

Church Growth

By Phillip G. Kayser · Acts 2:41-47 · 2005-8-28

We have come to a section of the book of Acts that many churches look back to with longing, and with a sense of idealism in their hearts. And they treat this section as a paradigm of how the church should always be. "If only we could go back to the days of the apostles," they say. "If only our church could have the vitality of this church. If only we could have people coming to faith as quickly as they did back then!" But before you wish for this too quickly, let's get a bit of a feel for what was really happening.

Verse 41 says that three thousand people came to faith. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." In chapter 4:4 it says that just a couple days later there were 5000 heads of households who were saved. Now let's just assume that this is not an additional 5000, but a total of 5000 men. If you count the wives and assume an average of three children per household, you come to an increase in the church from 500 believers to 20,000 believers *within just a few days*. Now you may not see a problem with that, but if you were an officer who was supposed to take care of them, you sure would. It makes me tired even thinking about it. The work load for those apostles would have been overwhelming. And chapter by chapter that church just kept growing.

It's sort of like what's happening in India and in [country] today. I know about leaders over there who said that their leadership initially was a disaster. In the last twenty years one leader (who felt that he was woefully untrained) found entire churches coming into existence month after month as he would travel from town to town. There would be a church of around 30-50 people who would become Christians in a two week period and he would teach them everything he knew, and then move on to another town and plant a church within a week or two hardly trying. He just preached and people would come to faith. While walking from town to town he would feverishly study the Scriptures and then teach those to the new people. After 20-30,000 people came to Christ he began to realize that he couldn't just leave the former towns in the lurch, so he would travel back to them and teach them what he had newly learned. But then he ran into a problem because when he went back, instead of finding 30-50 people in a town, he would find 200, 900, or more people. Things were growing out of control. He could not keep on top of it, and they were all begging him to teach. So he took some of the young people with him and bumbled along trying to train them to do what he was doing. By the end of twenty years he was responsible for a loosely networked organization of over one million people. There are five other leaders with similar results. Those are the biggest church movements.

And I wondered, "What would happen if Reformed people planted churches there." And I discovered that there are Reformed Chinese groups there who are experiencing similar results and similar frustrations. One leader from a Reformed group felt called of the Lord to go to a minority group (which was a huge cross-cultural challenge) and this leader planted 1000 churches in the last ten years, all numbering around 60-100 people. So that was between 60,000 and 100,000 believers in that minority group. The problem was that, because of lack of training, 600 of those churches were taken over by a cult. Providentially (and it is a very

interesting story), they were able to get most of the 600 churches back out of the cult. But the church in those two countries simply does not feel ready. This is why both of these countries are begging for leadership training, worldview training and theological training. One lower class Indian found a Bible and became converted. He was so excited about what he had found that he started reading the Bible to his friends, relatives and neighbors. And they were becoming Christians. Now listen to this: Before this guy even knew what a church was, and before he had been trained by another Christian, he had started 7 churches with about one thousand in each church.

Such growth almost always leads to financial challenges, heresy challenges, organizational challenges and persecution. And that's *exactly* what you see in the first few chapters of Acts. You see the same kind of fierce persecution in Acts that you find in some 10-40 countries. You see huge financial problems in this chapter and in chapter 4. You see enormous organizational problems in chapter 6, necessitating new leadership. Deacons are established in chapter 6, evangelists in chapter 8 and numerous elders by the time of chapter 11. Chapter 5 shows moral problems creeping into the church. Chapter 8 shows heresy problems. So it is no wonder that many churches fell away from the faith within 35 years of Acts 2. It is what is known as the great apostasy. Christ predicted this apostasy and much of what is written in the epistles was written to counteract the false teaching that had crept into the church in the last days of the Old Covenant and in some cases had spun off false cults. John says, "They went out from us that it might be made manifest that they were not of us."

And so, in one sense we can say, "Yes, what is happening in Acts 2 is exciting. It is thrilling. Yes, what is happening in two 10-40 countries is exciting. But the challenges are enormous and it is not a lot of fun. Some of those leaders we met with don't see their families for months at a time. It is not wise. And we told them so. Some of them only sleep three or four hours a night. All they know is work, and it is not wise. So let's have a little perspective on these glory days. I don't want to take away from the glory. It was obviously a tremendous time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But I would be quite content with ten converts a week, thank you, rather than 100 a week, let alone three thousand a week. I would submit if He gave that, and I would praise Him, and have a sense of excitement. But the reality is that I would find ten converts a week draining. But you know, many times we cannot choose. We submit to what God providentially presents before us.

So let's look at this passage phrase by phrase. Verse 41. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized." Peter didn't have to talk reluctant people into being converted. No. These were gladly receiving the word. In fact, it is a mistake to try to pressure a person to be converted. If God's Spirit is at work in their hearts, they will want to come. They will ask. Our job is to present the Scripture, and the Spirit's job is to make them ready and to make them come. *He made them glad* that there was a solution to their problems. Now this gives a balance between two extremes that I see on the mission field. On the one side we find people who make converts wait a year to prove themselves before they are baptized because they are fearful of them falling away. That's the way it was in Ethiopia. They want a pure church. But throughout the book of Acts we find that people are baptized as soon as they are converted. There is no testing period. After all, salvation is by faith, not by works. That's one of the reasons we don't make people wait through a long membership class before joining.

But the other extreme is what I call easy-believism, where people are given no reason not to believe. Christ didn't engage in that kind of evangelism. If anything, he talked people out of believing. He wanted to make sure that they understood what Christianity meant - that being a Christian is a life of denying self and following Jesus. He said to them that they couldn't be His disciples if they didn't pick up their cross and follow Him. And we saw in the last message that Peter presented a message of repentance and separation from the world. Verse 40 says, "And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Anyone who gladly believes after hearing *that* is a person who is likely regenerate. So baptism is based upon faith, not works, but it comes after a message that makes clear what it means to follow Jesus. A follower of Jesus is taking on a life of full demand and good works. So I think that clause gives a wonderful balance between the two extremes that you find in the Church.

We've already dealt with the second clause in verse 41. Look at verse 42. "And they continued steadfastly in" – and he lists four things that they were steadfast in. "doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." If these four are maintained, a church is much less likely to fall into trouble during times of phenomenal growth than otherwise. These are essentials. And they are actually essentials for a healthy church in any period of time.

First comes doctrine, and it is no accident that it is listed first. Throughout the epistles you have the order of doctrine first and then practice. Experience must always be tested by doctrine, not doctrine by experience. Some of the most bizarre church practices in China could have been avoided if this was followed. One smaller church movement is called "the criers." They follow the experiences that their founder followed in becoming saved. They believe that you can't be saved without first weeping and crying for days. And it's a loud church. It's almost cultic – we didn't associate with them. One person's experience became the norm, rather than doctrine being the norm to judge experience. And there are a ton of other bizarre behaviors in churches that have flowed out of reversing the order. Doctrine must guide everything we do as a church if we are to be a church that turns the world upside down. I don't think the 15-20 minute sermons that many evangelicals experience once a week could in any way qualify as continuing steadfastly in the apostles doctrine. But daily reading of theology books, devotions, midweek studies and a large portion served to you on Sunday mornings might just barely qualify.

Second was "fellowship." Literally, "the fellowship," so it is dealing with corporate fellowship. People who love doctrine frequently feel no need for fellowship, and people who major on fellowship frequently minor on doctrine. But both are needed in a healthy church. The apostle John said, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). So just because fellowship is second in order; second in priority, does not mean that it is not important. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. Christ indicated that this was an incredibly important aspect of the church's impact upon the world. He said, "By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). According to Matthew 5, repairing broken relationships takes priority over worship. Jesus said, "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar" [and the gift would be a sacrifice which would be followed by a communion meal – "if you bring your gift to the altar"]

and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift

(Matt 5:23-24). So urgent was this need to maintain fellowship that the animal was left there in the temple. I don't think he left it there for days and weeks and months. The fact that he left his gift there at the altar shows that he was planning to quickly run back and carry on with the sacrifice and the communion meal. That's how much of a priority restoring relationships and fellowship was. He's not saying skip church. The leaving the gift at the altar was a guarantee that he would resolve the problem quickly and come back to sacrifice the animal and have communion.

And it is the communion meal that is being referred to in the next words: "in the breaking of bread." Notice that they were steadfast in the breaking of bread. It was constant. So it is still important even though it had less priority than fellowship. And communion wasn't just four times a year as in so many churches. It wasn't just once a month. They continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread. In 1 Corinthians 11 it says that they partook of the Lord's Table whenever they came together. When did they have communion? It was when they "come together" (v. 11), "when you come together as a church" (v. 18), "when you come together in one place" (v. 20), "when you come together" (v. 33). It appears to be part and parcel of every church wide worship service. Verse 34 says "you come together for judgment" because it was assumed that they took the Lord's Supper whenever they came together, and they were doing so unworthily. And that chapter reinforces that there is no point in taking the Lord's Table if they are out of fellowship with each other. So once again, notice the order of priority. It is doctrine first, then fellowship, then Lord's Supper. But they were steadfast in all three. In other words, it continued every time they met.

Then comes "prayers." Which again is "The prayers," and is a reference to corporate rather than private prayer. Your prayers are not even heard if you are out of fellowship with believers and not in communion with the Lord. But prayers, even though they are listed last, are not unimportant. All of these four things are critical to the success of a church. That's why they continued steadfastly in all four. We simply will not succeed as a church unless we continue steadfastly in corporate prayer. It is a sick church that does not have corporate prayer.

Look at the results of this steadfastness in verse 43: "Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."

Notice that phrase: "then fear came upon every soul." We are in an age when there is virtually no fear of God and no understanding of the fact that He is a holy God and we are sinners. Even the holy angels hide their faces from God with their wings, and yet we boldly ignore God's directives, pray to him with sin stained hands and have little fear or awe for His presence. A synonym in the Scriptures for one who is sanctified or spiritually mature is one who fears God. You cannot be close to God without at the same time having some awe at His presence. And that awe will help to motivate us to avoid evil and pursue holiness. This does not mean terror or timidity. In British Columbia there is a channel called Skookumchuck rapids, which produces a tremendous spectacle when the tide changes. The tide changes so fast that the water can't escape fast enough and gradually a literal wall of water begins to form and huge whirl pools begin to pop up here and there up to 100 feet wide. The ground begins to

shake and you can't yell above the noise. The water current can get so strong that motor boats can be dashed into pieces and logs can get sucked down in one place and be shot up high into the sky in another place. And I tell you, when I stood on the banks of that inlet it produced tremendous awe. I was not terrified because I was safe on the shore. I was not timid to watch. But I had a healthy awe for its power that kept me from breaking the rules by stepping even ankle deep into the water. My healthy fear for the water did not stop my enjoying its presence, but it kept me from violating the rules by getting into the water. If I had been in the water there would have been sheer terror. Well, that is the same with God. Our fear of God is a constant awareness of His presence and power. That He is a holy being who hates sin. We are not terrified of God or timid in approaching Him with requests. But that is because we are in Christ and we are seeking to please Him. Being in Christ is like watching the rapids safely on the shore. But if we are so foolish as to try to swim in the water by violating God's standards, that is a sure indication that we have no fear of God. We don't understand what dynamite we are playing with. God later gave a visual demonstration of that dynamite later on with Ananias and Sapphira, not to show that God normally kills people instantly when they disobey, but to show that He continues to be consuming fire, and that the blessings *and* curses of Deuteronomy 28 continue to providentially be at work in His people. If we would be a church that turns the world upside down then we need to recapture the fear of God; the constant awareness of God's presence in His holiness and power.

Interestingly, when there is a fear of God, there is a corresponding boldness before man. 4:31 says that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." And 4:33 speaks of the power that is manifested in the church. "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all." That is a result of the fear of the Lord. And we see the same connection here. It was to these people filled with fear, reverence and awe for God that "many wonders and signs" were done through the apostles. Notice the word "then." This was a result of the steadfastness. In the Greek it is "and was born [or created] fear upon every soul, and was born [or created] wonders and signs through the apostles." The one was as sovereignly produced as the other. Just as we cannot produce miracles on demand, so too we cannot produce the fear of God on demand. Pastor Durham and I sometimes wish that we could. But only God can open blind eyes; only God can bring the fear of the Lord and only He can sovereignly produce miracles, whether it is through the apostles (as in this chapter) or through others in later history.

Verse 44 says, "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need." Just as extraordinary growth in India and China has called for extraordinary financial sacrifices, this growth of the church also required extraordinary sacrifices. What had happened was that hundreds of thousands of Jews from around the world had come to this feast of Pentecost and many had gotten saved. Rather than returning immediately to their countries, they stayed in Jerusalem to be taught. Once disciplined, they could go back to their countries and establish beachheads for missionaries to establish strong churches. But they had to be taught first. If you were a pilgrim who had come for the feast, you probably brought enough finances and food to last a couple weeks. But if you needed to be disciplined for several weeks, the church would have an enormous unplanned for deficit. So it was an unusual situation. There are people who use this verse to try to prove Christian Communism. But Christian Communism or

Christian Socialism is an oxymoron. They have nothing in common. Let me contrast communism with what was happening here very quickly for you. I have 9 points of contrast.

First of all, communism forces people to share, whereas this was voluntary and flowed out of grace transformed hearts filled with love.

Second, communism insists that this situation should be forever, whereas Acts indicates that this was a situation that only lasted for a short time until the problem was solved.

Third, Socialism and Communism uses the state as the vehicle for sharing, whereas here it is the church who distributes the gifts.

Fourth, socialism gets its money by a tax, whereas this was private charity.

Fifth, communism believes that the state owns the property, whereas it is clear that the individual owns the property they sell. We'll have more to say about this in chapter 4 when Ananias and Sapphira are judged. They were not judged for keeping their property, but for lying. In fact, Peter made it quite clear that the property was theirs until they gave it away. Once they gave it away, it would be theft to take it back. But this chapter assumes private ownership, not state ownership.

Sixth, communism doesn't liquidate property to give to others. No. They don't even give it away. The state owns the property and keeps it. Whereas here, the property is liquidated by the Christian, and some other private individual buys the property from them. It doesn't even remotely resemble state ownership. It is capitalism at work. North speculates that since they knew Jerusalem would be destroyed shortly, that property value would go down, and thus liquidation made the most sense. Whether that is true or not, it is clear that this liquidation of property is contrary to state ownership of property.

Seventh, only basic needs were supplied as verse 46 makes clear. This is not cradle to grave care. Verse 46 says, "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart." When believers lack food, radical sacrifices are needed to make such food available. Extra real estate was sold and given to help fund this extraordinary need. But there is nothing in this chapter about socialized medicine, Social Security, state run day-care centers or government housing. In fact, it is clear that though people sold extra rental houses that they owned, that they kept their own houses. Verse 46 mentions meeting "from house to house" and in the rest of Acts we find that some rather large estates continuing to be held by even the 120 of Acts 1. For example, there is the huge house owned by John's mother Mary in Acts 12:12 that is able to accommodate a large crowd. So we are talking about people making sacrifices of extra things that they had in order to provide for basic necessities of food and shelter.

Eighth, it was not a cure all for poverty since Jerusalem became a financial burden for other churches during the famine that occurred in chapter 11. This was intended as a patch up job for an emergency. No one saw it as a permanent economic system that would somehow solve everyone's problems.

Ninth, verse 45 says that it was "as anyone had need." Need is quite different than wants or envy. And envy is at the core of a socialistic or communistic system.

So for anyone who claims this as a proof text for communism, you can turn the text around and use it as the best proof possible of why state ownership and state welfare is wrong. There are nine reasons why this text proves free market charity rather than socialism.

But having dismissed communism, don't miss the clear fact that this virile Christianity was a generous and sacrificial Christianity. They had a close body life that ministered sacrificially when God's kingdom called for it. Everything we own should be at God's disposal, and if we see a brother or a sister have need, and we shut up our compassion towards them, how does the love of God dwell in us? The Christians in China and India can be a tremendous rebuke to our selfish and comfortable Christianity. But they do not subsidize irresponsibility, and neither did Acts.

One other characteristic to notice of this community was that it was filled with joy. It was not a dour, dry and dusty group. It says, "they ate their food with gladness..." Gladness and joy should be a very visible characteristic of Christianity. We most glorify God when we most enjoy Him and when we enjoy life. He loves it when we enjoy life because Scripture says that He delights to delight His people. The interesting thing about this statement however is that this gladness is not connected with something new, entertaining or spectacular. Because of God's work in their lives they were able to eat *food* with gladness (and the term for food is "trophies" which means basic nourishment. So they were able to eat simple basics of life with gladness. You can make people glad today by providing them with money, new cars, a meal at the French Café, new friendships, new jobs. But when a person is glad over the same old, same old; over the basics of life like food, you know that there is something unusual present. And that unusual is the power of the Holy Spirit. Psalm 46:4 likens the Spirit to a river when it says, "*There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God.*" Is your home filled with gladness? If not, cry out to God for the Spirit and the things that the Spirit produced in this chapter. It is my prayer that you would be able to say with David in Psalm 4:7, "You have put gladness in my heart, more than in the season that their grain and wine increased." David said those words when he fled from the city of Jerusalem and was being hunted down by his son Absalom. He wasn't experiencing the things that bring gladness to the world like celebrations of harvest. He wasn't glad because his circumstances were so comfortable. In fact, he didn't know if he would live through the next day. The Psalm speaks of enormous emotional pain that he was suffering. But David was glad because he knew that even if everything else was taken from him, no one could take *God* from Him. Later in this book you will see Christians having the same gladness when they are beaten, imprisoned and opposed. That is the heritage of all those who walk in the Spirit. One of the most remarkable verses in Deuteronomy 28 (the chapter of God's curses upon Israel) was a reason that was given for why God brought the curses. Verse 47 says, "Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart..." It's not enough to serve the Lord. They were judged because they did not serve the Lord with joy and gladness of heart. Gladness is a moral imperative for the believer. Dry and dusty Christianity must be put off and exchanged for a life filled with the Spirit in which we can enjoy even the mundane acts of eating breakfast every day. This gladness will chase envy away; it will chase covetousness out of your hearts. It will help us to be content in every circumstance that God places us in. So if you lack such gladness, restudy this chapter and ask

God to give you His repentance, His Spirit, His joy and to work in you the virile Christianity of this chapter that is compatible with such gladness. May he restore to you the joy of your salvation.

Acts 2 goes on to say that they ate their food with "simplicity of heart." That word speaks of sincerity and openness. The word derives from a word that means smooth, plain land without rocks and bumps in it. And so it is probably a reference to the transparency of their communication. Where verse 42 spoke of the Lord's Table, verse 46 spoke of their love feasts that happened after church. And those are times when people can be open and transparent in their communication with each other. This too is an important part of healthy church life. Not just breaking communion bread together but eating informally together in each others homes.

Verse 47 continues with the words, "praising God." Praise is another characteristic of a healthy Christianity. The reason God gave for disciplining Israel over and over again in the wilderness was that they murmured or grumbled against God instead of praising God. Praise should be on your lips when your life is sailing smoothly and praise should be on your lips when you are being beaten and in prison like Saul and Silas later in the book of Acts.

Verse 47 goes on, "and having favor with all the people." Some think that they aren't holy unless they are being persecuted and everyone hates them. Others go further, and try to antagonize persecution. But I want you to notice that the average citizen liked what they saw. They had favor with all the people. Certainly they were persecuted by the leaders. But it says they were "having favor with all the people." There is something wrong with our Christianity if no one is attracted to it. There is something wrong with our Christianity if no one knows that we are Christians. Paul said, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18). Paul recognized that peace is not always possible, but "If it *is* possible, as *much as depends on you*, live peaceably with all men" (And if your life is filled with gladness and praise to God and simplicity of heart rather than a devious or inscrutable personality, we will be attractive to others. There is much about Christianity and the cross that is offensive, but let's make sure that we don't add our own offense to the equation.

Finally, Luke says, "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." This is really the only way that anyone can be added to the church. He alone saves. "Except the Lord builds the house they labor in vain in who build it" (Psalm 127:1). The church does not grow by adding names to a register, or by using high pressure evangelism and doubtful professions of faith. It grows as the Lord adds daily. Obviously some of the people we have had to discipline by excommunication recently, weren't added by the Lord. And because God has said that *He* adds to the church, we can have great confidence that as we seek to be faithful in implementing some of the means towards that growth that we have looked at, that the Lord will add to the church in His good timing. Let us first and foremost seek to be faithful to God and look to Him for the results of our endeavors. Amen.

Children of God, I charge you to petition Jesus for the authentic Christianity that you see in Acts 2. Do not be content with the status quo, but seek to walk afresh each day in the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Amen.