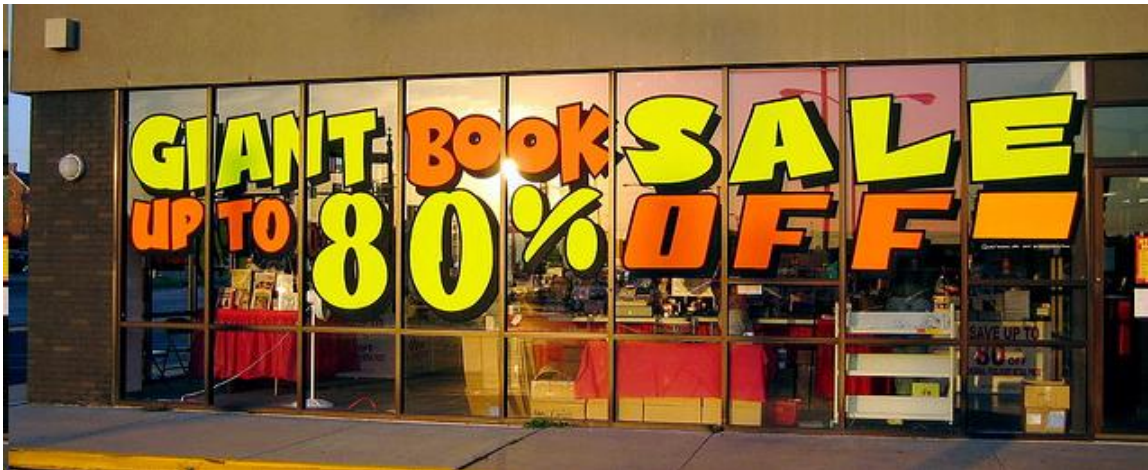


## True Church Growth (Fr. John Parker)

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“Grand opening.” When we see such an advertisement for a store, we think low prices—bargains. More likely than not, we don’t think about the flip-side. When retailers advertise for these and other special events, their eye is almost solely on the bottom line. Let’s get the most people we can in here in order to maximize sales. Every person through the door represents a certain percent chance of a sale, and therefore a certain percentage of today’s income. The math is fairly simple: a product people want plus the people who want it equals growth (profit, then ordering more, then selling more).

This plan works great for capitalism, but it is a disastrous scheme and a horrible ‘model’ for Christianity. The Christian faith is not a commodity, though there is a ruthless effort from within—of all places—to make it so. Models and methods for “explosive church growth” and “true community” are as overstocked as every American diet craze. Here today, gone tomorrow. Self-professed experts, who have little, if any, connection to the ancient church, offer their solutions to propel your church into the 21st century, for a nice price.

Everything is marketed, packaged, niched, and for sale. A now-dated example is the Prayer of Jabez, a ‘prayer’ never ever prayed by Christians in 2000 years, which was all the rage packaged as a book and fiercely marketed with options such as “Jabez Study Bible”, “Jabez Journal”, “Jabez for women”, “Jabez prayer shawl” (yes,

really), Jabez pencils, notebooks, bracelets, small group studies, videos, etc. Where is Jabez now?

Nearly every facet of “American Christianity” takes this approach. The “radical” new concept. The book. The study guide. The video. The tie-in bibles, notebooks, bumper stickers, bible covers, key chains, and dvds for men, women, children, teens, many special interest groups. The list has no end. And it is all exported, like any consumable. And then, like the so-called rapture (also not a part of bona fide Christian teaching from the beginning): whoosh! It’s gone, making room for the next one.

Nor, in the history of Christianity, is the Faith about getting massive numbers of people through the doors to make a simple ‘faith commitment’. Yes, it is true, that “thousands” were added to their number in single instances, as recorded, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles. The Orthodox Churches can tell us the names of many of them who went on to be burned, tortured, beheaded, beaten, and otherwise brutalized and put to death for their faith. They are our family members. But trust me, in the first three centuries, few, if any, ‘became a Christian’ because of peer pressure or because it fit in with their particular social scene. Christianity was a life or death decision then, these martyrs choosing temporal death for eternal life.

Church growth always includes increased numbers, but is likewise coupled with a deep, significant spiritual struggle and change. The teachings of the Church expressed in the writings of the New Testament call for a casting off of “the old man” and the putting on of Christ. No more lying, cheating, stealing, fornication, apathy, greed. No more lust, idolatry, personal interpretations of sacred teachings, gluttony, divorce. This is not moralism, by any means. This metanoia—repentance or change of mind—is not so much about certain behaviors (though outwardly that is the case). It is rather conformity to the likeness of God in Jesus Christ. This was the same call in the first century, the fourth century, the fourteenth century, and still is today.

But what happened when the Faith became fashionable (read ‘legal’)? Until the 4th century Christianity was illegal. But with the Edict of Milan, the Emperor Constantine called for an end to the persecution against Christians, and here is what happened: entrance into the Church became more difficult. *More difficult*. Conversions that seemed to have happened in a moment in the Acts of the Apostles were now lengthened to 3 years. Why so long? So people could learn the teachings of the Church and begin to rearrange their lives and ‘lifestyles’ to conform to Christ and His commandments. This helped to establish bona fide

church growth in an age when many had all the comforts of the day. They practiced and showed the members of the church their living commitment to lay down their lives at least figuratively (if not literally like their martyr forbearers) by serving those in every kind of need and in so doing, radiating the holy light of Jesus Christ from the inside of their existence, outward.

And what about today? If the early Christians took growth not only as a long-term process, but one which had to be proven by a visible, concrete, regular, and often significant life-change, why do we treat it as if it is something that can be bought in a video package, and completed in a 40-day or 15 session course? The divorce rate among self-professed Christians already speaks volumes about our commitment to this radical life of faith—not to mention all of the other ways in which contemporary, American Christianity looks no different from American religious-less existence.

On the whole, while there may be more warm bodies in the sanctuary on Sunday morning (or whenever people serve services these days), we must ask ourselves, “Am I presently and at all times laying down my life for the love of God and neighbor?” If the answer is no—and mostly this is the answer—then it is time to repent, again, to start anew, and to lay my life down now. Otherwise, I’m just filling a pew in the church. A warm statistic. But the Lord does not call for quantities and sums of people (though very specifically, according to Ezekiel, He desires the death of no one, but that all should turn and live). He also had some hard words related to lukewarm faith (see Revelation 3:15ff). Rather, He calls us each to repentance and return; He calls for broken hearts and changed lives.

Church growth, ultimately, is about holy lives. We are not made holy in a flash or a moment. The ever present image of the vine and the gardener comes to mind. An acorn does not magically spring from a speck to a great oak overnight. Rather, the soil must be cultivated and fertilized. The seed must be planted. It must be watered and cared for. The new growth must be checked for disease and pruned. This takes time, and it is painful. But it is the only way. In fact, it is The Way, and has been from the beginning. If we truly desire to be Christian, and involved in the growth of the Holy Church, best we return to the writings and ways of those who paved the way. We must avoid at all costs the winds and tides of contemporary schemes and models. Then hopefully, in the end, we each might be welcomed into the fullness of the Kingdom of God with the words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

*By Fr. John Parker*

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