

## **"How a Church Grows in Grace" (An Exposition of Acts 2:42-47)<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Introduction***

As we come to the end of another year, we are approaching what we hope will be an important new year in the life of our church. Lord willing, and by His grace, we hope to become particularized – that is, we hope to leave the nest of our mother church in Escondido, and become fully self-sustaining, self-governing, and self-replicating.

In other words, we want to be able to support ourselves *financially*, and no longer be a burden on our mother church. As the Apostle Paul told the church at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 11:8, **“I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.”**

That certainly does *not* describe us, but we know that New Life can certainly put the funds that they have been graciously devoting to us toward other ministry efforts. Not only that, but we hope to be able to have a *missions budget*, to be a church that is actively helping others in the work of spreading the gospel. Just as we hope that our members will all be committed to tithing (i.e. giving 10% to the church for the work of the ministry of the gospel), even so we want to be able to *tithe as a church*, giving 10% of our budget toward missions and other such things.

Lord willing, we also want to become *self-governing*, that is, having our own *local* Session or board of elders to govern our church. Right now we are still under the oversight and care of the Session of elders at New Life. In this way too we want to un-burden our brothers in Escondido. We have two men who we believe are qualified, gifted, and called to the office of ruling elder. Pray for them. And pray that the Lord of the church would raise up more like them, and even that He might raise up deacons from among us, so that we might be further equipped to minister to the needs of our little flock.

And, lastly, we would like to become self-replicating. We want to become a *sending* church, actively involved in missions and even church-planting. These are lofty goals, but that is why they are worth pursuing. And our Lord Jesus is **“able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen”** (Ephesians 3:20-21).

And so this morning I thought it would be good for us to take a look at a familiar passage from the book of Acts that speaks of the remarkable growth of the church- how the early church, by God's grace and the work of the Spirit of Christ, came to grow in *maturity*, in *unity*, and even in *number*. We want to see what this passage has to teach us about *how a church grows in grace*. That should always be our goal, not just at the New Year.

### ***Peter's Sermon in Jerusalem on Pentecost***

On the day of Pentecost when the Apostle Peter preached the gospel of Christ to the crowds in Jerusalem, we are told that **“those who received [or “gladly received” it – KJV] his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls”** (Acts 2:41). Now *that* is some serious church growth, and in a very short time! And what a beautiful description of conversion – gladly receiving the Word of God as it is preached!

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

*Does that describe you? Do you “gladly receive” the Word of God as the very Word of God? Do you (as we saw in Isaiah 66:2) “tremble” at the Word of God? That seems to be missing in the church today, doesn't it? We do not worship the Lord acceptably, “with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28), as we should.*

The very next thing that Luke (the author of Acts) tells us is these new believers in Christ were no casual converts. Rather, he tells us that these people “**devoted themselves**” (v.42) to a number of things. *And what were those things?* In v.42 Luke writes:

**“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”**

Those four (4) things are essentially *aspects of the public worship* of the church. Here Luke is referring to what we would call the “means of grace” (or “the outward and ordinary means of grace”). All four (4) of these things are related to the gathered church and public worship.

And what was the result of this newfound knowledge of Christ and devotion to the means of grace? *Growth in grace*. This infant church grew in their knowledge of the Christ and His Word (v.42-43); in Christ-likeness and care for one another in the church (v.44-45), and in their fellowship and unity with another (v.46). In other words, worshipping the Lord together according to the Word of God had a truly *transformative* effect on their lives, both individually and as a group! And they also grew in *number*, as the Lord added to His church those who were being saved (v.47).

How often do we in the church today focus on the *latter* (growing in *number*), while practically ignoring the former (growing in *grace*)? *And does our Lord Jesus not most often make the former to lead to the latter?* And so if we as a church grow in number while not growing in grace, can we really say in any meaningful sense that we are actually growing as a church at all?

And not only that, but in v.47 Luke adds that they (the church) found “**favor with all the people.**” As they grew in Christ, their godly reputation among their unbelieving neighbors grew as well. Their daily lives, as imperfect as they no doubt were, more and more started to affirm and line up with their doctrine.

*And what was the result?* Luke goes on to tell us that “**the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved**” (v.47). The Lord added even *more* saved sinners to His church! *Really verses 42-46 are sort of book-ended (so to speak) by statements about the Lord adding to His church!*

*This is how a church grows in grace!* And when a church truly grows in grace, they grow in maturity, in unity, and even in number, according to the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who builds His church so that even the very gates of hell can never prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). *This is how Jesus builds His church!*

*Are we in the church similarly devoted to the means of grace in the public worship of the church from week to week?* Are we then devoted to each other in love and service in the name of Christ? It is not programs that win people to Christ or cause the church to grow. (Nothing wrong with programs per se.) It is not gimmicks or marketing techniques that will cause the church to grow (as if numbers were the measure of all things). *No – it is the grace of God at work through the public worship of the Lord’s people from week to week!*

And so if we would see the Lord at work in building His church, we too, by the grace of God, must be devoted to His appointed means of grace (as ordinary as they may seem) in public worship. *May that be your resolution as a congregation in this coming New Year!*

Luke gives us a very helpful description of the early church here in Acts 2:42-47. And his description here is *more than* mere information; it is *more than* just the facts for the sake of telling us what happened. *The description of the early church that we find here is most certainly intended as an example for us to emulate.* That is probably obvious to you even as you read the passage, isn't it? When you read this portion of Scripture, do you not almost immediately start to *examine yourself* in comparison to the picture painted here? Do we not read these words and begin to look at ourselves *both individually and as a church*, to see if we measure up to this example? Can we honestly say that we are devoted to those same things? *If not, why not?*

Here in Acts 2:42-47 we see that the early Christians were especially devoted to four (4) things. So if we want to follow the example of the early church, and if we want to see the same kinds of growth in the church that we see here in the book of Acts, these same four (4) things must characterize us both as a church and as individuals. *They are devotion to: 1.) The Apostles' Teaching, 2.) The Fellowship, 3.) The Sacraments, and 4.) The Prayers.*

### ***Devotion to the Apostles' Teaching***

*First, they were devoted to the teaching of the apostles. The idea of believers on the whole being devoted to teaching or doctrine is practically a foreign concept these days. A casual glance at the doctrinal statement of the average evangelical church will show an alarming tendency to minimize doctrine, if not dismiss it altogether. Many do not even have one.*

We live in a day when the church is characterized by almost *anything but* devotion to the teaching or doctrine – in fact, *quite the opposite!* These days you will often hear phrases like “doctrine divides,” or “deeds, not creeds”, as if Christianity could be reduced to nothing but a *moral code* or as if the Great Commission could be reduced to a social cause.

We live in a day when churches are increasingly abandoning the biblical model for worship and evangelism in favor of a *market or consumer-driven approach* to ministry. In his book, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, **John MacArthur** writes,

The experts are now telling us that pastors and church leaders who want to be successful must concentrate their energies in this new direction. Provide non-Christians with an agreeable, inoffensive environment. Give them freedom, tolerance, and anonymity. Always be positive and benevolent. If you must have a sermon, keep it brief and amusing. Don't be preachy or authoritative. *Above all, keep everyone entertained.* Churches following this pattern will see numerical growth, we're assured; those that ignore it are doomed to decline.<sup>2</sup>

There is a word for that kind of worship - “idolatry.” Is *that* the way to grow as individual believers or as a church? Absolutely not! Scripture is filled with exhortations that tell us that if we want to grow and be fruitful in the Christian life, we must be people of the Book. *We must be devoted to the apostles' teachings in the Scriptures.*

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2 p.45 (Italics added.)

Psalms 1 tells us that it is only the one who 'delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night' (v.2) who will be like **“a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers”** (v.3). Colossians 3:16 tells us to, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . .”** That could also be translated, 'Let the Word of Christ dwell *among* you.' (The word “you” is *plural* there.)

2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that **“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”** So if we want to *be* what we are meant to be and be able to do every good work, *we need to be in the Word.*

### ***Devotion to Fellowship***

The *next* thing that they the early Christians were committed to was **“the fellowship”** (v.42). The word **“fellowship”** is a much deeper idea than the way we commonly use it today. We often use it to mean nothing more than *social time* or just *hanging out together*. Now it certainly includes being together, but it also includes the idea of sharing in something together. The Apostles' Creed includes this when it mentions “the communion of saints.” What do we share in together? All of the benefits of redemption in Jesus; all of the Spiritual gifts that the risen and ascended Lord Jesus gave to His church in order to build each other up in the faith.

Matthew Henry writes,

“They not only had a mutual affection to each other, but a great deal of mutual conversation [i.e. *life*] with each other; they were much together.”<sup>3</sup>

And because we share in those *greater* things, we also share our *lesser* things with each other when someone has a need. Some people actually try to use these early chapters in Acts as proof texts for Communism or Socialism. After all, in v.44-45 they **“had all things in common”** and were selling their possessions and giving to those in need, right? But it that what the book of Acts teaches us? By no means.

Acts 5:1-5 tells the story of a couple who actually *died* because they made a large donation to the church. (Well, sort of.) *Think about that next time we pass the offering plate.* It says,

**“But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.”** When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. **And great fear came upon all who heard of it.”**

Notice that the Apostle Peter told Ananias that his property, both before and after he sold it, *was his to do with as he wished.* He was under no compulsion or coercion to give any of it away.

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<sup>3</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. VI, p.28

Socialism is *not* charity, as it is so often depicted. Socialism is *forced*; it is *coerced*. The believers here in Acts 2 having all things in common and giving to others as they had need is *not* an indication that the church is to be a commune; it is an indication that *from the very beginning the Christian church has always been a family*. Family members love one another and take care of one another.

1 John 3:14-18 says,

**“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, *how does God's love abide in him?* Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”**

Let us learn to be *devoted to one another* in the church, to the fellowship of believers and the communion of saints. Let us be often with one another, especially in worship. Let us be, as Matthew Henry put it, “much together.”

### ***Devotion to the Sacraments***

The next thing that the early Christians were devoted to was the *Sacraments*. When v.42 says “**the breaking of bread**” it is not just talking about having the occasional potluck (although I think we are all pretty “devoted” to eating – I certainly like to eat). It doesn't just say 'breaking bread', but “**the breaking of bread**” (v.42).

What did the Lord Jesus do when He instituted the Lord's Supper? Matthew 26:26-28 says,

**“Now as they were eating, Jesus *took bread*, and after blessing it *broke it* and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”**

The early Christians did not neglect what the Lord Jesus gave to His church as a *sign and seal* of our salvation in Him.

As the Shorter Catechism tells us, The Lord's Supper is given to us for our “spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.”<sup>4</sup> If we are not feeding on the body and blood of Christ *by faith* together whenever possible, *is it any wonder that we are spiritually malnourished?* Is it any wonder that we are not growing in grace if we neglect the Lord's Supper?

*A church's ministry must be centered on Word & Sacrament.* That is not what the so-called church marketing “experts” tell us, but that is certainly what the Word of God tells us here in the book of Acts. Are we devoted to “**the breaking of bread**” (v.42) together? Do we look forward to Communion Sundays?

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4 *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q.96

## ***Devotion to Prayer***

The fourth thing that they were devoted to was “**the prayers**” (v.42). Now we should all be devoted to prayer. But that is *not* primarily what is in view here. It says “**the prayers.**” The use of the definite article (the word “**the**”) here (as well as the context of the rest of the passage) suggests that corporate prayer is what they were devoted to – *prayer together in worship!*

Prayer is an important part of worship. How could it *not* be? Remember when Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple in? What reason did He give? He said that the temple was not to be a den of thieves but a “**house of prayer**” (Matthew 21:13). We as individual *believers* should be characterized by prayer. The *church* should be characterized by prayer. And even our *worship* should be characterized by *prayer* as well.

We should want to spend time with our Lord who purchased us with the price of his own precious blood, who saved us from our sins, and whom we have the promise and hope of spending eternity with in heaven forever! And we should be quick to seek His blessing and help in all things, for *apart from Him we can do nothing* (John 15:5).

By God's grace, may He make this little church a house of prayer. And may He work in us that which is pleasing in His sight.

## ***Devotion to the Means of Grace***

All of this is to say that if we want to grow in grace as a church, we must be committed to the things that God has instituted for our growth in grace. These things that we see in our text are often referred to as the “outward and ordinary means of grace.”

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* puts it this way:

“**Q. 88.** *What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?* **A.** The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially *the Word, sacraments, and prayer*; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”

The four (4) things that we see here in v.42 are simply the *means of grace*. They are the way (the “outward and ordinary means”) that our Lord Jesus Christ communicates or imparts to us the benefits of His redemption.

In other words, these things (and *not* our own inventions, innovations or ideas) are how we grow in the faith; these things are the divinely-ordained way that we grow in grace. *If we neglect these things in favor of our own ideas or marketing strategies, we may very well fill the pews (or comfy chairs) on Sunday and increase our budget, but we will not be a part of Christ building His church.* And where are these means of grace primarily found? These are things that are found, first & foremost, primarily in the *public worship* of the church on the Lord's Day.

As our text here in Acts clearly shows us, corporate worship, both public and private, was anything but incidental to the lives of the Christians in the early church. It was their lifeblood; it was the thing that they devoted themselves to immediately after their conversion!

## **Conclusion**

The public, corporate worship of God's people is, and has *always* been, the primary means of grace. Another way of saying that is that *we cannot grow in the faith or in grace the way that God intends without the church*. As Hebrews 10:24-25 says,

**“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*”**

It seems as if many churches have lost confidence in the outward and ordinary means of grace that God has appointed for our benefit. We try to build churches (and Christians!) by *all kinds of other means* – more *exciting* means, fancier, *flashier* means, more *attractive* means, more *entertaining* means. Those things may attract a crowd; they may fill the pews on Sundays; but *we are not called to build an audience – we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ*.

What was the result of the church's devotion to God's means of grace in worship here in our text? What was God pleased to do through it? In v.43-47 we read:

**“And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”**

And may the Lord Jesus be pleased to work these same things among us as well. Not signs and wonders, as we no longer have the apostles with us, but a holy *awe* of the Lord, a growing love and care for one another, a love for being together in worship, hearts filled with gratitude and praise to God, and having a godly reputation among our neighbors, so that the gospel of Christ is adorned by our lives.

And, lastly, may we see *the Lord adding day by day those who were being saved* (v.47). To Him be the glory. - Amen.