

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

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There are more ways than one to grow a church. Think about it.

A church can grow as a result of natural procreation. Having babies. Statistically, however, that only accounts for a 25% growth rate over ten years.

A church can grow as a result of decline. I know that sounds strange, but the decline of one church can mean the growth of another. Twice in the last 28 years, Trinity has grown because another church has either folded or split up.

A church can grow through a targeted marketing campaign. These usually take time to reach critical mass, but can give a boost to the number of visitors.

A church can grow as a result of invitations. When church leadership regularly provides opportunities, such as special music, speakers, or other events, and the people regularly invite their family, friends, and acquaintances, growth will be steady.

But church growth can be limited, or completely curtailed, by more issues than we can count, which makes church growth an uphill battle. Throw into this sack everything that has ever made you wince or groan about a church—from petty to devastating—and you'll quickly realize what we're up against.

However, in the long run, there may be nothing as deadly to church growth as marginalization—rejecting some people, just because they're not like you. Think about it.

The Hebrew people were born from a promise—a promise God gave to their ancestor Abraham. Over the course of their history, they have experienced periods of abundant growth and prosperity and many miraculous interventions and rescues, but these latter came because they also have been faced with many devastating trials. One of the earliest major threats was the mushrooming power of Assyria, a nation that eventually mastered much of the Middle East, an area once known as the Fertile Crescent.

Last Sunday, we learned of King Ahaz, whose fear of the immediate threat of his cousins to the north—Israel and their allies—drove him to look to the man of God, Isaiah, for counsel. But Ahaz's stubborn doubt that God would actually help him drove him to ignore Isaiah's advice and put himself and his people into the hands of the king of Assyria, whose help he trusted. In the short run, this seemed good, because it brought a conclusive end to the threat of Israeli invasion. In the long run, however, this was Judah's undoing, as the tide of Assyria's appetite for control swept Judah away along with the other Middle Eastern nations in their path.

When their overthrow became inevitable, national despair and anguish reached a peak. Hope had fled. There remained only a certain dread of a loss they could not prevent or diminish on a scale that swallowed their every horizon. Darkness seemed to cover the earth.

Into this bleakness, God sent prophets to encourage His people—not that they would again be rescued, but that they would ultimately survive and, in fact, grow out of their trial. Their survival was assured by the committed grace of God (for the sake of their faithful ancestors). And their growth would come from an unsus-

pected avenue: the assimilation of a wider family of people—a people formerly defamed and rejected. This type of growth would be characteristic of the arrival of God’s Anointed leader, their Messiah.

Let’s hear the news straight from the pen of Isaiah, written over 700 years before Jesus was born.

Isaiah 9:1-2

¹ *Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled (Israel’s conquest and exile by Assyria), but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.*

² *The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.*

For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.

“Zebulun and Naphtali” were two of the ten tribes that made up the northern kingdom of Israel, and here become the poetic representatives of that entire kingdom.

“Galilee of the Gentiles” represents the broader region, still largely non-Jewish—because the Gentiles were never overthrown or driven out by the Jews when God first brought them into the Land of Promise—and a trade route for Gentile nations from the east to reach the Mediterranean Sea.

We sometimes sing:

You give and take away

You give and take away

My heart will choose to say,

“Lord, blessed be Your name!”

(“Blessed Be Your Name”

by Matt and Beth Redman)

We bless the name of the Lord, even when He orchestrates loss in our lives, because that is not how the story ends! He always writes another chapter, in which there is recovery and restoration and growth and fruitfulness. The *“time of darkness and despair will not go on forever.”* There will be a humbling, but there will just as surely be an exaltation. Galilee will be “filled with glory,” will see “a great light,” and “a light will shine” on them. This is their destiny—the destiny of a people once excluded and rejected.

Isaiah 9:3-5

³ *You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice.*

They will rejoice before you

as people rejoice at the harvest

and like warriors dividing the plunder.

⁴ *For you will break the yoke of their slavery*

and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.

You will break the oppressor’s rod,

just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.

⁵ *The boots of the warrior*

and the uniforms bloodstained by war

will all be burned.

They will be fuel for the fire.

The nation's eventual prosperity and growth would be the result of a conquest of their own—an internal victory—in which prejudice and oppression would be driven from their hearts. That victory would be as decisive as Gideon's amazing conquest of the Midianites, when 300 men, armed only with trumpets and torches, overcame 135,000 armed warriors. This represents the final conflict and the ultimate victory for the people of God—a victory over their own narrowness and pride.

Yet this is only the beginning of the blessing! For this evident triumph is empowered by an unseen work of God. Ultimately, this is God's victory—a victory into which He invites His people! This is the work of Messiah Jesus.

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶ *For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.*

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *His government and its peace
will never end.*

*He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.*

*The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen!*

The words of this prophecy, particularly the sixth verse have illuminated countless Christmas cards, and been the theme of numberless poems and songs.

These words could not be restricted to the son of the prophet, who would indeed be a signal of God's intent, but was never called "Wonderful Counselor" or "Prince of Peace." Nor was he a descendant of David to sit upon his throne forever.

Jews have always regarded these words to refer to the Messiah—the Christ, the Anointed One—who would restore David's kingdom to something akin to and also far beyond its former glory.

These are words that describe the Christ, God's Son, "*born to us,*" and "*given to us.*" He was given in God's gracious plan to redeem and rescue a people for Himself. He was born as one of us—God *and* man, united in a single being. You see, He had to be God in order to overcome the sin that had mastered our race, and He had to be human in order to atone for our sins.

These words also describe His purpose for coming. He does "*save His people from their sins,*" but we have over-individualized that concept—His people are more than a collection of individuals, they are a great nation, a kingdom of priests. God's purpose has always been to create a global community, a nation that spanned geographic boundaries and even the boundaries of time itself—a people of His own, present and eternal, who would love Him and love one another.

Christ is the sole Governor of this Nation of Peace, and His rule is perpetual, unceasing—characterized by divine justice and fairness.

We can taste this government today, not in any of the political structures of our time, nor even in the political structures of His Church on earth, but in our hearts (if they belong to Him), and in our churches, if we keep in step with the Holy Spirit. And its flavor is spreading! On average, over 165,000 people around the world turn their lives over to Jesus Christ every day. They're not perfect yet—none of them and none of us—but they are practicing yielding to the Holy Spirit's instructions and gentle promptings.

"Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6). God's own "passionate commitment" is bringing this to pass. Sure, people will fail—you and I will fail—but God will never fail. This will come to pass.

And this is what Christmas reminds us of, year after year: God's unfailing love and purpose.

Out of darkness, He brings light. Oppressions *shall* cease. Wars *shall* end. Brotherhood *shall* increase. Righteousness *shall* prevail. Not by military might, not by human energies, but by the activity of the Spirit of the Lord. Jesus Christ is growing His everlasting Kingdom, one person at a time.

This is the Christmas story. Is it *your* Christmas story? It can be. Come to Christ today. Let Him enfold you into His great people, and His everlasting hope.