

Sermon 36, How the Church Thrives, Acts 9:31-43

Proposition: The church thrives by imitating the characteristics and evangelistic methods of the early church, which all circle around the uniqueness of Jesus.

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 - A. It Has Troublemakers at a Safe Distance
 - B. It Has Peace
 - C. It Is Edified
 - D. It Walks in the Fear of God
 - E. It Walks in the Comfort of the Holy Spirit
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- II. A Thriving Church at Work, vv. 32-43
 - A. Jesus Christ Heals, vv. 32-35
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have spent a significant amount of time looking at Luke's summaries of the church's activity. Here we see yet another one, and I want to look at these six characteristics with you this morning.

I. A Thriving Church at Peace, v. 31

A. It Has Troublemakers at a Safe Distance

The first thing, and maybe the most troubling thing, I want you to see about this passage is the way Luke implies that getting rid of Paul helped the church find peace. It's really hard to avoid that impression. I hate to preach that the church needs to send apostolic leaders away so that it can have peace. But I am duty-bound to preach whatever the word of God says, whether I like it or not. And the word here definitely has the word "therefore" at the beginning of v. 31. Paul went back to Tarsus; therefore, the church enjoyed peace.

Now, what is Luke trying to say? One of the most plausible explanations I've read posits that the church has always existed in two major branches. One is the settled church, and the other is the church on the move. In Roman Catholic practice, these two groups have been institutionalized into local parishes, on the one hand, and monastic orders on the other. In

contemporary evangelicalism, roughly the same outcome is generated by the distinction between the church on the one hand and the parachurch on the other. Thus, no matter how many good things you can say about Paul (and he did a lot of good!), you have to admit, this explanation runs, that he was simply too much for any local church to handle. One of my friends told me once that he was going to adopt an Alaskan Malamute that weighed 140 pounds. I was pretty stunned. But the next week he called and said “I didn’t adopt the Malamute. Too much dog!”

And brothers and sisters, I think that none of us who have read Paul’s letters can have any doubt that he was too much apostle! Yes, by all means, travel through and preach occasionally. But don’t camp here and blow up our nice little church. We are here for the long haul; you need to go outside and work off some of that energy in Illyricum and Spain and Rome and every other Godforsaken place you can find, Paul.

So let’s evaluate this explanation. Is this what Luke is saying? That some leaders, some personalities, some teachers are too big to fit into the local church and literally need to be traveling ministers of some kind, and likely on the front lines of kingdom expansion? Is it correct to say that putting Billy Graham as solo pastor of a church of 40 people in East Podunk, Iowa is actually going to cause conflicts, difficulties, and a general lack of peace within the church? I think that most of us can imagine such a thing not going very well.

Now, Luke doesn’t want to say such a thing very loudly, because he is telling us that every person has a place in the church — in the local church. But some people are in fact called to move on somewhat regularly. I’m not suggesting that any of you are called to a bigger ministry, to a task you literally can’t do within the confines of these four walls. But it could very well be the case. Some of you may be called to pastoral ministry. Some of you may be called to missionary service in a closed country. Some of you may need to go be the next Billy Graham. Regardless, brothers and sisters, know this: if the Lord needs you to move on in order to give peace to the church, He will make that clear to you. A flourishing church gets the right amount of apostolic attention — but sometimes it needs some beneficial neglect.

B. It Has Peace

So what is peace in the church? It’s when everyone not only shares the same desires, but generally agrees on how to get there. We all want to see disciples made, the church expanded, the unsaved brought in, and vibrant worship packed with devoted lovers of Christ. But within the global church, there are many disagreements on doctrinal and practical points, everything from “What musical instruments do we use?” to “Do we speak in tongues, and if so, how much?” A church at peace is a church that agrees on the answers to those questions large and small. That is a flourishing church, and that is the church in Galilee, Judea, and Samaria.

How do we attain peace in the church? The NT is clear: By drawing closer to Christ, the Prince of Peace. In our human weakness and limitations, we have also invented denominations as a halfway house, a way in which the church can have peace within local congregations. We do not agree with the Weslyans or Lutherans on significant aspects of ecclesiology and polity. But we love them, and we have peace within our congregation and they have peace in theirs because we don’t all try to worship under the same roof. A Presbyterian and a Lutheran who are

determined to both remain so will not be able to run a church together, even if they can agree on all the most important things.

When we're at peace, we know that we love each other. We are comforted and built up.

C. It Is Edified

And that's exactly where Luke takes it next. The church was edified. Who edified it? Well, I would venture to suggest that when a church is healthy, it is being built up, and the people don't ask "Who's doing this?" They simply experience and enjoy it. Ultimately, edification is a synergistic process. God works it, and the church works it, and individual Christians work it. You build up your neighbor; that builds you up and builds the church up. Yet remember this: When you build up your neighbor, God is working through you for his benefit.

A healthy church is an edified church. The people are growing in their knowledge of Christ, their obedience to Christ, and their love for Christ. They are getting better at those things, and they are getting better at sharing them with others.

Does that sound like our church? Or are we stuck?

D. It Walks in the Fear of God

Luke also tells us that the church of that day walked in the fear of God. Folks, you may have been told that the fear of God is a piece of Old Testament religion. Actually, it's a piece of Biblical religion, both Old and New Testament. The fear of God is an appropriate sense of His mighty, rushing, dynamic energy. To fear God is to be aware that coming into contact with Him can kill you. Just as you shrink back from a semi rushing by at 80 MPH, so you shrink back from the never-stopping divine energy of our Holy God.

The church walked in the fear of God. They continued in it all day long. That was their default and continuous atmosphere.

To walk in the fear of God is to have all of your decision-making driven by the question, "What does God think of this?" That is the calling of the Christian. That is what the church today is supposed to be doing. We don't ask "What does the *New York Times* think of this?" We don't ask "What does my pastor think of this?" We don't ask "Will this make it more likely that I survive to fight another day?" We ask "Does this please God?"

E. It Walks in the Comfort of the Holy Spirit

Notice that fear of God doesn't mean discomfort. No. The church walked in the fear of God, and as part of that, they also walked in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The two went together for them.

What is the comfort of the Holy Spirit? It is His ministry as paraclete, as the one who comes alongside and speaks the truth on your behalf. A flourishing church, in other words, does not take its cues from the world. It does not decide how it feels based on the news. We can rejoice over victories like the Texas abortion law. But if the news cycle makes our emotional weather, we are pagans. The comfort of the Holy Spirit means that we are encouraged by what never changes: The reality and power of our Holy God, who works by His Spirit for our salvation.

How do we get better at walking in the comfort of the Holy Spirit? We have to be sure that we don't grieve Him. We need to be full of the word of Christ. And we need to ask regularly for Him to come and be present with us. That's how we find the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

F. It Is Multiplied

When a church experiences these five things, then it multiplies. We should not expect a church full of conflict to multiply. We should not expect a church that is mostly concerned with the here and now rather than the Holy Spirit and the things of eternity to multiply.

When we fear God and edify each other, we will see growth — not necessarily in the sense of our congregation getting larger, but in the sense of the global church getting larger. Numerical growth — dare I say it — is a consequence of spiritual growth. That doesn't mean that a church full of godly people is always going to get huge. It means that a church full of godly people is going to be an asset to the church worldwide, and that from its prayers and labors an abundant crop will be harvested sooner or later.

So are you ready to live like this? To be a church like this? To serve like this? Then do what you can to walk in the fear of God and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and we will be multiplied. This is what a church that submits to Christ's rule looks like. This is how we see His reign fleshed out.

We also see His reign fleshed out in His power over sickness, death, and the multitudes whom He calls to new life. In the rest of Acts 9, we continue to see the certainty of the reign of Christ, exercised once more through Peter and his gift of healing that leads to mass conversions twice over. This, in turn, sets the stage for the turn to the Gentiles and mass conversions like the world has never seen. Through it all, Christ reigns — over sickness, over death, and over the multitudes whom He calls to Himself for healing, new life, and salvation.

II. The Healing of Aeneas, vv. 32-35

Luke tells us about a time when Peter was traveling everywhere. He went through it all, Acts 9:32 says.

A. Aeneas, Paralyzed for 8 Years, Healed by Jesus, v. 33-34

In the OT town of Lod, known as Lydda in New Testament times but once again called Lod today, Peter encountered a paralyzed man named Aeneas. The name is a famous one, for it is the name of the hero of Virgil's great epic *The Aeneid*. It's easy to take this whole encounter as a metaphor for Jesus healing pagan Roman culture, and I think there may be something to that. But that is not Luke's major point here. As Peter so eloquently puts it, Jesus Christ heals! And that's it; He does. The point is not that He heals Rome, but that He heals Romans and everyone else who turns to Him in repentance and faith. Aeneas gets up and makes his bed. Notice, please, that making the bed was not a condition for getting healed. It was not something that Aeneas could do to deserve getting healed. But it was an appropriate response to being healed. Luke doesn't include it just because it happened; he leaves out a ton of stuff that happened. He includes it because of the point it makes. When Jesus Christ heals you, you need to respond by being responsible and doing what you can to obey and serve Him.

Do you know Jesus as the one who heals — not just physical illness, which people recover from every day, but especially moral illness, which no one naturally recovers from? Have you seen Him at work healing you and your fellow saints?

I've talked about mantras to you before. "Worthy is the Lamb!" is a great mantra. So is "Jesus Christ heals (you)." Something is going wrong! Where do I turn? To Jesus Christ! He heals.

B. Mass Conversions, v. 35

And what is the result? Mass conversions. Does Luke literally mean that everyone in the entire plain of Sharon became a Christian? No. He means that tons of them did. You could fairly say that the city turned to Christ when they saw His healing power.

Now, what about it? Do we dare to pray that Christ will physically heal today and turn people toward Him? You bet. But here's the thing: Jesus is not some kind of glorified hospital or therapist or nurse practitioner. If we are trying to get people to become Christians on the basis of the claim that Jesus can replace New York-Presbyterian Hospital or that as long as we have Jesus we don't need the Mayo Clinic, we're not going to get many converts. The whole point of the healings Peter performed in that first century era was that Jesus was offering something available nowhere else. It's important that we look past the healing to see the core claim beneath it. We are not in the business of saying that Jesus is one source of healing, alongside your family doctor and the specialists at the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. We are in the business of saying that while Jesus can do everything human doctors can do, and more, He is ultimately offering something of a totally, qualitatively different kind. It's good to seek healing. But the healing Jesus has to offer is a spiritual-moral healing, the kind that no earthly physician has ever performed or ever will be able to perform.

So don't try to attract converts by claiming that Jesus does what hospitals and the welfare state do, only better. That's not what Luke is trying to say here. He's telling us that Jesus does what hospitals and the welfare state *can't* do. And that's why we should trust and believe in Him.

III. The Raising of Tabitha, vv. 36-43

And that, of course, is immediately where the narrative goes. Jesus does indeed do what no human being can do: He gives life in place of death.

A. Tabitha's Charitable Deeds, v. 36

Luke gives a quick peek at the works of Miss Gazelle, as we can call her. The names Tabitha and Dorcas both mean "Gazelle." She was full of kindness and charity, not just some of the time but all of the time.

Will that be said of you upon your death? Are you so full of Christ that you genuinely believe what He said, that it's more blessed to give than to receive? Tabitha believed it.

B. Death Takes Tabitha, v. 37

And yet, in this broken world, death took her. I want us to sit here for a minute and think about this. Good people die. The most charitable, devout, generous people you could ever hope to meet perish, while it seems that the wicked live on and on. The Mormon church is run by a man who was born in 1924. The wicked live on and on! But here is Tabitha, dead.

Can you submit to how Jesus runs the world? Can you trust Him? Specifically, can you trust that He has conquered death and that He is going to bring life out of death? That, after all, is the Christian claim. We are not here to tell people that Jesus is like hospice, only better. We are here to tell people that Jesus undoes death itself.

C. Peter Raises Tabitha, vv. 38-41

Because that's what happens here. You know, there are only 5 resurrections in the New Testament beside that of Jesus Himself — three by Christ (Lazarus, the widow of Nain's son, and the little girl), and one each by Peter and Paul. This was not an everyday thing in the early church. But it did happen so that the world could see that the Kingdom of God was breaking into this world.

Peter did not raise Tabitha as a spectacle. He sent everyone out, and then he prayed. He announced the healing of Christ, but he had to ask for the resurrection Christ brought.

D. Mass Conversions, v. 42

But when Dorcas rose from the dead, again, there were mass conversions. Peter brought people to faith by showing that Jesus is not a supplement to an already good life; Jesus offers life that is unavailable elsewhere.

IV. The Preparation for Mass Conversions Like Never Before, v. 43

Both these healing resulted in mass conversions — and thus prepared the way for the next chapter, when the gospel will break out of the ghetto and come to the Gentiles. The reverberations of that explosive growth are still being felt around the world.

The church at peace and the church showing Jesus not as one healer among many but as the only healer worthy of the name — that's what we see in this portion of Acts 9. And when we see that, we recognize that Jesus is the one who makes the church flourish, and that He is the one who makes the good news spread. Christ heals; Christ saves. Turn to Him, and take that message to your neighbors. The message that Jesus gives us essentially the same thing that politicians promise has lost the church an awful lot of members in the last two generations. But the real message of the New Testament — that Jesus offers what nobody else does — is the secret behind church growth in the first century, and today. Look to Him and be saved — and then tell everyone you know. Amen.