

God Gave the Increase

By John R. Gibson

Have you ever said or heard someone say something similar to the following?

We can sow the seed, but if God doesn't give the increase there's nothing we can do.

Such sentiments are often expressed and rarely questioned, but is that what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 3:6 when he wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase"? Did Paul intend to say that both the conversion of sinners and the further growth of the saints at Corinth were dependent upon God's willingness to give the increase?

If that is the meaning of 1 Corinthians 3:6 so be it, but I believe the context of 1 Corinthians 1-3 suggests a different and better understanding that is fully compatible with the individual's freewill and ability to make his own decision about being saved (Matthew 11:28-30; Acts 2:41). I believe a proper understanding of God's increase begins by understanding that the church at Corinth was beset with division centered around preachers (1 Corinthians 1:10, 11), an issue upon which the first four chapters of the epistle are focused. Consider carefully the arguments that led to the statement about planting, watering and increase.

It's All About Christ. 1:13-17

The apostle began his attack on the divisions by reminding the Corinthians that not only was Christ not divided, but it was Christ who died for them and in whose name they were baptized. No one had been baptized in the name of Paul, and he certainly was not the one who had died for them. And though unstated, what he said of himself would have been also true of Peter and Apollos.

The Message of the Cross. 1:18—2:5

In a passage similar to Romans 1:16 Paul declared that the message of the cross was the power of God (1:18) and the Lord was saving men through the message of the cross (1:21). Though one chapter ends and another begins, the same thought is continued in 2:1-5 as the one who had planted explained how and why he planted as he denied using excellence of speech or persuasive words of human wisdom. He had come to them with nothing more than Jesus Christ and Him crucified so that their faith would "not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (2:5).

The Very Words. 2:6-16

Having denied that his preaching contained the wisdom of men, Paul avowed that his message contained the purest wisdom, viz. the wisdom of God. In fact, he contended that the inspiration by which he had spoken to them was such that his very words were those which the Holy Spirit taught as He revealed the mind of God (2:11-13).

Who Were Paul and Apollos? 3:1-11

The third chapter opens with the assertion that the Corinthians were behaving in a fleshly, infantile way by proclaiming allegiance to Paul and Apollos. After raising the question of who he and Apollos were, he answered his own questions with the affirmation that they were simply ministers or servants through whom the Corinthians had believed. It was then that Paul asserted that the increase

comes from God and followed that with the assertion that the Corinthian church was God's field and God's building, as opposed to anything belonging to Paul or Apollos.

Summary

Though Paul and Apollos had proclaimed the message in Corinth, the increase was attributed to God because it was His plan and His Son that died on the cross. Further, the gospel that was preached and believed was said to be God's power because it was the story of Christ and its very words came from God. The Corinthians had not become believers because God decided to give an increase, but because God's servants preached God's message to them in God's way and they believed it (3:5; Acts 18:8), thus becoming God's church (1:2).

None of this is to say that we should not seek God's blessings on our efforts to preach the gospel, for we cannot know in what ways the Almighty might bless our efforts. God's providence should never be discounted or dismissed, but we do not need to pray that He will be willing to give an increase, for He has already assured us of His desire that all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:5) and further that He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Let's preach God's message in God's way so that when souls respond it will be God who is glorified. "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. ...that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). Truly God gives the increase!

"Whosoever will, whosoever will," / Send the proclamation over vale and hill; / 'Tis a loving Father calls the wand'rer home: / Whosoever will may come." / Whosoever cometh need not delay, / Now the door is open, enter while you may; / Jesus is the true, the only Living Way: / "Whosoever will may come."

Philip P. Bliss

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