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Here's What You Want: Church Growth in Acts

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

If you are a pastor or a church leader anywhere on planet Earth, you must admit that you salivate with deep hunger when you read the Book of Acts. Why? The answer is very simple - what you read is what you want to see happen in your church. You want healthy, sound, biblical church life and church growth.

You desire to see the members of your church committed to biblical teaching and preaching. You dream of your congregation, whatever its size, being composed of eager learners who consistently arrive on time at Sunday classes and worship services with ears eager ready for the Word. You grieve over flaky folks who don't take preaching very seriously, who will miss services with seemingly no conscience pangs, at almost any flimsy excuse. You mourn for a generation, red-eyed from video games and TV,



bloated with youth soccer, scouts, ballet and karate classes hot tubs and designer vacations, but bored with the Word of God. Even long-term, in-good-standing members seem to get indigestion over anything beyond simple, baby-food instruction. But then, thank God for Acts 2:42 where believers are described as ‘continually, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching’. You can persist in your dreaming, because if God did it in the first century, he can do it again.

Next, you imagine a congregation where there is real fellowship between people who care for one another with concrete love. The lip-service, my-affairs-first kind of ‘love’ which parades as genuine Christian koinonia is nauseating. But it is possible for wall-building, veneer-shallow, self-centered people from a self-sufficient, pleasure-seeking, lone-ranger culture to become self-sacrificing, bridge-building, hospitality-practicing servants. You know it’s possible because Acts records it: ‘They were continually devoting themselves to...fellowship...selling their property and possessions...sharing them with all as anyone might have need...taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart’ (Acts 2:42, 45, 46).

And, of course, you dream of a church body where worship is practiced with joyous white-hot intensity. After all, isn’t this what God deserves? He is holy, therefore he demands holy worship from people who are wholeheartedly enthusiastic. Dry, over-cooked, abstract, intellectual-only liturgy won’t cut it. Neither will mushy, fluffy, feel-good, emotionalism. God is to be worshipped with all the heart, soul, mind and strength. And that’s certainly what the worship must have been like that Luke records: vigorous, demanding on both the mind and emotions, balanced and full of gladness. ‘They continually were devoting themselves to...the breaking of bread...And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple [they were]...praising God’ (Acts 2:42, 46, 47).

Moreover, your reverie certainly includes a vision of a 'packed house' corporate prayer meeting; the kind that Spurgeon once referred to as the heating system of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. The number of prayer-warriors in your church at present is not the issue. Two or three glowing implorers banded together to beseech 'Your kingdom come' is a crowd big enough to ignite a congregation and a community, for prayer is the means God has always used to inflame his people and build his church. Luke carefully points out that corporate prayer was the foundation and the life-style of the new covenant community. In his first two chapters twice he records that 'they were continually devoting themselves to prayer' (Acts 1:14 and 2:42).

Certainly you envision your congregation reaching out with strong hands and arms, carrying good deeds of love justice and mercy and the good news into every nook and cranny of your city, spreading the aroma of Christ everywhere; on fire for evangelism; gossiping the gospel; weeping tears of compassion for the physically needy and the spiritually lost; standing firm, side by side, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel (Phil. 1:27). You can see it: believers making an impact on society; the church being too vigorous and virile in Word and deed for the world's 'Do Not Disturb' sign to consign her to silence. That's Luke's portrait: '...Having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47).

Finally your dream includes numerical growth: numbers that speak of individuals who have been transformed by the gospel; numbers that represent sinners brought from darkness to light, and from Satan's power to God's, by way of the Cross. Conversion growth is your strong inward desire. And it was definitely of interest to Luke and to the Holy Spirit, because it is recorded in black and white for all-time, 'and there were added that day about three thousand souls' (Acts 2:41).

Dream on, church leader! Keep salivating, Pastor! Don't be frustrated by your appetite for a healthy church. God himself has created and stimulated your hunger. He has done it by his trustworthy, error-free inspiration of a passion-creating picture of the church in Acts. Dream on! What you crave for, every true Christian wants. What you desire, God has accomplished many times in history, when it suited his purposes to revive his church by pouring out his Spirit on his people.

God did it in Acts. Acts is your model for the healthy church. Your longing for a congregation that hungers for the Word, that practices vigorous worship, vibrant fellowship, potent prayer, robust evangelism and self-denying service, comes from Acts. Your appetite for church growth originates from God's own Word.

Keep dreaming. God can make his church healthy and growing. God can satisfy your thirst.

Quotations for Your Encouragement

The purpose of Acts...is to convince Theophilus that no one is able to hinder the victorious march of Christ's gospel. For that reason, Luke relates...the progress of the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome (Simon Kistemaker).⁵

... Acts is also important...for the contemporary inspiration which it brings us...It has, in fact, been a salutary exercise for the Christian church of every century to compare itself with the church of the first, and to seek to recapture something of its confidence, enthusiasm, vision and power (John R. W. Stott).⁶

The things that Luke sets down here for our instruction are great things and of extraordinary benefit....The beginning of the reign of Christ, and,

as it were, the renewal of the world is being depicted here...Moreover, there is apparent in it both the astonishing power of Christ and the efficacy and force of the gospel itself. For in it Christ has furnished clear proof of his divine power, because, through men of no importance and endowed with no skill, he brought the whole world into submission to himself so easily by the sound of the gospel, despite the fact that Satan rose up in opposition with so many hindrances. In it we also see the incredible power of the gospel, because, in face of the resistance of the whole world, not only did it win through, but with the greatest honour brought all that seemed invincible into obedience to Christ. Therefore more was achieved by these few contemptible little men against all the stormiest commotions of the world, with the humble sound of the human voice, than if God had thundered openly from heaven (John Calvin).⁷

In [the opening chapters of Acts] we see the apostles and their followers proclaiming the bodily resurrection of Jesus with unshakable and utterly convincing faith. They are absolutely sure of Jesus' resurrection and his enthronement at the Father's right hand. Therefore they know that all men are duty-bound to repent of their sins and to trust in him as their Savior and Lord...Their believing energy spreads the gospel... like the movement of a wind-driven prairie fire (C. John Miller).⁸

George Barna tells us that we are only replacing the dead, that the evangelical body is not growing. Churches are growing by the rearranging of the saints. Evangelicals are simply playing 'musical churches', moving around to more exciting, larger churches. The megachurch's feeder system is the

smaller church and disgruntled believers who have quit their churches. What is going to happen when that feeder system dries up? What we are not doing is penetrating our world for Christ. Real evangelism, real discipleship, real outreach is simply not taking place on any serious level, as the cold facts plainly demonstrate (Bill Hull).⁹

Shall we never institute the inquiry, ‘Why have I not succeeded better in my ministry? How is it that my congregation is not larger, and my church more rapidly increasing? In what way can I account for it that the truth as it is in Jesus, which I believe I preach, is not more influential, and the doctrine of the cross is not, as it was intended to be, the power of God unto the salvation of souls? Why do I not more frequently hear addressed to me, by those who are constantly under my ministry, the anxious inquiry, “What shall I do to be saved?” I am not wanting, as far as I know, in the regular discharge of my ordinary duties, and yet I gather little fruit of my labours, and have to utter continually the prophet’s complaint, “Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”’

Do we indeed indulge in such complaints! Have we earnestness enough to pour forth such lamentations? Or is it of little consequence to us; whether the ends of the ministry are accomplished or not, provided we get our stipends, keep up our congregations to their usual size, and maintain tranquillity in our churches? Are we often seen by God’s omniscient eye pacing our studies in deep thoughtfulness, solemn meditation, and rigorous self-inquisition; and after an impartial survey of our doing, and a sorrowful lamentation that we are doing no more, questioning ourselves thus? ‘Is there no new method to be tried, no new scheme to



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be devised, to increase the efficiency of my ministerial and pastoral labours? Is there nothing I can improve, correct, or add? Is there any thing particularly wanting in the matter, manner, or method of my preaching, or in my course of pastoral attention?' Surely it might be supposed that such inquiries would be often instituted into the results of a ministry so momentous as ours; that seasons would be not unfrequently set apart, especially at the close or beginning of every year, for such a purpose. The result could not fail to be beneficial (John Angell James).¹⁰

