

Know, Grow, Go: A Growing Church

Acts 2:40-47

John Breon

One morning in 1881, the Rev. C. C. McCabe sat on a train heading toward the Pacific Northwest of the US. In a few days he would be leading the planning, and later the fund raising, for planting Methodist churches over much of Oregon, Idaho and Washington. Years before, he had been an influential chaplain in the Civil War. Now he was leader of new church extension for the Methodist Episcopal Church.... The Methodist Church was starting more than one new congregation a day. Some months they averaged *two* new churches a day....

An article in McCabe's morning newspaper featured a speech delivered in Chicago by Robert Ingersol, the famous agnostic philosopher, to a convention of the Freethinkers Association of America. Ingersol's speech declared that "the churches are dying out all over the earth; they are struck with death." When the train stopped at the next town, McCabe sent a telegram to Ingersol, still at the convention:

Dear Robert:

"All hail the power of Jesus' name"—we are building one Methodist Church for every day in the year, and propose to make it two a day!

C. C. McCabe

Word about the telegram was leaked, and someone wrote a folk hymn that was sung throughout the Pacific Northwest in preaching missions and camp meetings, brush arbors and Sunday evening services. The song dramatized the frontier Methodist people's quiet confidence in the power of what they offered people:

The infidels, a motley band
In counsel met and said:
"The churches are dying across the land,
and soon they'll all be dead."
When suddenly, a message came
And caught them with dismay:
"All hail the power of Jesus' name,
We're building two a day!"
We're building two a day, Dear Bob,
We're building two a day!
All hail the power of Jesus' name,
We're building two a day.

(George Hunter, *To Spread the Power* 19-20)

The confidence and dynamic growth of the Methodist Church in the Nineteenth Century illustrates the kind of growth the early church experienced—and that God still wants to produce in his church.

The Scripture we've read is the conclusion to the account of Pentecost. This group of Jesus' followers, gathered and empowered by the Holy Spirit, didn't sit quietly or just maintain their membership. They grew. They were active and dynamic. Being filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they devoted themselves to practices that helped sustain their experience of the Spirit. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Wonders and signs were performed. They were generous. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

The same life and power and dynamic growth the early church experienced are available today. As we look at what God did then, we can open ourselves to God's working now and make ourselves available to be used by him. Let's look at ways they grew and see how we can grow today.

My brother once wrote an article about church growth based on this passage in Acts. I got this outline from him. The early church grew *up*, they grew *together*, and they grew *out*.

They grew up. The church and individual Christian lives should be marked by healthy growth. We want to grow the church and grow people. The first Christians grew up in their faith. They were becoming mature followers of Jesus. Their relationship with God was alive and growing.

The Christian life isn't a one-time event that we always point back to. It's a dynamic, growing, alive personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Often preachers call us to a point of decision—which is good, but it can give the impression that once the decision is made, there is no more for us to experience or be responsible for. But any experience of God we have is the entrance to a new life. *Conversion* is the beginning of a new way of living. *The new birth* is just that: a new beginning followed by growth and development. Other experiences of the Holy Spirit or other special blessings from God are aspects of his *continuous* work of grace in our lives. Those experiences are not places to settle in complacency, but places from which to move on in growth and development. Christians are more like pioneers than settlers.

We're not Christians just because we believed a long time ago. We're Christians because *right now* we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Believing for salvation these days has been reduced to a once-done act that requires no further attention. The young believer is made aware of an act to be performed rather than a living Savior to be followed and adored. (A. W. Tozer, *Renewed Day by Day*, Aug 16)

The Christian life is more than whatever brought us into it, just as a marriage is more than the wedding ceremony. A relationship requires continual commitment and attention. If it doesn't keep growing deeper and stronger, it can grow stale and diminish.

How do we grow in our relationship with God? Let's look at the early disciples' example. They grew *up* by growing *deep*—and so do we.

They devoted themselves to the *apostles' teaching*. If you're going to know someone you need to know about that person. Those people knew about Jesus through the apostles' testimony and doctrine. This was the

Lord's teaching through the apostles. For us it's the New Testament scriptures. We can know about God through reading the Bible, studying it, hearing it preached and taught.

When I was in high school, our school paper (The "Canine Capers") was printed in the town paper (*The Appleton City Journal*). One feature of the school paper was the "Senior Spotlight." Each week, two or three seniors were spotlighted. Along with our picture were things like our favorite TV show, food, movie, etc. When I went to college, my folks subscribed to the *Journal* for me. The "Senior Spotlights" now featured people who were in the class behind mine. My college friends, who kind of laughed at me for getting my hometown paper, could read those and know a few facts about those people. But I knew them because I'd gone to school with them.

Reading Scripture involves more than just learning some facts about God. The Holy Spirit works through the Bible as we read it and hear it and discuss it to make God's presence real to us and to help us *know* God.

To know someone you need more than information about him or her. You can also learn about a person through others who know her or him. The early disciples devoted themselves to *fellowship*. This being connected to the body of Christ, this belonging to the community of faith, this relationship with each other of sharing life together in Christ is important to growing up as Christians. Fellowship helps us know God as we see what God's doing in others' lives and as we learn what other Christians have to say.

The early disciples devoted themselves to *the breaking of bread*. This may refer here to the Lord's Supper although it was part of an entire meal in the early church. The breaking of bread was part of their fellowship. The broken bread reminds us of Christ being broken in death. Sharing in the one loaf reminds us of our unity as Christ's body.

We also get to know a person by talking with the person. Those first disciples devoted themselves to *prayer*. This is our communication with God. Prayer is vital for our life in Christ. Prayer really is effective. Let's keep praying for each other. And let's devote ourselves to a praying lifestyle and commit ourselves to consistent and disciplined times of prayer.

The early church's growing relationship with the Lord also involved a sense of awe or reverence. We can't be "cool" in God's presence. When we know we're in God's presence we're humbled.

Signs and wonders were part of their growth. Jesus performed miraculous signs in his ministry to demonstrate the presence and power of God's kingdom and to meet people's needs. In the Holy Spirit he continues to do those kinds of works through his church. God will use anyone who is available and willing.

All of this encourages us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

The early church not only grew up, they also ***grew together***. We've already seen how important fellowship was for the first followers of Jesus. Luke also tells us that they shared all they had. This was a sign of the Spirit's unity among them. They gave to anyone in need. There was no selfishness in their fellowship. This was a result of God's generosity in Christ. They met together in the temple and they ate together in each other's homes with glad and sincere hearts. They praised God and worshiped together. The kind of life they experienced together attracted people.

We're probably not called to communal living like that. It didn't continue throughout the early church or in every place. But we are called to give up our selfish clinging to our possessions and to make them available to God so he can direct our giving. In light of Christ's sacrifice we give sacrificially and generously and joyfully.

In the church today we need to learn to look out for each other. The Christian life is a shared life. None of us can make it on our own. We need each other.

Let's worship God together. Encourage each other to praise God. Our unity and our love for each other are part of our witness to the world. Remember that's one of the reasons Jesus prayed for our unity (John 17). Let's love each other and live in such a way that people will be attracted and want to know what makes us like we are. Then let's "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope we have" (1 Peter 3:15).

The early church grew up and they grew together. They also **grew out**. That is, the church grew bigger, their numbers increased. They reached out and brought others in.

Notice in Acts how often Luke reports on the growth of the church: 2:41 (3,000); 2:47 (the Lord added daily); 4:4 (5,000); 5:14 (more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number); 6:1 (the number of disciples was increasing); 6:7; 9:31, 35, 42; 11:21, 24; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:12.

The church exists to reproduce, to make disciples. Part of the church's essence is reaching out to others, introducing them to relationship with Jesus and fellowship with other Christians.

We can't keep taking in God's blessing and life and power and never give out. We can't just maintain what we have, we need constant freshness and new growth. The church always needs new disciples.

Let's not be intimidated by the early church's growth. Notice *the Lord* added to their number. Growth was a result of the Spirit's movement. The Holy Spirit can move that way still and might just start with us. This can be cause for great hope and expectation. Let's keep growing in that vision and looking for where God leads us, prepared for the next step God calls us to take.

Let's commit ourselves to growing. Let's grow up—get to know Jesus. Let's grow together—learn to love and support each other more and more. Let's grow out—share the good news, help others come to know Jesus.

In 1941, Herman Thomas was pastoring the Methodist Church in Algoma, WI. One summer evening Thomas was visiting in a neighborhood on foot. His steps brought him to the home of Robert G. Ingersol III, a brilliant engineer and grandson of the famous agnostic philosopher. The Ingersols had moved to Algoma a year before, and Mrs. Ingersol, a strong Christian, soon joined the church and sang in the choir. Robert Ingersol visited occasionally.

Herman Thomas breathed a prayer for love and strength and knocked on the door. Ingersol met him at the door, saying, "Pastor Thomas, I'm glad you've dropped by. I've been saving some questions

for you." He posed his questions and seemed to appreciate the understanding and clarity of Thomas' replies. Then he asked, "Pastor Thomas, how can I become a follower of the Way? Will you help me?" Herman Thomas explained how the Spirit of Christ knocks at the heart's door, and how the person who opens the door will experience Christ's grace and know he or she belongs to him. Thomas asked Ingersol if he would like to be led in a door-opening prayer to the Lord who knocks. "I would like that very much." They prayed, and Herman Thomas left knowing he had been the steward of a remarkable turning to God.

The next Sunday Ingersol came to church, walked forward during the singing of a hymn, and asked to be baptized into the community of the Messiah. Now the whole church was aware of this remarkable awakening.

One Sunday morning in 1942, the Algoma Methodist Church had another memorable service. Pastor Thomas baptized two infant boys into the Christian family. One was his own firstborn son. The other was a baby boy named Robert G. Ingersol IV! Had the church been silent in that moment, they would have heard some singing in the distance:

We're building two a day, dear Bob,
We're building two a day!
"All hail the power of Jesus' name,"
We're building two a day.
(Hunter 37-38)

What God did in the early church and in Methodism's past, God wants to do today. Let's seek God for how he wants to work here and now, for how God wants to involve us in what he's doing in this time and place.