

How Big Is Too Big?

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As has been evident to just about all of us, I believe, over the past several years, we've seen quite a bit of growth as a congregation. I've been delighted to see that, but as with any of God's blessings, it brings with it some challenges, and some of those challenges have to do with the mindset of our members. Now that we're actually among the larger sound congregations in the Chicago area, I get the feeling that it makes some of us uneasy, that we're concerned that if this growth continues, the Joliet church may actually reach a size that is too big to be desirable.

Before I go on, let me say that I understand that sentiment completely. After all, for most of us, most of our church experience has been with churches that are smaller. The first church I ever belonged to was a little congregation in New Jersey that was lucky if it had 70 souls in attendance on Sunday morning, and there are definitely positive aspects to belonging to a church of that size. You get to know everybody, be close to everybody, and share in that close family feeling as a church that so many of us value. In a larger congregation, that's not necessarily going to be true.

However, as with any spiritual question, our desires and our expectations don't settle the issue. We aren't the ones who get to decide the optimal size for our church. That's something for God to decide, and it's quite evident from Scripture just how big He wants a church to be. If we don't pay attention to His wishes in this matter, we run the risk of developing attitudes and practices that are contrary to His will. Instead, we need to listen, so that just as we conform to the pattern of the New Testament church in our worship and in our use of the Lord's money, we also conform to the pattern in our goals for the growth of the church. Let's look this morning, then, to decide how big is too big.

God's Plan for the Church.

The best way to answer this question is by turning our attention to God's plan for the church, not just for local congregations, but for the church universally. We see quite clearly just how big God wants the church to be in 1 Timothy 2:3-4. Basically, every time we cross paths with another human being, we can be certain that God wants them to be saved, and, as an inevitable consequence of that, He wants them to be added to the assembly of the saved—the church. In a local sense, here's what this means. If there is some soul in the Joliet area that has reached the age of accountability and needs salvation, God wants that soul to be a member of the Joliet church. It doesn't matter who they are, what they've done, how old they are, what color they are, or anything else. God wants to see them worshipping with us, period. Of course, God's desire is never going to be completely fulfilled. There are always going to be sinners who reject the gospel. However, that doesn't change God's aspiration, which is for as many as possible in this area to be a part of us.

This same universal aspiration is mirrored in God's commands for evangelism. Consider with me the wording of Mark 16:15-16. The apostles, and by extension all Christians, were to teach the gospel to everyone. This includes us today. Jesus intends for us to teach anyone we can get to sit still and listen. No exceptions. Obviously, this is a strategy designed to save as many souls as possible, which means that it is designed to lead to a church that is as large as possible.

That means that if we don't want a church that is as large as possible, in some part of our spiritual thinking, we are actually working at cross purposes with God. Let's work through this logically. Let's say that I think the Joliet church is the perfect size right now. I fear that if it gets any bigger, we'll lose something important. If that is truly my belief, what am I not going to do? Obviously, I'm going to have nothing to do with saving the lost, because if I do save the lost, I'm going to create the bigger church that I believe is a problem. In all honesty, brethren, I fear that this way of thinking is far more prevalent than we want to admit. Too many of us like our nice placid little church just the way it is, and we don't want to bring in any of those messy sinners with all of their messy problems. As a result, we don't devote ourselves to rescuing those messy sinners. We get the church we want, but God doesn't get the church that He wants.

God's Plan in Jerusalem.

If we want to know what kind of a church God does want, we need only turn to the example of the first-century church in Jerusalem. In many ways, the Jerusalem church is the prototypical church, and we know more about its growth patterns than we do about any other early congregation. We learn about the size of this group of brethren before the day of Pentecost from Acts 1:15. Before the first proclamation of the gospel, the disciples in Jerusalem numbered about 120 people. In other words, there were about as many of them as there are of us this morning. Were the apostles satisfied with that? Was the Lord satisfied with that? Clearly not! On the day of Pentecost, the apostles proclaimed Christ to the multitudes. We learn about the result of this in Acts 2:44. As a result of the teaching of Peter and the other apostles, that decent-sized group of 120 grew by 3000. Brethren, if I ever baptized 3000 people in one day, I would die of joy. That would be amazing! It would be spectacular! At that point, a lot of Christians would get nervous. They'd want to slow down on this evangelism thing to consolidate the gains they'd already made. Is that how Peter and the apostles felt?

Absolutely not! Instead, they went out again and sought more lost souls. We learn about the result of Peter's second gospel sermon in Acts 4:4. Before, the Jerusalem church had a little over 3000 people. Now the men alone number 5000. When we figure in the women and children, there may well have been more than 15,000 souls in that congregation.

I don't know for sure, friends, but I'm reasonably certain that today, there isn't a single church of Christ anywhere on the planet that can claim that many members. If we had that kind of growth in the Joliet congregation, we'd be showing up in the national news. In the span of not more than a year or two, the Jerusalem church grew a hundred times larger than it began. That's mind-boggling! But do you think that Peter and his fellow workers were finished there? No, they weren't. We see the further effects of their preaching described in Acts 5:14. More people than ever were brought to the Lord—multitudes of them! At this point, Luke gives up on assigning numbers to the Christians in Jerusalem, I suspect because nobody but God knew just how many there were. Just imagine trying to take attendance on that group. The attendance chart would have looked like the Chicago phone book! There was no indoor structure in Jerusalem that could possibly have accommodated all of those disciples in one place. Was that enough for Peter? Was that enough for Jesus? For our answer, let's look at Acts 6:7. Now, we learn that the word continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied. Once again, we don't have hard numbers anymore, but it is likely that by this point in time, we are talking about a group of Christians large enough that it would have filled up the stands of Soldier Field. Even at this level, the only thing that keeps the church from growing more is the persecution of Saul, which scatters it.

I think that pretty well answers the question of how big is too big, don't you? There is no such number. Even if the Lord blesses us so much here that we have to buy a basketball arena to meet in, that still isn't big enough. Even if there are 50,000 Christians within the city limits of Joliet, that still leaves 100,000 people who aren't. And we have, what, 120 people here this morning? Brethren, that's not the goal. That's what the church in Jerusalem started with. We talk a lot about how we want to be the first-century church, but if we actually are the first-century church, we will be dedicated to teaching the lost about Jesus, and we will not be afraid of growth, no matter how great that growth might be.

Traits of a Larger Church.

Of course, the example of the Jerusalem church doesn't keep some Christians from advancing arguments in favor of a smaller church as the optimal size. One of the first things they point to is that in a church that's larger than about 200, it becomes impossible for all the members to know each other personally. That is true, but unity can be a characteristic of a larger church too. Look what Luke says about the Jerusalem church in Acts 4:32. According to the Holy Spirit, even these thousands and thousands of Christians were still able to be of one heart and one soul. Size is no barrier to the Scriptural conception of unity. In fact, it may help. There have been times in my life when I didn't place membership with the church geographically closest to me because there wasn't anybody there my own age. That wouldn't have happened in the Jerusalem church. No one in that church could have been friends with everybody, but everybody could have been friends with somebody. Furthermore, a church that is as dedicated to growth as the Jerusalem church was doesn't have the energy to spare for church splits and other internal squabbles. Usually, those things are a problem in churches that aren't growing. Regardless of how big we are, we can still be united if we decide to be united.

The second argument that is often advanced against larger churches is that in those larger churches, men don't often have the opportunity to serve by leading singing or prayers in the assembly. Once again, that may be true, but larger churches actually offer more opportunities to serve, not less. Consider, for instance, the problem described in Acts 6:1. The number of foreign widows in the Jerusalem church at this time was so great that they ended up needing seven men taking care of them full time. That doesn't include the widows who were from Jerusalem. It doesn't include the other needy. It doesn't include all the other good works that the church needed done. Sometimes, we get the idea that the only things that need doing in our church are the things that happen between the announcements and the closing prayer, that a man who isn't participating isn't getting the full privileges he's entitled to as a Christian in good standing. Brethren, service isn't about getting our turn. It's not about getting what we're entitled to. Service is about obeying God and taking care of His people, whenever and wherever the need may arise. If we aren't leading singing on Sunday morning, so what? If our service never has anything to do with the assembly, that does not make us any less pleasing to our Lord.

Finally, Christians will often say that they just enjoy being a part of a smaller church. However, if the Jerusalem church is any indication, an even greater joy accompanies being part of a larger church that is growing dramatically. Consider how the Jerusalem Christians are presented in Acts 2:46-47. Sure, it's fun to associate with the same familiar friends, to go to the same round of social gatherings every year with the same people, but that's nothing next to the joy of being part of a church that's got the devil on the run. There are a lot of things that I do for fun. I enjoy computer games; I enjoy cheering my Tigers on to victory; but none of that can compare to the happiness of seeing even a single soul come to the Lord. Just one repentant sinner will put me on Cloud Nine for a week. Just imagine if we had so many soul-winners in our congregation that every Sunday, someone came forward to obey the gospel. That would be like heaven on earth. All of the joys that we know as Christians will only be intensified the more of us there are.