were the more added to the Lord.” This holy disciplined body was attractive to those who wanted to truly serve the Lord. Others were brought in.

We need to continue as a church body to deal with little things, and to keep undimmed the vision of a holy church, and a separated body. The rampant apostasy in our time in a direct result of ignoring small issues, little issues, little things among the plain groups. What do the Scriptures say about a little leaven? “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9). For instance, if we allow the play spirit to gain a foothold in the church, it will crowd out our love of the truth, and our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must maintain a resistance to wrong change. For instance, we face things that are challenging our application in relation to the plain cape dress. History bears out that when a form of application changed, soon there was a loss of a form completely. Therefore, we must continue to maintain a Scriptural order in the church so that the presence of the Lord is reflected in our midst.

4) *Another issue is that of recognizing the accountability that*

*goes along with increased resources.* God expects us to do what we can. A growing church makes possible a broader work. In Acts 1:8 we have the Church's mandate, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The Church began right where She was, and She grew as the Lord blessed. She was able to reach out further and further.

Our church group began as a small group with many young families. As a maturing group we have more material assets, and a larger constituency. As a result because of that we can touch regions beyond where we initially were. We cannot touch the whole earth, but the Lord expects us to do what we can, and what we are able to do. That is our mandate as a church, is it not? That is what God expects. The time of the Early Church was unique. It was the time of Roman peace when the Roman empire controlled much of the then known world. There were roads over which missionary bands could travel to take the Gospel.

Our moment in history is somewhat unique as well. We

have modern means of travel, modern means of communication. Our missions today have contact with home in a way that was not possible years ago. Calls are coming for help across the continent and in various parts of the world there are needs that are facing the Church. Therefore, we are in a time of great opportunity but a time of great responsibility as well, are we not? We have a message that the whole world needs. It is the message that will meet the needs of every soul on earth. The challenge before us is to press our means into kingdom building while our moment of opportunity is before us.

5) *Another issue is that of relating Scripturally to the tests that growth brings.* In Acts 6 we notice the tests that came upon the Early Church, as is often true. Rapid growth led to some difficulties, some problems within the Church. The apostles, because of the heavy load upon them, were not able to look after the details of church life. You will notice in verse 1 that the Grecians (or the Hellenistic Jews — the Jews who had adopted the Greek language and customs) murmured because they felt their widows were being neglected. The solution was to ordain the seven to what we call the deacon office today.

The result is in verse 7, “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.” We should not fear the challenges that go along with growth. Rather, we should do our work carefully so that the blessing of God can come upon us as was obvious here.

I would like to mention one test of growth at this point. There can be a weakened sense of personal accountability and responsibility. When a congregation is filling up and a church is growing, it can make it easier for us to feel like we can miss prayer meeting, or we can miss local outreach or special meetings because perhaps our absence will not be noticed. We may think that the work can go on without us. That may be true, but we will miss a blessing, will we not? We cannot afford the opportunity to obtain a blessing that goes along with immersing ourselves in the work of furthering the church.

6) *Another issue is that of bringing others into the leadership to fill the increasing need of a growing church.* In Acts 1:26 we have the calling of Matthias to fill the place that Judas left vacant. In Acts 6 we have the ordination of the seven. Later on

in Acts 14 we read that Paul and Barnabas “ordained them elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). It is important that we look ahead to the needs of the church that are rising and provide more leadership before the need is acute and the church suffers because of that. We need to provide this, do this in ample time so that we can do our work carefully in relation to ordination with adequate planning and care. We certainly want solid leaders added to the church, not with the leaders not caring and who stoop to the wrong pressure from the people. A strong vigorous leadership is certainly healthy and essential to the ongoing work of the church.

7) *Then, we have the issue of meeting the increased financial demands.* A growing work requires financial support. As a North American people we are among the most financially blessed people in the world. We should be conscious of that as a people. We have the means which perhaps few people do across the world to reach out into new areas and to at least respond to some of the appeals that are coming to us for help. The challenge before is, will we respond with a sacrifice for the cause and place our funds in eternal trust? Or, will we spend unduly for personal comforts and enjoyments?

If we go down the road of enjoying the present world to the full whether we play, fishing trips, and all that the world has to offer to us, if we go down that road our history will be short. Our minds will be blinded to the great needs that are staring us in the face as a church.

In Acts 4:34, 35 we notice that there was spontaneous giving in the Early Church. "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, (35) And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." These individuals gave because their hearts were throbbing with the cause. It caused their pocketbooks to be wide open. They were not required to sell of the extra possessions which they had, which apparently is what they did. We do have record of ownership continued in the Early Church. However, the challenge before us is that we likewise in a day of great opportunity to build a church are willing to give sacrificially for the cause of expanding the work of the church.

8) *Another issue is that of adjusting willingly to change as growth requires.* One challenge

is especially before us, this being the first meeting, first gathering of the western part of the Denver district in this manner. We have gathered at a different time than we were accustomed to in the past at a different place. For some of us here, gathering here meant travelling winding roads across some mountains rather than the turnpike to the east. We have appreciated the attachment to the broader district. We are not promoting the severing of those ties. Yet, the challenge before us is to throw our weight behind the development of the work in this part of God's kingdom.

Growth has meant more terms added to the Numidia Bible school. There are now November and December terms. Are we willing to adjust our schedules and support those terms if we can? The challenge is before us. Growth means that some congregations need to give up their ministry to serve in new areas. In Acts 13:2,3 we have the call coming from the Lord through the Church "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. (3) And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them

away.” They willingly gave up these two beloved leaders for the work of carrying the Gospel into the new areas. They are called “chosen” and “beloved” men in Acts 15:25.

One challenge for each of us is, are we personally willing to labour in a new area should the Lord call us to do that? Are we willing to make the adjustments which that would require? Being a mission church requires of us the willingness to sacrifice for the expanse, the carrying forth of the Gospel, the building of the Church in other parts of the kingdom.

9) *Another issue is that of guarding carefully the process of growth.* Our effort to reach new areas at home and also in other lands must be done with slow, steady, careful steps. It can never be reckless, but carefully thinking the issues through as we move into new works. Congregations should not be divided too quickly lest we wind up with one or both parts of a divided congregation greatly weakened. Before we divide a work we must make sure that there is a solid core of convictions in both the remaining and the new congregation so that both can move forward on a stable, solid platform. We need to provide seasoned leadership for

emerging congregations in the more distant areas. We should not ordain and immediately send a new man out, but those who are mature as leaders.

One long term goal for congregations that are isolated a bit which would move from the home area is to provide a sister congregation so that the fellowship can be spread out and more balanced. Sometimes at informative meetings we are given the opportunity to give our voice in relation to a new mission outreach. It is good when we are given that opportunity to remember that this has been brought through by the church leaders and has been looked at as feasible. Normally we should be willing as a group when we can feasibly take on a new area to support doing that and be ready to sacrifice for expanded work.

10) *Last, but not least, is the issue of maintaining a sense of responsibility to and a oneness with the broader church.* As we move into new areas and new districts are formed we need to maintain a frame of reference that is tied in with the church at large. We are moving with the heartthrob of a church at large. In Acts we notice that Jerusalem was a centre for the work. Later Antioch provided a centre for missionary activity.

This is a pattern for us that while we spread out, we maintain a churchwide cohesion. They lived in times when travelling was difficult. Contact was not readily available like we have today by telephone and otherwise. In Acts 15 Paul and Barnabas took the vexing matter of circumcision back to Jerusalem to the church there for their help in resolving this matter, this issue. Many times in the local area we need the broader church to help us to think through issues that we are facing so that we might face them properly.

Our mission families need a time of furlough to renew the attachment to the home base and sense the brotherhood, the larger base brotherhood behind them. The spirit of independence as developed in the past, for

instance in relation to the African missions, is dangerous to our church. It is important that we do not allow this to develop. It is for our safety to have a strong attachment and tie to the broader body. As we move toward a separate district, perhaps the responsibility of getting across the church is even greater than before — attending such things as informative meetings, Bible Conference at Numidia, and Conferring meetings. It is good for even the laity to get to those meetings at times. We need this to give us a stabilizing touch with the churchwide body.

May we carefully build the Church. May we throw our weight behind the church for our safety and eternal welfare, and also for the furtherance of the great work of the Lord through the Church.

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4:10

Hebrews  
60      11:26      60

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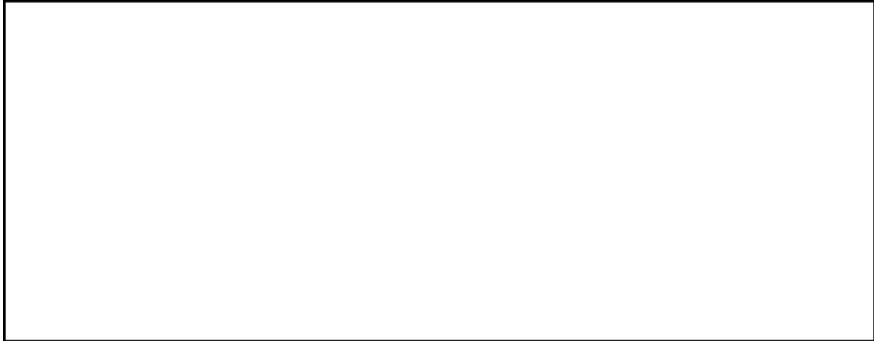
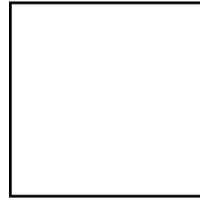
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