

Acts 2:41–47: ⁴¹So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The Lord Grows His Church

INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, in the America church, there seems to be fixation on numbers. Are you growing, are you growing, are you growing—I can't count how many times I've been asked that question. Only once have I been asked if I am faithful to the Word of God, upon which the Church is founded, and lives and breathes, and has her being. Don't get me wrong: genuine mission work should be done, for Christ commands it, and Christians should have a genuine concern for the salvation of souls, but not for the business-like growth of an institution for its own sake. There are those who want to see the church grow because it's about money and paying the bills—more people, more money. But souls begin to look like dollar signs when the church is all about money. For still others, a growing church is the sign of a successful church—“we must be doing the right thing.” Perhaps this is because we're greatly influenced by the notion of secular success—good businesses grow, bad ones don't.

But the Kingdom of God isn't a secular business; the Gospel isn't a product to be packaged and marketed; and souls aren't "customers." When the church is treated like a business, the Gospel becomes a product to be marketed, and people become customers to be enticed. When that happens, the Church looks no different from any other American business. The Apostle Paul said that the cross—the preaching of Christ crucified—is an offense. Businessmen don't get too far if they market something that's offensive. The cross announces that men are sinful—utterly lost and in need a Savior. The cross is bloody—sacrifice is necessary to atone for sin. And the cross is expensive—there is no salvation without repentance, without the turning away from your sin, without denying yourself—and turning to God through faith in Christ Jesus.

That we might be saved, God gives us His Word, and with His Word comes the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life, who gives life through the Word. Without the Holy Spirit, the Gospel is absurd and faith in Jesus is nonsense. In order for the Gospel to be packaged so that it is palatable for unbelievers, it must be cleansed of the cross, of suffering, of repentance, and of the blood of Jesus—the only way to remove the offense of the cross is to remove the cross! Needless to say, many churches have done just that. But without the cross, do you have the Gospel? Everything you are and have as Christians is because of the cross—forgiveness of sins, life and salvation—they flow from the cross! But without the cross, Christian preaching is just more nice sounding words to add this culture's heap of nice sounding words.

In the Kingdom of God, our Lord isn't so much focused on numbers as He is on faithfulness to His Word. In Ephesians chapter two (v 20), Paul teaches that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." Before Jesus returned to heaven, He told His disciples to "go"—"baptize all nations"—and "teach all that I have commanded you"—not "teach some" or "something else" but "all that I

have commanded you.” In John Chapter 6, Jesus remained faithful to the Word of God even though nearly His entire congregation left Him because His teachings were “too hard.” That’s when Jesus said to His disciples, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” The Old Testament prophets were commended for faithfulness and condemned for unfaithfulness.

The Holy Spirit creates new believers, and sustains them through the Word of God. That’s why our Lutheran Confessions state that the Marks of the Church—meaning where the church here on earth is found—are where the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and where the Sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution.

Because the Holy Spirit works through these gifts to save souls, we call them the means of grace. And where they are found, there you have the Church and there you have Christians. The Augsburg Confession states (Art. V): “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake. Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that through their own preparations and works the Holy Spirit comes to them without the external Word.”

Today’s reading from Acts is the result of the faithful teaching of God’s Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. Historians believe that there were around 20,000 people living in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. But during important pilgrimage festivals, such as Pentecost, it’s believed that the population of Jerusalem swelled to as many as 120,000 people. If that’s

true, and I don't see any reason to think otherwise, on the first Christian Pentecost, the disciples preached to a huge audience. Luke notes that 3,000 souls were added to their number that day. But that was 3,000 out of 120,000. Perhaps there would have been more, but Peter preached Christ and Him crucified—not a message unbelieving ears want to hear. Those 3,000 souls became believers by the grace of God, through the power of Holy Spirit, in the preaching of the cross—not by any evangelism program or church growth model. They became Christians because a tax collector and several fisherman from Galilee preached the Word of God.

As we see in today's reading from Acts, those new converts devoted themselves to the Apostles' teachings. To be devoted means to persevere in and hold fast to something—in this case, the Word of God. They didn't change the Apostolic Word, or ask for it to be watered down to suit their fancy—that's not devotion. They adhered to what was taught; they held fast to the Words that give eternal life.

Luke notes that they were also devoted to the Fellowship. They held fast to and persevered in the Communion of Saints—they devoted themselves to the weekly gatherings of this new congregation—they were one in Christ. Those early Christians didn't give up meeting together as the community of believers, even under the threat of persecution, which came first from the Jews and then from the Romans. Times have kind of changed, haven't they?

Luke goes on to say that they devoted themselves to the Breaking of the Bread. That's the early church's name of the Lord's Supper. When Christ first instituted the Lord's Supper, He gave thanks, broke the bread, and consecrated it to be His Body, "given for you." He did the same with the cup. The early Christians devoted themselves to the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for them for the forgiveness of sins.

Finally, Luke writes that they devoted themselves to the Prayers. If you remember, the NIV simply said, “prayer.” But Luke said, “the Prayers”—a proper noun referring to the form and order of the Divine Service. The early Christians followed the ancient liturgy of the Temple and the Synagogue, which had a Psalm or two, Scripture readings, and a sermon or midrash as it was called. But they added the Lord’s Supper as the epitome of the Divine Service.

And what happened? And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. To put it more simply, “The people were faithful to the Word of God, to each other, to the Sacraments, and to worship, and the Lord grew the Church.”

God builds His Church on the teachings of the prophets and the apostles. He sustains His Church through the preaching and teaching of the pure Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. And as the faith of those first Christians grew, so did their love for one another, as Luke writes, “⁴⁵And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people.”

The best evangelism program I know is to love your neighbor as yourself. Surveys show that in any given congregation, 70% of Christians are there because they were invited by a family member, friend, or co-worker. For most Christians, we’re believers because our parents brought us to the font, to Sunday School, to Confirmation class, to church and Bible study. Dr. John Kleinig writes in his book, *Grace up Grace*, that he learned to love the liturgy sitting on the lap of his father every Sunday in church. What God gave to the father, he passed on to his son, and so on. That’s Christian love at work.

However, only about 5% are in church because of the pastor. In fact, people are more likely to leave a church than to join it because of the pastor—due to personality conflicts, dislike for his style, not happy with His teaching, or not hearing what they want to hear. Faithful pastors are given the Word of God to grow the church. Programs that don't impart the Word of God in its truth and purity, don't grow the church in any real way. They may grow congregational size, but they don't grow the Church. The Holy Spirit does that only through the Word and Sacraments.

It is Christian love to talk to your friends and neighbors about Jesus—and when you have the chance, invite them to church. In the past, when I was asked why my church wasn't growing, I asked in response, “When was the last time you invited someone to church?” And for the most part, the answer was never. Most Christians in our day and age have never invited someone to church. Is it because we're ashamed of the Gospel? Is it because we don't want people to know we're Christians? Is it because we think evangelism is the pastor's job, meaning only the pastor should do it? Is it because you're not trained? I saw a bumper sticker that said, “Ask me about my grandkids.” If you can tell people the good news about your grandkids without any specialized training, you can tell them the good news about Jesus. Is it because if people know we're Christians that means we need to act like Christians? Is it because we're afraid? What do we have to be afraid of? What's the worse thing someone can do to you when you tell them about Jesus? Kill you—and then you're in heaven! If we're afraid to tell the Good News about Jesus, then we need to repent of loving ourselves more than our neighbor who needs the Gospel. And we need to ask the Lord to give us the courage and the Words to tell people about Jesus. And He will do so because He is faithful to His promises.

As I mentioned earlier, in our Confessions we acknowledge that the Holy Spirit grows the church when and where He pleases. I know of a church in Arkansas that took out a huge loan and

built a new church building. The pastor literally told them, “Build it and they will come.” They built it ... but they didn’t come. Seeing the writing on the wall, that pastor left, leaving the next pastor with a huge mortgage and a divided congregation.

As that church in Arkansas found out, the building doesn’t grow the Church, the Holy Spirit grows the Church when and where it pleases Him through the people in the building who are devoted to the gifts of God. Let us not look in envy on churches that are growing; instead, let us give thanks that God has given us Christ in Word and Sacrament for our salvation, and by His Holy Spirit He has given us the kind of faith that is devoted to the Apostles’ Teaching, to the Fellowship, to the Breaking of bread, and to the Prayers so that we are ready to meet Christ on Judgment Day.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.