

Sermon 12, The Firstfruits of Church Growth, Acts 2:41-47

Proposition: The Feast of Firstfruits saw the church grow by 26 times; that growth was driven by the power of God and the 14 practices of the church.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been looking together at this second chapter of Acts for six weeks now. We have seen some fascinating stuff together. This morning, we begin a two-week look at Luke's summary statement at the end of the chapter. As is our habit, we will take the larger chunk first, looking at this mega-summary of the early church (seven verses long) before we look next Sunday at the most basic summary, v. 42 with its four habits that marked the early church and should continue to mark our church today. What we see in the mega-summary is that church growth is driven by the power of God and the practices of the church. Growth starts with word, sacrament, and membership; growth grows with eleven different elements that Luke specifies. That totals fourteen elements (surprise, surprise): The church grows numerically and spiritually when it practices the fourteen elements of growth in which the early church engaged.

I. How Growth Starts: Word, Sacrament, Church Membership, v. 41

Luke foregrounds three significant practices at the beginning of his summary. Again, we see a key number for the early church — 3! These practices are absolutely crucial. In one sense, we can say that these three at the beginning are necessary to the being of the church. Without word, sacrament, and membership, there is no church. The other eleven practices are necessary to the well-being of the church, and woe to the very sick body that does not engage in most or all of them! But a body that doesn't do word, sacrament, and membership does not even exist. These three are the ones that the Reformers identified as the marks of the true church. That means that

their presence constitutes a church, while their absence demonstrates that a particular entity is not a church at all.

So let's discuss each of them. Luke first informs us that there was a group there that accepted Peter's message. They listened to the word of God from the mouth of the apostles. This, the proclamation of the word of God to an audience that accepts it, is the greatest and most important mark of the church. Luke puts it first. And if you'll notice, of course, it is from the word of God as written that we derive all of the other marks and practices of the church. If something calling itself a church is not proclaiming the word of God, then even if it displays the other thirteen marks and practices here, it is missing the most crucial one. The Bible clearly tells us that in the beginning, the Word of God created the heavens and the earth. It is just as clear that the Word of God created the church. That's because the church is the assembly of all those throughout the world who profess faith in Christ, along with their children. The church is created by rational appeal to our human intelligence — i.e., by the word.

We've looked at length at the form and content of what Peter preached. Now we see that he did not merely preach to the air. He preached to people with the stated purpose of convincing them — and he was successful. There was a group that accepted his word. That is the church. That group, the group that accepted Peter's word, then proceeded to engage in the other thirteen practices here. Had they not accepted his word, they would not have done any of this. And so it is today. The first thing we want to do is get our message out there. We want people to hear the word! That means, of course, that what we need to make our top priority at church is the hearing of the word.

The first thing the word instructed them to do was to get baptized, as we talked about last week. As soon as you have repented, you need to be baptized. What is baptism? It is a washing with water in the Triune name that signifies and seals our engrafting into Christ, partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's. A church that does not baptize, again, is a church that is never going to grow.

Finally, in this first summary, Luke mentions church membership. They got saved, we would say. And yes, Luke uses that word in the previous verse — “save yourselves from this perverse generation.” But his focus is not on the individual dimension, but on the corporate one. The New Testament knows nothing of an unchurched Christian! To be saved and to be added to the church is the same thing. Now, if we press this too far, we get the idea that so long as you can get someone to say the words and externally join the church, you've made a Christian. We know that's not too. There always have been unbelievers in the church — e.g., Simon Magus later in the book of Acts. But though we know that the internal and external do not always correspond to each other like they should, that does not absolve us from the responsibility to follow the word of God here, which tells us that to believe in Jesus as Savior automatically demands church membership. Belief entails membership. If you are a Christian this morning but not a member of any local church, then you can and should quit expecting to grow spiritually. It ain't gonna happen. If you think that you can make disciples without teaching them the word of God and

baptizing them into Jesus, then you should also think that you can be a disciple of Jesus without being added to a local church. I'm not the one saying this; Luke is!

What about when there are no good local churches? Then I repeat what I said: You can forget about spiritual growth. The Lord knows about genuinely extraordinary situations. He knows how much of your "needs" are real and how much are an excuse. But He is abundantly clear that the Lord added to the church daily such as were being saved. The Lord didn't save them and let them hang out, church-free, for weeks or years at a stretch.

I'm not saying that church membership has to be formal. The passage doesn't say either way, any more than the Bible says that membership in Abraham's flock of sheep was formal. But to say that formal membership, where you are written down on an official list and counted as one of the body, is unbiblical — well, that's absurd.

So those three practices are foundational. Growth starts with word, sacrament, and membership.

II. How Growth Grows, vv. 42-47

But growth, of course, does not end there. It continues with eleven other practices that Luke lists here. To say "I accepted Jesus, I've been baptized, and I've joined the church, so I can now go resume living just like I did before I got saved" is a catastrophic mistake! Look with me at all the things these early Christians engaged in as a result of Pentecost.

A. Teaching, Fellowship, Eucharist, Prayer, v. 42

The first set of four things comes here in v. 42. This summary is so important that we are going to spend an entire sermon on it next week. For today, suffice it to say that Luke mentions again in this verse all the things he mentioned in the previous verse, along with prayer. The apostles' teaching = Peter's sermon. Church membership = fellowship. And Baptism = Eucharist, in that they are both sacraments (though obviously they are not the same sacrament). Let me say it one more time: Luke lists fourteen items here, but he lists three of them twice: word, sacrament, and church membership. Why do these three get special billing, getting listed twice right at the beginning of the list of fourteen items? Because Luke wants to emphasize them!

I have often wondered why the ordinary habits of our Christian life — going to church, reading the Bible every day, partaking of the Lord's Supper each week — get so little space in Scripture. You can read the Bible every day for a long time before you will see it saying "Go to church. Read your Bible every day. Eat the Lord's Supper every Sunday." Only one of these is even in Scripture as a direct command, and it appears there only one time (in Hebrews 10). I figured the answer was that these things are just wholesome practices. But looking here at the text of Acts I see that they actually have solid Biblical grounding, at least in their basic elements. Your Christian life needs to orbit around word, sacrament, and church. That's what the life of the earliest Christians, converted on the day of Pentecost, revolved around. And of course, prayer is another element that could be added in here. Your Christian life really needs to include talking to God together with your brothers and sisters.

So how about it? Can you say "Yes, this is what my Christian life majors on: Word, sacrament, church"? If not, you need to examine this text a lot more closely, my friends.

B. Awe, v. 43a

Well, Luke proceeds from what we would consider the bread and butter, the ordinary habits of the Christian life, to something that you have probably not thought of recently as a practice essential to your faith. This is the feeling or habit of awe. “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe,” says the NASB, while the KJV has the superb “fear came upon every soul.” T.S. Eliot explains this fear best, I think:

So that before the end, the eightieth Christmas
(By “eightieth” meaning whichever is the last)
The accumulated memories of annual emotion
May be concentrated into a great joy
Which shall be also a great fear, as on the occasion
When fear came upon every soul:
Because the beginning shall remind us of the end
And the first coming of the second coming.²

At a minimum, the Christian life is an awestruck life! Do you believe this? Does the coming of Christ, the descent of the Spirit, and life of the church tend to inspire awe bordering on fear in your heart? Are you moved by these things? Or do you tend to think of our religion as boring, humdrum, a bit too much of the quotidian clinging to it? If so, you are not understanding it like the early church did. Yes, we can all get desensitized to sacred things. But that is a major problem. One reason that the early church did so well was that they all were struck with fear — not a servile fear, of injury or death or pain, but an ennobling fear, a fear of God and His works.

We desperately need to recover this fear of God that manifests itself in an ongoing sense of awe. Otherwise we will be bored by Jesus!

C. Miracles, v. 43b

The next thing Luke highlights is the ongoing miracles that accompanied the early growth of the church. Unlike the fear of God, the reading of His word, membership in His people, and prayer, this one is not a constant throughout the Biblical record or church history. That is, to our Charismatic friends, we say “Yes, I am glad that you believe in miracles. So do I. But it is indisputable that miracles were not an ordinary, ongoing feature in the life of Israel. Nor does church history lead us to expect them to be ongoing in the life of the church. In moments of war, frontline mission work, and so on, God can and does do miracles. But the wonders and signs at this period in the church’s life were God’s way of establishing a beachhead in the conquest of Satan’s kingdom.” Once the beachhead is established, the conquest proceeds generally by less dramatic means.

D. Radical Voluntary Sharing, vv. 44-45

The next thing, however, is something that the church has consciously sought after, and by its own acknowledgement has failed to live up to its desires in this area. I’m talking, of course,

² “The Cultivation of Christmas Trees”.

about radical generosity. We all believe in it. We know that we ought to love in deed and truth, and that to say “Be warmed and filled” within giving a dime to help is one of the most un-Christian things it’s possible to do. We believe in sharing; we just don’t know how to do it, or who to do it for. And yet — you’ll find that Christians are generous. The two most generous nations in the world are the USA and Burma. We support huge numbers of non-profits and churches, while the Burmese support a giant crowd of Buddhist monks. In both cases, the motivations are often religious.

I’ve made a habit of asking my Christian friends how they give to the poor. Virtually all of them do — most of them habitually. They support Christian schools, crisis pregnancy centers, rescue missions, homeless shelters, African and Indian development projects, and all manner of other ways of taking care of the poor both here and abroad. This is something we believe in. Yes, our churches are generally homogeneous, full of upper-middle-class people with few obvious physical needs. But the point here is that for the church to grow, we need to be sharing with each other.

E. Unity, v. 46a

The early church was also characterized by unity. They were of one mind! In general, you have a hard time giving money to causes or people you radically disagree with. I will not be giving money to NARAL Pro-Choice America, because I hate everything they stand for.

But the early church experienced this kind of unity because God gave it to them. This too is something we should seek after by studying, learning, and praying together!

F. Corporate Worship, v. 46a

They were in the temple together. What did they do in the temple? They worshipped God! That is what the temple was for. It was a place for meeting with God. They didn’t gather in the temple to do the same thing they could do in home; like us, they went to a larger public gathering first and then went on to eat together in homes.

We would maybe put corporate worship up there as one of the things that should have been mentioned twice in this list of fourteen practices. Certainly it’s very important. It is the preeminent place where the word of God is heard; worship is the preeminent thing that constitutes the church. But Luke puts it here because it is just one way that we hear God’s word.

G. Eating Together in Homes, v. 46b

The early church ate together in people’s homes. Do we? Gillette is an inhospitable place, and I’m not just talking about the weather here. We also have difficulties inviting one another into our homes. Why? I’m not sure. But I do know that the Bible is big on hospitality, telling us not to forget it and that elders in the church must be hospitable. If you’ve never been inside his home, don’t nominate him for the eldership!

H. Praise, v. 47a

The early church was also marked by praise. They got together and praised God. Do you? If you don’t have awe, you won’t have praise either. If you aren’t impressed by God and what He has done, you won’t praise Him. But the converse is true too.

We sing praise because that is how the church grows!

I. Favor, v. 47b

Clearly this one is supernatural. We can't convince everyone to favor us. But we can live in the generous, loving, giving, encouraging way that will make the whole city love us. That is how the early church converted Rome: It was through the favor that they had with all the people. It is completely fair to say that we ought to conduct ourselves in such a way that every non-believer says "I'm not a Christian. But I wish I were!"

How can that happen?

J. Divine Agency, v. 47c

In one sense, it will happen when we live like we should instead of being judgmental, self-righteous, and so on. But in another, it can only happen when God gives us that favor. People are attracted to perfection, and they also hate it. It's why some women keep dating horrible men who beat them. It's why the Pharisees crucified Jesus. And it's why even the best church will be hated unless Jesus changes hearts.

So what's the best method of evangelism? Prayer! Asking God to open people's hearts so that they're open to Him is essential, because without that, no one will believe.

It was God who added to the church then and it is He who adds to the church now. That doesn't mean that we can rest on our laurels and do nothing; instead, it means that we ought to be diligent about the means He's given us — all of the things listed here in Acts 2, but most especially the word, sacraments, and church membership!

K. Church Membership, v. 47

You see, Luke winds up his summary with a reminder that church membership was the beginning and ending of conversion. They joined the church, and in the church they did all these things, and the Lord added more to the church. If you're bringing people to Jesus then you have to bring them to the church because that's where He is. Yes, He is also outside the church. But people belong in the church; the church is the people's assembly of the Kingdom.

So how can we be certain about the Kingdom? We need to follow these practices of the early church. That's how they gained certainty about what they'd been taught. It's how we will gain certainty too. Amen.