

Church Growth

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[0 : 00] Well, this week and last week, I mentioned that we have our annual meeting coming up next month. And most years, someone asks me what the strategy is going to be to grow our church the following year.

And there are all sorts of articles out there that talk about church growth. Some claim to have the keys that unlock church growth. I like this next one on your screens that boast seven keys to guarantee church growth.

The first one is know where your church. I think that's the second one. The first one should be know where your church is going, which is not on the screen.

I'm not sure what's happened there. The second one is to create an inviting atmosphere because people like aesthetically appealing environments. And the third one, which we might have, which is actually number seven on the list, is enjoy the ride.

Your call to whatever you're doing in church should be enjoyable, fulfilling and balanced. Needless to say that COVID has thrown all of them out the window, hasn't it?

[1 : 13] I mean, whose five year plan included this? And we can't even meet at church, whether it's aesthetically pleasing or not.

And life hasn't felt balanced or always enjoyable as these restrictions continue. So I'm not sure I'd call those things keys for church growth.

To be fair, the article does also talk about being welcoming and caring, which is very important and sound better. Or with COVID, people are now saying that technology is the key to church growth. Putting everything online, even when we can meet back together. Or increasing the production value of our online services. After all, many of you have enjoyed sleeping in and watching church in your PJs.

And why not? In fact, I might have to make our first Sunday back, Pajama Sunday, just to get you back. Now, of course, things like being welcoming are very important.

[2 : 19] And technology is kind of essential at the moment. But what is it that God considers most important? What are the real keys to church growth?

Well, today we see the church grow amongst the Gentiles, particularly at Antioch, which Luke really uses to back up his point from last week.

But as he does, we also see how the church grows. And so as I unpack the passage today, I want you to look out for God's keys to growing his church, whether it's growth in number or maturity.

But the passage actually begins with Gentiles converted in Antioch. So look at verse 19 in your Bibles. Now, those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

[3 : 35] The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Now, before we get to how the church grows here, we really need to notice that this is Luke's verification of last week's point.

On your screens, remember the main point that even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. And that's what we see this week.

Verse 19, they went speaking only to Jews, but verse 20, some of them went to Greeks, Gentiles as well.

And what happened? Verse 21, a great number believed. They have life eternal. In fact, Luke has been saving this scene so he could use it here.

You see, Stephen's persecution, we were actually told about that a few chapters ago, back in chapter 8 on your screens. That's when Stephen was killed and the church was scattered.

[4 : 48] And that's when those who were scattered went preaching the word, even as far as Antioch. And so on the next slide is a map. It's a bit busy and hard to see, so let's zoom in and look for the yellow circles.

So down the bottom is Jerusalem, where the persecution broke out. If you go a little bit north, you go to Joppa is the next yellow circle, where Peter was.

And then a bit further north is Caesarea, Maritima, or just Caesarea. That's where Cornelius was last week. And then going up, the Christians were scattered to Phoenicia.

See, along the coast there, the top yellow circle. And then if we go to the next slide, moving further north, but on the far left of your screen, is the island of Cyprus.

That's where the Christians were scattered to as well. And then the middle top is Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman Empire, a strategic location.

[5 : 51] But the point here is that Luke waits until now to show us this. He could have shown us back in chapter 8. It would have followed on quite logically.

But he waits until now to verify his point from last week that God really has granted life, even to Gentiles. Because look at how many there are believing.

So at one level, this passage really belongs to last week with Cornelius, where we saw God's intervention, Peter's realization, the Spirit's confirmation, the Apostle's recognition, and now this week, Luke's verification.

But it was going to be too long. But the point here is the gospel really is for Gentiles, because in the city of Antioch, lots believe.

Now, by the way, we may wonder why we don't see such great numbers believing in our city today. One person even said they find reading acts depressing, because our church seems so much less exciting.

[7 : 01] But we need to remember a few things. First, this was the beginning of the Christian church. God was working overtly to kickstart it. Second, God has also worked like this in history at different times.

I mean, think of the revivals and so on. So it can still happen. Third, though, it's hard to know how long these great numbers took to believe here in Acts 11.

Earlier in Acts, we're told 3,000 believed in one day. But here, it's more likely to have taken some time. But rather, 4th, Luke just summarizes it all here to point out that life really has come to the Gentiles.

It's his verification, if you like. And so we don't need to be discouraged when we don't see it happening in our day all the time. But while this passage might belong to last week, we can still learn this week the real keys to church growth.

Did you spot any of them? One is in verse 21. Notice it was the Lord's hand that was with them.

[8 : 18] That meant a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Now, we're going to see God's work in growing his church throughout the passage. So I'll come back to that later. But that was one key.

The second one, though, is that they spoke the good news about Jesus, didn't they? When the church grows, it's because Christians speak the gospel.

And notice it's ordinary Christians here in verse 20. Men from Cyprus and Cyrene who share the gospel. Yes, we need to live authentic Christian lives, whether at home or at work or on social media, so that we make the gospel attractive.

And yes, we need to stand out as salt and light in the world, so that people might ask us questions why. Yes, we even need to gently say things that might spark conversations.

I saw one person in hospital last week, and he would tell the nurses and other patients his dog and cat going to heaven joke. It's not very funny, but stay with me.

[9 : 27] The dog fronts up to the gates of heaven, and Peter is sitting there and asked why the dog should come in. And the dog says, I'm man's best friend. I sit, roll over, and fetch whenever I'm asked.

But when the cat was asked why, the cat simply responded, Peter, you're sitting in my seat. Now, for those who have cats, you know exactly what I mean. Of course, Peter won't be sitting in a seat there.

And the real answer to the question is, I believe in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. But the reason this person was told this joke was to try and spark conversation.

I have to ask him how it went. But the thing is, while we need to live those authentic Christian lives, at some point, we then need to speak the good news about the Lord Jesus.

For that's how God grows the church in number. We can have the highest production level possible for our online services.

[10:32] We can have a 20-piece band, or the best ladies bathroom, or a five-course or 10-course morning tea, or whatever.

They're all nice things to have. But more importantly, the church grows in number as Christians proclaim the gospel.

Well, now that Gentiles are converted at Antioch, the church needs help to grow in maturity. So teachers go to Antioch.

Point 2, verse 22. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Notice here again that it's God's grace that was at work.

[11:38] It's God's work again, isn't it? But remember, verse 19 to 21 really follows on from chapter 8. And so it's hard to know, again, how much time has passed before these numbers of Gentiles were converted, and the mother church in Jerusalem hears about it in verse 22.

Was it after they learnt the lesson from last week that God has granted life to even Gentiles, so that they send Barnabas to welcome these new converts?

Or was it before the Jerusalem apostles learnt the lesson from last week, and so they were sending Barnabas to sort out these Gentiles?

It's hard to know, but I suspect it was before they learnt the lesson of Cornelius. Because Luke actually highlights the character of Barnabas.

Did you notice? His name Barnabas actually means son of encouragement, and Luke actually begins verse 24 with the word because.

[12:50] So on your screens, when Barnabas arrived and saw God's grace at work, he didn't rebuke the Gentiles and say, no, no, this is only for Jews. Rather, he rejoiced and true to his name encouraged them because he was a good man full of the Spirit and faith, because of his character which got God's plan.

Whatever the motives of the Jerusalem church, he encourages them to remain devoted to the Lord because of who he was, his character, you see.

To stick with Jesus. That's what pastors and teachers do. Because there are times when it's hard to stick to Christ. Times when it's hard to keep trusting in Jesus, aren't there?

Perhaps this time is one such time for you. And being a Christian isn't a 100 metre sprint, it's a lifelong marathon. It's like that hymn on your screens that says, go on, go on, go on in the Lord, be strengthened, go on in the Lord.

Your labour is not in vain in the Lord, you must go on, go on in the Lord. Apparently the hymn goes on for 47 verses. I couldn't find them all though.

[14:18] Or it's like that joke, you know, old preachers never die, they just go on and go on and go on. But you see, the Christian life is a marathon where we are to go on in the Lord.

But to go on, we need encouragement to keep going because we all get tired or deflated or dehydrated. I was speaking with someone this week, a great guy who was feeling spiritually dehydrated and really missing face-to-face Christian fellowship.

But to his credit, he went looking for encouragement in the right place. He started, he was opening God's word and listening to more sermons and so on. Because that's the key place we find encouragement.

Yes, we can find encouragement in fellowship, absolutely. In seeing role models, of course. But the key place is the Bible.

And so for another friend of mine who used to attend our church and is now a college lecturer, he has done some daily devotions on YouTube, working through the book of Isaiah. They're less than 10 minutes each.

[15 : 30] Well, the ones I've done are, and I've put the link on our website under resources, or I can send it to you if you're interested. Because he knows the key way to be encouraged is with the Bible open.

That's no doubt how Barnabas encouraged this church. By teaching them how good this news really is. For what other Lord would die for you?

What other leader would die for you? What other king saves you from sin and guarantees you life eternal, which will more than make up for any suffering in this life?

They're the truths that God's word gives us, that encourages us to go on in the Lord. And interestingly, as the church is encouraged to go on in verse 23, God brings more people in verse 24.

Did you notice? You see, church strengthening leads to church evangelism. Though again, notice it's ultimately God's work.

[16 : 38] For these people were brought to the Lord. But now there's also so many people that Barnabas needs help to teach them. Have a look at verse 25 to 26.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Now it's been about seven or eight years since we've heard of Saul or Paul. Remember he got a name change.

At the end of chapter nine, when he was converted and he was preaching the gospel to the Jews, the Jews, well, they tried to kill him. And so the Christians sent him to his home city of Tarsus in the region of Cilicia.

And so if you remember the map, we're looking at the top left corner there and the two yellow circles, the city of Tarsus in the region of Cilicia. Paul, we know, was preaching the gospel in that region and it was probably during that time he was doing so.

[17 : 48] But Barnabas traveled from Antioch along that purple line probably up to Tarsus to get Paul. And when Barnabas finally finds him, he brings him back to Antioch.

And what do they do? Well, they met with the church and for a whole year taught the church. And later on in Acts chapter 20, Paul will tell us what he teaches the churches, his curriculum, if you like. It's the whole council of God. That is God's word, the Bible. Here is another key of church growth. The church grows in maturity as it's encouraged and taught from the Bible. And we know that that's what happened to this church because they became so big and so established, so well known that they needed a new name.

And they weren't, you know, Gentiles. They weren't like Gentiles. They weren't quite Jews. They were Christians. They were named after Christ, the one they talked about, the one they lived for.

[19 : 01] And I wonder if that's how people know you and me as a Christian even before an Australian. And not a Bible basher or a hypocrite who ignores the Bible, but a genuine Christian who gently speaks of Christ when appropriate and humbly lives for him.

But the point here is that it's God's word that grows us to be this devoted. And we are to be taught from the Bible, preferably as we meet together, which is why it's right that we keep praying we can as soon as possible.

But until then, it's also why we keep encouraging and teaching you the Bible, even online. Well, the church in Antioch grew in such maturity from this Bible teaching.

not only did it need a new name, it also became the mission base for Paul's later missionary journeys and it even started to give generously in gospel partnership.

So, point three, verse 27. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

[20 : 26] This happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, singing their gift of money to the elders in Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul.

The church in Antioch sends money to support the church in Jerusalem, as each was able. Here is gospel partnership, isn't it?

Just as the Jerusalem church sent Barney to them. As I said, it's hard to know what their motives were for sending Barnabas, but either way, he encouraged them and taught them, didn't he?

And so, there too was gospel partnership. You see, we're not meant to do church alone. That's why COVID has been so hard for many of us.

But we're to do it together in community, working for the common cause of the gospel. It's why we send money to our mission partners, why we work together here, whether by serving at church through reading the Bible, or as many of you have done, or serving others through meals and phone calls, or whether it's sending money as you're able, or whether it's the partnership between Holy Trinity and St. John's, where Trinity sent people to St. John's, and St. John's has even sent people back to record the music that we play online, or to read the Bible from home, or help with the IT.

[22 : 11] For all your partnership, let me say thank you. I thank God for you and your partnership, because the church grows as we work together in it.

But all this growth is not for our glory. It's for God's. Because I hope you've seen the number one key for church growth is God.

It's what's run throughout our passage. So on your screens, on the next slide there, verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them when Barnabas saw the grace of God, what it had done.

People were brought to the Lord, that is by God. And even in verse 28, it was through the Holy Spirit that the famine was predicted.

The number one key to church growth is God. Without Him, nothing grows. So we need to keep praying, don't we?

[23 : 20] That's why I call our monthly prayer night Kingdom Growth Night. Because it's God who gives the growth for our church and His kingdom. It's God who softens hearts to believe numbers.

It's God who convicts our hearts by His word to grow like Christ. Maturity. So thank you for all who pray for our church, both St. John's and Holy Trinity.

And if you don't, can I encourage you to do so? Because God is the one who gives the growth in both maturity and number, even during COVID.

Well, what are God's keys to church growth? It's not to have a five-year plan, the best technology, the most aesthetically pleasing bathrooms, as good as those things are.

Rather, God's keys, the more important things are to pray, proclaim, partner, and be taught, or to keep with the peas, pay attention to God's word.

[24 : 34] And so, as the annual meeting approaches next month, what's the big plan for our church growth next year? Well, it's the same plan I inherited, actually, to keep living and speaking the gospel, to keep encouraging and teaching the Bible, to start meeting together as soon as possible, and to keep partnering in the gospel, but above all, to keep praying to our great God who gives the growth.

Let's start doing that. Let's pray. our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you that you grow your church, and not even COVID can stop it.

And so, father, we pray that you continue to grow our church, both at St. John's and Holy Trinity, in both maturity and number, as we pray, proclaim, partner, and pay attention to your word.

Help us in this, we pray, not for our glory, but for yours. In Jesus' name, Amen.