

God's Plan for Church Growth

Acts 2:41-47

Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at what effective evangelism entails. Looking at Philip's example from Acts chapter 8, we saw that we need to reach across all sorts of boundaries, proclaiming the good news of Jesus. From the Samaritan woman at the well, we saw the value of one-on-one gospel conversations, the need to speak into the brokenness that is increasingly obvious in our world. From Paul's speech on Mars Hill, we saw how to proclaim the gospel to the self-confident and powerful, identifying points of contact with their belief systems and pointing out inconsistencies in their thinking. And last week, we saw the need to preach Jesus to those who think they are already saved, especially those who are trapped in legalism or who put their faith in all sorts of rituals or good deeds.

But once new believers come to join our family of faith, how do we help them grow, deepening their commitment to Christ? Well, today's passage picks up the story right after a tremendous number of people were converted to Christ on the day of Pentecost. So if we look at the way those early believers ordered their lives together, maybe we can get some ideas about how to encourage Christians at every level of maturity to live every day in the light of the cross and the empty tomb, helping the Kingdom of God to grow and expand right here, where we live.

Of course, the first thing we learn in verse 42 is that the new believers devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine, or teaching. And notice – this didn't end with Peter's first sermon on Pentecost. No, the new believers were determined to learn everything the apostles had to tell them.

And it's really no wonder that such devotion to apostolic doctrine helped the Church to grow, is it? After all, Luke tells us that the apostles did wonders and signs, and that these inspired fear or awe in the hearts of the people.

So much is clear, but it's not as though we can just call one of Jesus' apostles to be our pastor. And God doesn't seem to bless the preaching of even the most faithful ministers with those kinds of splashy, public miracles anymore. Does that mean that our church can't grow like the Church in Jerusalem after Pentecost?

Of course not. And the reason that Acts-type miracles don't happen much anymore is something that should actually give us confidence. For why did God do all those miracles in the days of the Apostles, and of prophets like Elijah and Elisha before them? To put His divine stamp of approval on their testimony. But that prophetic and apostolic testimony has now been written down in the Bible. Thus, preachers don't need the power of miracles anymore because they can now appeal to the apostolic authority of the Holy Scriptures. So in a sense, the miracles worked through the prophets and apostles way back then are the same miracles that bear witness to the truth of Scripture today.

And so if we really understand that the miracle-working, Christ-appointed, divinely inspired apostles wrote this book, we will join with those Jerusalem Christians, standing in fear and awe when we open its pages, as we listen to the apostolic teaching, and as we share its

truths with new believers. As we are faithful to the Scriptures, we thus declare that we are part of the one, holy, catholic (which just means “universal”), and apostolic Church.

But are we so faithful? Do we stand in awe of the Scriptures? Do we hide the words of the Bible in our hearts? Do we cherish and obey its teachings? Are we careful to consult it when we make decisions? Are we willing to do what it says even when our desires and our self-interest point in another direction? Are we eager to share its truth with those who desperately need to hear its call to repentance and to receive its comforting promises of forgiveness and grace?

A faithful church, a church that orders its common life according to the apostles’ teaching in the Word of God will grow in numbers and deepen in discipleship. Is our congregation that sort of church?

Well, the next item in God’s plan for church growth gives us an opportunity to breathe a sigh of relief. The Jerusalem Christians devoted themselves to fellowship, and we Mississippi Presbyterians are really good at that. We love to get together because we really enjoy being around one another, especially after so many COVID-related periods of isolation. But these early believers seem to have gone further than happy conversations on Sunday mornings. Scripture tells us that they had all their goods in common, and sold whatever they had in order to give to those in need.

Now, why did the Jerusalem Christians so generous? Why did they divide what they had with one another? Simply because others were in need. The important point, then, is that when the members of the Church recognized needs in their fellow Christians, they sprang to meet those needs, no matter what they were, and no matter how much it might have cost them.

And so, if we would follow the example of the Jerusalem Christians, the question for us is the same as it was for them: what are the needs of the new believers around us? Sure, we’re good at being friendly to our visitors on Sunday morning, but how far do we go to check up on them and include them in our daily lives throughout the week? And what about our brothers and sisters who are already members of this congregation? Are we trying to meet their needs as well?

Are we engaging the broken in gospel conversations, pointing them to Jesus, the only solution for the sin in our world? Are we blessing the lonely with time and attention? Are we blessing the sick and the homebound with food or phone calls or visits? Are we blessing the depressed and grieving by giving them a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on? In modern America, time and attention tend to be much more valuable than money, you know. Are we sharing our time in these ways with those who need us?

But let’s go a bit deeper. Verse 46 says that the early Christians continued daily with one accord. It says that they had singleness of heart. Does that level of fellowship, that level of unity characterize our congregation? Do we take the initiative to reconcile with people who are upset with us? Are we willing to swallow our pride, putting old grudges aside and reaching out to heal old wounds? Do we really consider our fellow church members to be brothers and sisters in the Lord?

And what did Jesus say about this principle of church growth in our responsive reading? “By this, all men shall know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.” A loving church, a church that seeks to welcome and include others, a church that seeks to meet each other’s needs, a church that is truly one in the Spirit will be a growing church. Is our congregation that sort of church?

Next, the Jerusalem church devoted itself to the breaking of bread. In the light of Jesus’ command at the Last Supper, this would certainly include what we would call the Lord’s Supper. So, if the Jerusalem Christians enjoyed Biblical preaching and practiced genuine love for one another, this next point describes their worship. What was it like?

Well, such visits to the Lord’s table show that their worship was truly focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Theirs was a church which proclaimed the Lord’s death and resurrection faithfully. Theirs was a church that broke the Bread of Life and celebrated all believers’ union with Christ regularly.

We also notice that the people worshipped God with glad hearts and simple trust in Him. How contagious their joy must have been as they celebrated their deliverance from sin and death and told one another the precious truths of the gospel over and over again. And this gladness was not confined to their worship, but even spilled over into their dinner conversation.

Well, what about us? Do we worship in such a joyful way? When guests visit our Sanctuary on the Lord’s Day, do they see that we are focused on Jesus Christ and what He has done for us? Do they see us celebrating our deliverance with glad hearts, simply trusting Jesus? Do they see us worshipping with one heart and mind, allowing no divisions between us? Surely, a church that worships Jesus in such a joyful way will be a growing church. Is ours that sort of church?

We also notice that the worship of the Jerusalem church was integrated into the day-to-day lives of its members. The people of God were daily in the temple. But the church also broke bread from house to house. Wherever the people of God were, they were involved in worship.

What does that mean? How can we worship God wherever we are, all day long? Well, it doesn’t mean that God is calling us to be monks or nuns, spending all day in monasteries or cloisters. It might mean, however, that our view of worship is too narrow. For worship is not only singing and preaching and praying.

Instead, worship simply means focusing our lives on God. Worship means obeying God’s greatest commandment – loving the Lord our God with all we are, heart, mind, soul, and strength. Worship means doing everything we do for God’s glory, and in order to fulfill God’s will.

Now, we are accustomed to thinking of worshipping while we do other things. We know we can pray or sing hymns while we drive a tractor or wash dishes or do yardwork. But worship should reach even beyond that. We should worship by driving the tractor and by washing dishes and by doing yardwork to the glory of God.

In other words, God should be our constant point of reference, our reason for living, our ground of meaning. This is what it truly means to worship, and this is the way the Jerusalem Christians worshipped. A church that is thus constantly devoting everything that it does and everything that it has to God will be a growing church. Is ours that sort of church?

So, what sort of a church grows? A church that uses the Apostolic Word of God as its guide in everything, a church that loves others in self-sacrificial unity, a church that worships joyfully and that is devoted to God in everything it does. In short, a church that grows is a church like Christ.

But at the same time, which congregation can honestly say that it does all these things? Indeed, which of us individual followers of Christ can say we spend enough time in the Word? Which of us can say that we always put others' needs before our own? Which of us can say that we joyfully worship God in everything we do? And if we individual Christians aren't particularly faithful, how can we expect others to join us on our journey with Jesus?

Well, when we look at verse 47, we realize that none of us have the power to make the church grow. It is God Who adds to the church those that are saved. It is God Who saved each one of us, and it is God Who will draw to Himself those whom He wants to come to faith in Christ and be added to our number.

But it is precisely at this point, when we stare our sinfulness and our weakness in the face, that we are where we need to be. For it is at this point that we fall on our knees before the Lord, begging Him to do what we cannot. "Lord, make us a church worthy of You. Make us a church that is obedient and loving and joyful and devoted to You. Cleanse us of our sin."

"And then use us for Your glory. Give us the opportunity to have gospel conversations with those who need to know Christ or to know Him better. Open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, allowing all of us more truly and deeply to understand the good news. Soften the hardened hearts of those who need to repent of their sin, or who need to follow Jesus more consistently. Be pleased to expand Your kingdom in this place."

And then we notice that in verse 42 the Jerusalem church continued in prayer as well. So, maybe that's where we need to start. Maybe we need to pray that Jesus would make us the sort of Christians we should be, so that our church can be the sort of church it should be.

And as we go on praying, and as we continue to study and to live by the Word, and as we reach out to new believers by having gospel conversations with them, and as we reach out to one another not only in friendliness but in true fellowship, as we worship God not only on Sunday mornings but with our words and works throughout the week, can we doubt that God will answer our prayers? Can we doubt that God will use even our most feeble efforts to reveal the love of Christ to each other and to the world? Can we doubt that God will increase His glory and show forth His grace by drawing sinners unto Himself? As we display the character of Christ to the world, can we doubt that God will empower His Church to grow?