



Growth Matters: Numbers Count

Biblical Reflections on Numerical Growth

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INTRODUCTION

“Why do we want to grow?” This was the question raised repeatedly in our Chapter Building Think Tank at NISSET 2008. We took a fresh look at strategies for building witnessing communities on campus. We looked carefully at the WHO, WHAT, WHY, and HOW of chapter building. As we progressed, we came to realize that we needed a clearer sense of WHY we would like to see our groups grow. This paper is partly an attempt to address the WHY question—a biblical basis for numerical growth.

We are in a time of transition within InterVarsity with regard to growth and numbers. We have been tracking our Annual Field Report numbers for a long time. We have held staff accountable for raising their own support for many years. This includes budgets and fundraising targets. Now we have embarked on a new growth initiative for planting 100 new chapters and pursuing chapter growth goals with overall targets of 42,000 students and faculty by the year 2012.

This is somewhat new thinking for InterVarsity. Is this spiritual? Is it worldly? Does this mean that staff will now be evaluated according to numerical results? Some staff welcome this change as long overdue, giving new attention to our mission in InterVarsity. Others may be worried that we are going down a wrong road; that we will sacrifice quality, that we will get too pre-occupied with numbers and lose our sense of dependence on God. These are valid concerns and deserve careful consideration. I will try to address these concerns in this paper.

1. The Big Picture

Numerical growth has been on God’s mind from the very beginning. To the first couple he said *be fruitful and increase in numbers; fill the earth and subdue it*. This command meant more than just to go and have lots of babies. In the pre-fall setting, it amounted to filling the whole earth with God’s people, God’s presence, God’s Kingdom and universal rule over the whole earth. This has been God’s design ever since.

God said to Abraham, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars— if indeed you can count them; so shall your descendants be” (Gen. 15:5). Abraham’s spiritual offspring would be like the stars in the heavens and the sand on the shore—incalculable. Paul makes it clear that the “seed” of Abraham is Christ, and that we are his spiritual offspring. God is still in the process of fulfilling this promise to Abraham.

Of the Messianic Servant in Isaiah, he promises that not only would salvation come to the tribes of Jacob, but “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). God’s intention that his kingdom would reach to the ends of the earth was revealed throughout biblical history.

When Jesus came as the Savior of the world, having accomplished his work of redemption, he sent his disciples *to all nations, into all the world, to the very ends of the earth*. In fact, Acts 1:8 becomes a formula of how the gospel historically spreads from *Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*. When Jesus gathered his disciples in the upper room, in John 15, he taught them that they are to be fruitful, very fruitful. Picture a grape vine, with branches extending from the vine, bursting with fruit.

We see a glimpse of the outcome in the final scenes of Revelation when people from *every tribe and language and nation* have become God’s Kingdom to reign on the earth and serve and worship the Lord God forever and ever. God’s people will in the end *fill the whole earth* with his glory.

We are part of a grand scheme that involves the growth and victory of God’s Kingdom on this earth and finally in the New Heavens and New Earth. The Bible is full of images of growth including

reproduction, lineage, agricultural images, economic images, building structures, and the human body. They are all used to show how God's Kingdom is growing and will keep growing.

As the saying goes, "if we aim at nothing, we will hit it every time." We have reason to be bold in making goals and setting targets. We serve a big God, we have a Great Commission, and we know something of the Great Outcome. Jesus invites us to *ask, seek, and knock* (Matt. 7:7). Our Father loves to give good gifts to his children. Let's not be found asking small things of a big God. Perhaps the reason we are hesitant to make specific prayer goals for growth has more to do with our "little faith" than our concern for being presumptuous.

2. Numbers Count

Stacey Woods, our founding director, reports that by 1949 InterVarsity had grown to 500 active student groups. In 1950 there were 2,000 students who had made professions of faith in Christ, with 787 student Bible studies, and 534 daily prayer meetings. We have been tracking numerical growth for a long time.

Numbers are people. As President Alec Hill reminded us at the last Staff Conference, every student on campus is someone's son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter. There are Christian parents who desperately care about whether their children will survive in their faith, grow in their faith, and continue their walk with God. Just one example of this reality came when a friend of mine asked me if we could make contact with his grandson at the university. We did. He received this note from his grandson:

*Hey Grandpa,
How are things going up there? I miss you a ton. I am going to come back home for your birthday, can't wait. Everything down here is great. I got involved with InterVarsity. They are a really awesome group of people. I also got into a small group with them. I'm going on a weekend retreat with them this weekend and that should be a lot of fun. I made a bunch of friends and I really love it down here. I really make sure that I am on top of my homework because it really piles up and it is so easy to get behind. Chris*

More significantly, there is a loving Heavenly Father who is not willing that any should perish and who stands with open arms ready to welcome the prodigal son or daughter home. This God cares about every student and faculty member on campus and has sent us to every campus, to every part of the campus, to the ends of the earth, to reach them, invite them, and by all means win them to faith in Christ.

The Bible is full of numbers. There are approximately 6,928 references to numbers in the Bible. About one out of five verses contains a number. God seems concerned about everything from the number of converts at Pentecost (3,000) to the number of fish caught by the disciples (153). In fact, the whole book of Numbers is filled with, well, numbers! And the numbers are people, with names, and parents and grandparents.

3. Fear of Numbers

In light of this, why are we often cautious about numbers, about setting concrete goals for growth in our ministry and expecting God to accomplish amazing increase in our student and faculty groups? One reason is simply *fear*.

a. Fear of failure. What if we don't see growth? How will it make us look? Have we let God down? Some of us are afraid of being unfairly evaluated by our supervisor or supporters. It would be sad if people did not take into account the obstacles, difficulties, the unique challenges of a particular ethnic group, and extenuating circumstances that we face. We need to guard against unfair evaluation, but this is not sufficient reason to avoid setting numerical growth goals.

Growth goals should come out of a dialogue between staff and supervisor, which takes into account the unique context and challenges we face.

b. Fear of change. Some of us may be afraid of growth because it means change. How often have we heard some student say, “I wouldn’t want to see this group get much bigger; then I wouldn’t know everyone and we wouldn’t have this sense of closeness”? Not many staff members would say this, but when we grow we may start to feel that we are in uncharted waters and that things are out of control. We may feel out of our depth and our sense of security plummets.

c. Fear of being worldly. In all honesty, some of us suspect that numbers are worldly. Perhaps we feel that a focus on numbers is a carry over from the “corporate mentality.” Granted, there is sometimes a formulaic, prideful, greedy, and dishonest approach to numbers in the corporate world that can even creep into Christian ministry. We have seen the results of this way of doing business with the recent crash on Wall Street. It is poor business practice and it is poor ministry practice. But many Christians operate in the business world with a healthy focus on numbers as well as a deep dependence on God.

4. Abuse of Numbers

a. Pride and self-reliance. There is certainly a wrong way to deal with numbers. When King David, (uncharacteristically) moved by pride and self-reliance, and against Joab’s strong objections, commissioned Joab to conduct a census of all the fighting men, the results were disastrous. The Lord brought a severe plague of judgment across all of Israel for this sin (I Chron. 21, II Sam. 24)) that killed 70,000 men. David appears to have been motivated by a sense of pride in the size of the Israelite army and was placing his security in sheer manpower available to him in the event of war, and so his focus on numbers became idolatrous. Of course, the census itself was not evil. There were other times when the Lord clearly ordered a census to be taken (Numbers 1 & 26) to determine those who would form the army. The right use of census-taking and numbers is to strategically plan and proceed in a responsible manner, counting the cost before we embark on a mission. Jesus compares the importance of counting the cost of discipleship to someone who counts the cost before building a house or tower (Luke 14:28-30). It is foolish to not count the cost in these cases.

May the Lord always protect InterVarsity from falling into a prideful, self-reliant spirit in any aspect of our ministry, including the area of numerical growth. The Tower of Babel enticement is still a temptation for us today to “come and let us make a name for ourselves.” If we use numbers to compare ourselves to other campus organizations; if we use numbers to boast of our great size, or to stir up our competitive instinct; or if we think we will accomplish great things for the kingdom simply because of the many students and faculty involved in our ministry, then we will have fallen into the same sin as David. The sin is not in the counting, the sin is idolatry—depending on our own resources instead of depending fully on the Lord.

b. Dishonest reporting. There is another potential abuse of numbers, and that is in dishonest reporting. We have seen the dire consequences when businesses like Enron take this path. We sometimes even see this kind of dishonest use of numbers in Christian ministries. How did the phrase “evangelistically speaking” ever creep into our language as a caricature for exaggeration? When I was working with IFES in Eastern Europe at a consultation on evangelism, a national leader from Bulgaria stood up and said to leaders of a particular mission agency, “I have seen your letters and reports that you send home to America, and according to your numbers, we now have more Christians in Bulgaria than we have people. Brothers, we need to repent. We Bulgarians need to repent because we accepted your money; you need to repent because lying is a sin.” I was stunned. But the leaders of this mission agency were unfazed as they continued with their presentation of numbers. The Apostle Paul says, “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (II

Cor. 4:2). Those of us on InterVarsity staff must guard against exaggerating numbers in AFRs and misrepresenting evangelistic results in reports to donors.

c. Preoccupation with numbers. Max DePree wisely points out that “too much emphasis on quantification makes organizational eunuchs.” We agree that we are not interested in sterile and endless analysis of numbers. What we really want is to have healthy, strong, and fruitful chapters on campus that are attractive and winsome to students and faculty. God can accomplish his purposes through large numbers or through Gideon’s 300 carefully selected courageous men. It is possible to have large numbers and be of no use to the kingdom whatsoever. We must take care that numbers do not become an end in themselves.

5. It’s a Matter of Stewardship

One theme that we find in Scripture from beginning to end— from the Creation Mandate to the parables of Jesus to the final judgment— is stewardship. The three cardinal principles of stewardship are these: (1) God is the owner of all things, (2) He has entrusted some things to us as stewards, and (3) There will be a day of accounting. I believe that this is the most biblical approach to this whole discussion about numerical growth.

a. It’s about ministry. In InterVarsity we believe that God has entrusted to us a ministry to students and faculty, to the university world. We are not the only ones doing this work, but this is clearly our calling. Our job is to be good stewards of this trust, to work hard and to work smart. We are called to be faithful stewards to the message of the gospel (I Cor. 4:2). We are called to use our resources to take risks for the Kingdom, as in the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14ff). By the way, there is numerical growth in this parable. Two servants doubled their investment, and the servant who is condemned is the one who did not take risks but buried his trust in the ground.

Unlike the master in the parable, God is not a slave driver, a cruel ogre, ready to punish us when we fail. He knows the obstacles and hardships we face in ministry. He understands our weaknesses and limitations. Still he invites us to enter wholeheartedly into our work, to take risks, to try new strategies. Any good supervisor will respond similarly.

b. It’s about accountability. How have we handled the trust? Have we been diligent? Paul seems to have a strong awareness of his obligation to the gospel (Rom. 1:14-15) and a certain expectation of a judgment for Christians. “His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light” (I Cor. 3:13). “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (II Cor. 5:10). Why do we so seldom hear teaching on these passages? I believe that InterVarsity will in some way be held accountable for how we have managed the trust God has given to us— this generation of students and faculty. This is our calling. This is not to induce guilt or apply pressure; it is just a matter of faithful stewardship and the biblical realities of accountability.

It’s true; sometimes the farmer can work hard all year, only to lose the whole crop in the end, to a hail storm. However, if the farmer keeps losing the crop year after year, while neighboring farmers are having success, we might begin to question his methods. The application is obvious: let us work hard and work smart.

One common accusation that comes against non-profits generally and against Christian ministries in particular is that we don’t like accountability. We don’t like to be measured, and so we set vague goals with fuzzy numbers and unclear outcomes. Some Christians in the corporate world wish we would learn a few things from their world, such as that accountability can be a good thing.

Constructive evaluation can be a liberating experience and a healthy corrective. It may become evident that I have not worked as hard as I could. It may turn out that I have followed a poor strategy. The evaluation may reveal that we need further skill training in chapter building. It may turn out that my gifts are not really in chapter building. Wouldn’t it be better to find out these

things? Maybe we do need to find another place of service that more fully uses our particular gifts. We are most happy and fulfilled when we are utilizing our best gifts for God's service.

c. It's about avoiding shoddy work. While I was working in Eastern Europe, I was also disappointed to realize that many missionaries had very little accountability from their mission agency. Some had mediocre strategies, myopic attitudes, and very little results in their ministry, but no one was holding them accountable. Some missionaries seemed to be on vacation a good part of the time. Jim Tebbe talks about how he and other mission leaders have puzzled over the "do-nothing missionary." One pastor in Sarajevo was commenting on this, and when I apologized for these missionaries, he said, "It's okay, Dan, I know there are missionaries and there are mercenaries." Ouch! There is some shoddy work done in the name of Christian missions, and I don't want InterVarsity or IFES to be a part of that.

Let me hasten to add that I encountered many missionaries who were models of servant leadership, who worked hard at contextualization and indigenous ministry, and who were very effective. There are some InterVarsity LINK staff who are my greatest heroes and who I believe are outstanding examples of what a missionary should be.

6. Mindset Issues

As important as effective strategies are for successful growth in our work on campus, issues of mindset may be even more crucial to our results. Mindset has to do with expectations and attitudes that affect the way we approach our ministry, and it can greatly influence the outcome.

a. Abundance vs. scarcity. In the account of the Feeding of the 5,000 (the only miracle found in all four gospels), Jesus found himself in a remote place with large crowds of people following him to listen to his teaching and to be healed. His disciples began to be worried about the situation. They looked around at all the people, saw that they were in the countryside with no fast food places in sight, and urged Jesus to send the crowds away (hardly a strategy for growth!). They saw scarcity – scarcity of food, scarcity of shelter, scarcity of resources. They saw the unlikely prospects of finding any food nearby, and the incredible expense it would be (eight months wages) to buy that much food even if they could find it. Amazingly, Jesus' response was "you give them something to eat." Their *scarcity* response was, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish." To remind them that he had endless resources at his disposal, Jesus performed the miracle of multiplication of the food so that all were fed, with some left over.

Are we focused on the lack of resources, the obstacles we face on campus, the proliferation of other groups that are present, or the unique anti-Christian biases of this student generation? We can become obsessed with the lack of leaders, lack of staff, lack of funds, and lack of results. It is wise to assess these things, but this kind of analysis can quickly cripple us in our ministry if we forget that Jesus is still in the business of performing miracles and God still has unlimited resources at his disposal.

Of course, this does not mean that these resources are necessarily always at *our* disposal. We live in a time of economic recession. Sometimes funds do not come in. Sometimes people do not respond to our best efforts. Perhaps another campus group starts up and takes away our best leaders. These are realities that we face. The question is how we will respond to these circumstances. Will we retreat in defeat or will we pray all the more for the God of the harvest to unleash his unlimited resources?

I will always remember a statement in the SIMA motivational profile of one of our staff members who had a long history as a strong chapter builder. It said, "He is not impressed with obstacles." I knew that this staff member also had a big view of God, and I had seen how this worked itself out in his work.

b. A sense of expectancy. As we surveyed our most successful chapter builders, one characteristic that emerged was a healthy sense of expectancy that the chapter would grow. They prayed for growth, they planned for growth, they worked for growth. They fully expected that God would add to their numbers. We can have expectancy about growth, based on a conviction that God is at work, without this deteriorating into pride and self-reliance. In the Chapter Building Think Tank, we discovered that effective chapter builders tend to have a holy dissatisfaction or godly discontent about the current state of things. We need to guard against complacency and becoming content with the status quo. We need only to read the amazing church growth story in the book of Acts to lift our sights to expect great things of God.

Some regional staff teams have experienced a sort of transformation of thinking about how they view their geographic territory. They have moved from a bias that they were dealing with *rocky soil* to a steady confidence that there is a greater openness to the gospel than they had recognized. They have come to a conviction that God can bring growth to their groups, and amazingly, it is beginning to happen.

In other regions, like the Rocky Mountain Region, Bob Coughlin reports that the staff team had become discouraged. They were weighed down by shrinking numbers, they felt beat up by limited resources and limited funding. They were tired, they were spread out, and they did not feel healthy. They felt that this was a tough place to work. Their conversion numbers dropped to 18. Paula Fuller came to speak for their regional staff conference, with a prophetic word from Isaiah 61:1-4, the same passage Jesus came to fulfill.

<i>¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,</i>	<i>the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. ⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.</i>
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Paula spoke of the “year of the Lord’s favor” and “rebuilding the ancient ruins” with particular application to this regional team. It was a turning point. It was also their 60th year of ministry in the region. Don Everts did some research into the history of InterVarsity in the region and pointed out that they were birthed as an evangelistic movement. This was a transformation. For the first time, they set a numerical goal of 60 conversions, for their 60th year. Their conversions grew from 18 to 44. After the AFRs were submitted, more conversions were reported that brought the count to 58. Around the same time, Rich Lamb did some training with the team which raised their level of expectancy. They were struck by the phrase, “healthy things grow.” They began working on getting healthier as a region. Jim Lundgren also challenged them to develop a long range plan for growth, another first for them. There is a new sense of healthy expectancy, as they turn their focus from limited resources to the *rebuilding* that the Lord is doing in their midst.

7. Four False Dichotomies

a. Quality vs. quantity. I have been around long enough to have heard a certain concern expressed in a variety of ways within InterVarsity. People ask, “Are we going for breadth or depth? Are we just after numbers or do we want something that will last?” We are a quality-based fellowship with a passion for depth. We have twelve Core Ministry Values and a Purpose Statement describing love for God, God’s word, God’s people, and God’s purposes. We see racial

reconciliation as an important value of our ministry and at the core of the gospel message. It is true that these quality issues are more difficult to measure by our AFRs, and therefore can be devalued. We must continue to find ways to highlight the importance of this kind of growth in discipleship.

But when we pit our high value for quality against valuing quantity, this way of thinking throws up a classic logical fallacy called *The Dilemma*. It presents an “either-or” bifurcation as though only two alternatives are available. In this case we must insist that there is a “both-and” option. To suggest that we cannot be committed to quantitative growth and at the same time be committed to quality is a fallacy. In fact, real attention to quality usually results in greater numerical growth. Healthy things grow. People are attracted to quality; no one is motivated by mediocrity. Sometimes we can play the *quality card* as an excuse when we don’t see much growth in our fellowships on campus. We say, “Well, I am going for quality.” Jesus brought together quality and quantity in the great commission when he said “Make disciples (quality) of all nations” (quantity).

In I Cor. 3:10-15, Paul uses one of his many metaphors for the growth of the church— a building. This passage is sometimes used to support the Quality vs. Quantity polarity. Paul says that there are different ways to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ— with gold, silver, and costly stones, or wood, hay, and straw. In the judgment, it will all be tested by fire, “and the fire will test the quality of each one’s work.” The weaker, combustible materials will presumably be burned up. The moral of the story is to build in a way that has quality, that is lasting and valuable. Of course, someone might choose to adopt “quick and dirty” methods for ministry that don’t pay attention to quality, and that don’t have lasting value. This growth is shallow and will not last long. Indeed, there are different ways to build, but build we must. It is not a question of whether we will build but how we will build. We are not to sit around and wring our hands about whether we will choose quality or quantity. Choose quality materials and get busy building! If you build with quality, it will last, and there will be a reward. We see here again the stewardship principle— there is always a day of accounting to determine how we have used those things entrusted to us.

b. People vs. programs. This argument is sometimes framed as Worker vs. Work or Spiritual Formation vs. Activism. Probably no one in InterVarsity has been more committed to the spiritual formation of staff than Doug and Marilyn Stewart, but at the same time, they have repeatedly made it clear that they are “about the mission.” Their desire is to see staff spiritually healthy and released to the mission. Barney Ford has compared the relationship between spiritual formation and mission to the experience of breathing— inhaling and exhaling. If we only inhale, and keep trying to inhale, we will explode. We must also breathe out— breathe out God’s character and goodness and redemption by means of the mission. We see it in the life of Jesus, a rhythm of active ministry and then times of withdrawal (Mark 1:35). The practice of Sabbath should be a regular part of our life of ministry.

Even this breathing analogy can be misleading, as though we are suggesting that activism and spiritual formation are mutually exclusive, that they are opposing activities. We can bring Sabbath into our every day ministry experience, so that there is a peace and sense of God’s presence even in our busiest moments. It is not simply that we are to supplement our activism with times of spiritual retreat. We must bring them together and embrace both if we are to sustain the spirituality of our mission. Being prayerful throughout our day (perhaps praying the daily offices) can bring integrity and power and inward peace and joy.

How many times have I heard, “God is more concerned with who we are than what we do”? The fact is, God is keenly concerned about both of these as seen in the judgment scenes (I Cor. 3:13; II Cor. 5:10). A primary evidence of who we are is seen in what we do. We can and must learn to embrace both spiritual formation and the mission as one healthy, balanced description of the life of a Christ follower.

Some of us are naturally prone to be activists, even prone to frenzied activity. We need to take care to tend to the feeding of our souls, times of renewal and restoration. We need to come under the gentle yoke of Jesus to find rest. Others are more prone to reflection and need to be reminded of

the mission, the fields that are “white for harvest.” It is tempting to judge one another in this matter, perhaps unfairly. “All he ever wants to do is pray.” “All she ever thinks of is the next thing that needs to be done.” This can quickly deteriorate into a contest of who is more “spiritual.” Rather, our experience in contemplation should be compelling into the mission, and our involvement in the mission should be moving us to prayer. We have sometimes heard it said, “Pray as if it all depends on God, work as if it all depends on you.” But this reverts back to the false dichotomy. Rather we should *pray and work as if it all depends on God*. It does!

c. Faithfulness vs. fruitfulness. It is absolutely true that God is the one who gives the increase (I Cor. 3:7) and “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1). However, it could be tempting to take a passive approach to God’s Kingdom work. We could conclude that we are simply to remain faithful and let God decide if he wants to bring about growth. It is true that all real growth is God’s growth. We are totally dependent on the Lord for any spiritual fruit or growth or results. If we think we can take things into our own hands and succeed by our own clever plans and human effort, we are sadly mistaken. To proceed in this way is not Christian at all. There is no place in God’s Kingdom for self-reliance and this is a severe temptation that we must continually resist. We are indeed called to be *faithful*.

These two truths, to be faithfully depending on God and to be actively seeking fruitfulness, need not be in opposition. Paul states that “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” (I Cor. 3:6). There is a place for planting and watering, and at the same time recognizing our dependence on God to bring growth. We are in a divine partnership. “Work out your salvation . . . for it is God who works in you” (Phil. 2:12-13).

We are well-acquainted with Jesus’ allegory of the vine and branches in John 15:1-8. It seems to be at the center of the debate between *abiding* and *abounding*. Most of the sermons and devotionals that I have heard on this passage focus on the importance of *abiding* or *remaining* in Jesus, with great elaboration of what it means to *abide*. However, when we take a careful look at this passage we see that it is at least equally about *bearing fruit*. For sure, the emphatic statement “apart from me you can do nothing” reminds us how vital it is to be connected to the vine in order to bear any fruit. But the focus on *remaining* is the means to *bearing much fruit*. In the *BST* volume on *John*, Milne says this passage is all about the mission; these are marching orders for Jesus’ disciples. Think about it. Every branch that bears no fruit is cut off and every branch that does bear fruit is pruned so that it will bear more fruit. The repetitions of “much fruit” and “more fruit” drive home the point. Finally, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to *bear fruit—fruit that will last*” (vs. 16). Try to picture a grape vine bursting with fruit. It is hard to imagine that much fruit packed into such a small space. The gardener is cultivating for maximum fruitfulness. It appears that the fruit here is both quality and quantity. It is certainly reproduction, a vine branching out to produce more and more grapes. It is evangelism. It is numerical growth. But Jesus also refers to the qualities of love and joy in this passage. It is not just any kind of growth, not just any kind of fruit, but fruit that will last, and fruit that will faithfully reflect the character of Jesus himself.

Also, in the stewardship Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:13-30), Jesus uses the metaphor of business and economics to teach a lesson on faithfulness, on what it means to be a good steward. The ten, five, and one Talent (a Talent was worth about \$1,000) were to be used to invest. Being *faithful* meant using this money in a resourceful and industrious manner, not burying it in the ground. We should bring our best and most creative efforts to this great cause of God’s Kingdom. This parable teaches that there is a freedom to take risks in God’s mission.

d. Praying vs. Planning. Under the guise of being led by the Spirit we may be tempted to believe that planning for results is worldly, that setting specific goals is adopting the methods of “corporate America.” But the Bible is filled with stories of planning and goal-setting. We can think of Nehemiah planning and building the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah planned this project in detail, with precision, order, preparation of resources, delegating each section, with a time-sensitive target, and clear outcomes. His visionary leadership kept the people on track, free from distraction, undeterred from the task. They completed the wall in an amazing 52 days.

The examples are endless. We can think of Joshua's step-by-step conquest of the land of Canaan and the subsequent detailed apportionment of the land. And there is the planning and building of the Tabernacle under Moses and Bezalel, with workers assigned to each aspect and the gathering of needed resources. We can consider the details of the elaborate Old Testament worship system, the festivals, which guided the spiritual lives of faithful Israelites. In the New Testament, Paul lays out the plan of God for the ages (Eph. 1:3-14). God has a *plan* and *purpose* to ultimately bring together all things under Christ. God's people in the Bible are often showing ingenuity, cleverness, and skill. There is nothing wrong with being resourceful and creative in working for God's Kingdom.

8. Kingdom Growth Theme (Matthew 13)

We have already seen that growth has been on God's heart from the beginning. It is a continual thread throughout Scripture. Now let's take a closer look at this growth theme in some of Jesus' parables in Matthew 13.

In some of these parables Jesus is trying to convey a truth to his disciples that while the Kingdom is now present in seed form, it is growing, it will keep on growing, it will grow in surprising and amazing ways, and it will flourish and spread. He uses agricultural and cooking metaphors to describe this process.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus uses the first three soils to explain that not everyone will receive the message of the Kingdom (the path, rocky soil, thorns). The fault is not in the message (the seed); the fault is with the hearers. However, with the good soil, the receptive hearers receive the message. It takes root, and it produces a crop up to 30, 60, and 100 times what was sown.

The first lesson of the parable is, of course, for us to consider what kind of soil we are. Are we receptive and welcoming the word of God into our lives? I was teaching this parable with a small group of non-believing Chinese students at the International Student Houseparty at Cedar Campus. I had just made this point that we should consider what kind of soil we are when one of these students asked me, "What kind of soil are you, Dan?" I wanted to say, "Look, I am the one asking the questions here." But I said, "Well, I want to be good soil, and I usually am good soil, but at times the worries of this life crowd the growth of God's word in my life." Then I quickly turned the question back to them. Amazingly, during the week all of them moved from a posture of being unable to imagine how any thinking person could believe these things about the Bible, to a receptivity of saying, "I am beginning to like this Jesus."

Another point of the parable, for the disciples, was to create a sense of expectancy—that as they scattered seed, as they took up the work of the sower, they could expect that some seed would fall on good ground and produce an enormous harvest, beyond belief. When the message of the Kingdom falls on good soil, it will produce a harvest exponentially well beyond what they might expect. There is a sense of the inevitability of the growth of the Kingdom. With this in mind, Jesus later presented them with the Great Commission to every nation, to the ends of the earth. We see the results early in the Book of Acts, when people were becoming Christ followers by the thousands and the church began to multiply.

This growth is also something of a mystery, as seen in the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast. The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, and yet it becomes the largest plant in the garden, even to the extent that birds can perch in its branches. How does this happen? How can such a small seed be transformed into this nine foot plant? In one sense, it is a mystery because there is an invisible and organic nature to the growth. In another sense, it is miraculous because this combining of soil, seed, and water to produce life and growth is from the very hand of God. Botanists can describe this transformation scientifically, but the miracle of life and growth transcends scientific explanation. This parable tells us that the Kingdom will grow, its growth is inevitable, from what appears to be a very small beginning (i.e., the disciples) it will grow

exponentially, out of all proportion to its small beginning. Its growth is amazing and surprising. In one sense, the Kingdom of Heaven has a logic all its own. Human reason cannot fathom its depths; it must be revealed to us by God, and this is what Jesus is doing in the parables.

Next, Jesus moves to a cooking metaphor. The Parable of Yeast (or Leaven) is surprising in itself, in that leaven is usually a symbol of evil in the Bible. But here Jesus uses it to represent the mysterious manner in which the Kingdom expands throughout society. When a cook places a tiny amount of yeast (or small portion of leavened dough from the previous batch) into a large amount of dough, it eventually permeates and transforms the entire lump, producing the rising of dough that is required to make bread. Similarly, the Kingdom grows from such a small and inconspicuous beginning to permeate and transform the whole evil society in which it finds itself. The Kingdom of God may appear unimpressive at first, but appearances can be deceiving, and in the end no one will be able to miss it or ignore it. What Jesus has put in motion is so powerful that it will one day be brought to completion with the “reconciling of all things to himself” (Col. 1:20).

I remember inviting a well-known Christian psychologist, Paul Vitz, to speak at the InterVarsity meeting at the University of Michigan. He had just completed an important paper on the meaning of personhood. When he met with some of us before the meeting, he said, “I hope you know that the most important thing going on at this campus is what you people are doing in Bible studies and Christian gatherings, talking about God’s Kingdom.” It took us by surprise, but we never forgot that important lesson; something like Jesus’ lesson of the Yeast.

There is not necessarily a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the sower’s effort and the result. There are many extenuating circumstances and hidden motives and complex personal histories that sometimes baffle us. There is a miraculous and mysterious element to the growth of the Kingdom. This is, after all, the work of God. There is no magic formula for success. However, we do have our God-given minds and we are called to be “as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.” We are told not to “give dogs what is sacred or to cast our pearls to the pigs.” We can learn to distinguish good soil from rocky soil. We can learn to recognize more effective methods of sowing and tilling the soil and reaping the harvest. We can learn to pray for the mission with expectancy. Above all, we should take from these parables an expectancy that God’s Kingdom is going to grow, and grow in spectacular and surprising ways. *Whoever has ears, let them hear.*

9. But what about numerical goals?

In one sense, setting numerical goals is just a way to divide up the bigger goal— the whole world— into bite size pieces. If we take seriously the commission of Jesus in sending his disciples to *every nation, to the ends of the earth*, we should not be afraid of setting incremental goals toward that great end. It is a natural part of Christian ministry and faithful stewardship.

We see Jesus systematically sending the Twelve and then the Seventy-two to the surrounding towns and villages. There is a saturation method in this mission. He sends them with a strategy, to find “some worthy person” who will receive them and their message; people who represent the good soil of the parable. He sends them to minister to the needs of the people and to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God, just as he had been doing.

Later in Acts, Jesus’ commission that they will be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is a plan and strategy (even a prophecy) for the expanding mission. This is exactly what we see unfolding in the story of Acts as the apostles carry the message as far as Rome. There are a series of gospel breakthroughs into each new region of the Roman world at that time. It begins with Peter’s bold preaching in Jerusalem at Pentecost. People came from all over the Roman Empire to Jerusalem for the festival, and they heard the gospel and were converted in large numbers; about 3,000 were added to the church in one day. The Apostles continued preaching daily in the temple courts with similar response and thousands of conversions. Persecution drove many of the disciples out of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Philip brought the gospel to Samaria.

Finally, with Paul's dramatic conversion, the gospel is extended to the Gentiles. With three whirlwind missionary journeys, the Apostle Paul brought the gospel to the Mediterranean world, planting churches on the Islands and in all the major cities of Asia (modern Turkey) and Syria. He preaches and plants churches in Greece and Macedonia and Crete, and finally in Rome itself. Paul sums up his ministry— "So from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:19). He talks of his plans to go to Spain. This spread of the church through Paul and his missionary team is astounding and unparalleled in history.

When we look more closely at Paul's strategy in the letter to Titus, we see a very deliberate plan to plant churches and appoint godly leaders in every town on the island of Crete. "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders *in every town*, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5).

It seems reasonable that we in InterVarsity should have a goal to plant a witnessing community at every secular college and university in this country, and that IFES has the same goal in every country in the world. We need not become Triumphalistic in our thinking, with slogans like "every nation in our generation." We are simply seeking to be faithful to fulfill our part of the Great Commission.

Jesus gave the disciples a commission and a pattern or strategy for fulfilling the mission. While he didn't provide numerical growth goals, Jesus (and Paul) did use words like *all and every* to describe the extent of the mission. It follows that we should have some plan or strategy as to which campuses to reach out to this year and the next. Taking the Great Commission seriously also suggests that we should be concerned with establishing groups in large enough numbers to have a credible impact on the whole campus community, to engage the whole campus with the gospel.

Numerical goals are also a helpful way to evaluate our work in a responsible manner. We have set a target of an 8% conversion rate per year, not because it is some magic number or because we have a Bible verse to support it. But because it is a reasonable and yet faith-stretching goal which at once casts us upon the grace of God and provides something for us to aim at and a way to measure our progress. If we don't reach that target, we will pray, we will examine ourselves, and we will evaluate if there are ways that we could be more effective in bringing the gospel to the campus. Of course, we know that only God can save someone. However, we have the promise that the Holy Spirit is present in the world, convicting people of guilt, sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). We are not operating in a spiritual vacuum. And if we are faithfully and effectively proclaiming and sharing the gospel with relevance and clarity, we can expect that there will be results.

10. The Urgency of the Mission

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:35-38)

This summary statement of Jesus' ministry includes teaching, preaching, and healing. He obviously thought that these people were worth his effort. He worked hard and long to bring the good news to them. He saw them as they really were— harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd. Do I see students and faculty this way? When we stand in the quad or heavy traffic area on campus, what do we see? Too often I see them as busy, self-sufficient, confident, and intimidating. The work is plentiful and the need is urgent. Immediately after this, Jesus sent out the Twelve and later the Seventy-two to replicate his own ministry.

I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. (John 4:35-36)

The urgency of the harvest and the commands of Jesus require an unswerving dedication to growth, to more harvest and more laborers. How are we doing in the mission? How is the harvest coming along? Are we asking God for large numbers of new InterVarsity staff who are committed to a great harvest in the years to come? Are we asking God for a great harvest of students and faculty who will be brought into the Kingdom?

There is still a remarkable openness on the part of students and faculty when the good news is presented with clarity and relevance. Some will certainly reject it; some will sneer. They will sense no need for God or redemption. But we are sent to find those who will give us a welcome and who will welcome this message of good news, people who are ready to receive a blessing from the Lord, people for whom the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' words. *Now is the time!* Let us rise up and go, and let us be glad together as we reap the harvest of our Lord.

Some Sources:

John Ortberg, *To Abide or To Abound*
William Hoyt, *Effectiveness by the Numbers*
Jim Collins, *Good to Great in the Social Sector*
Rick Mattson, *Practical and Contemplative Spirituality*
Jon Ball & Scott Hall, *A Theology of Growth in the Kingdom of God*
The Bible Speaks Today Series, several volumes
David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*
C. Stacey Woods, *The Growth of a Work of God*

[Growth Matters: Numbers Count](#) is posted on the [Collegiate Ministries website](#) with related resources for InterVarsity staff and student leaders.