

Church Growth

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, there are all sorts of articles out there that claim to have the keys to unlock church growth. Articles like this one on your screens that boast seven keys to guarantee church growth.
- The first one is on your slides there. Know where the church is going, which is your five-year plan or whatever. And the second, create an inviting atmosphere because people like aesthetically appealing environments.
- Or on the next slide, enjoy the ride. The call should be enjoyable, fulfilling and balanced. And needless to say, COVID has thrown all those out the window, hasn't it?
- I mean, whose five-year plan had COVID in it? And we can't even meet at church whether it's aesthetically appealing or not.
- And life hasn't felt balanced or always enjoyable while these restrictions continue, has it? So I'm not sure I'd call those things key for church growth.
- [1 : 1 4] To be fair, the article does also talk about being welcoming and caring, which sound better. Or with COVID, people are saying that technology now is the key for church growth going forward.
- You know, increasing the production value of our online services. After all, many of you have enjoyed sleeping in and watching church in your pajamas.
- And why not? I might have to make our first Sunday back, Pajama Sunday, just to get you all back. Now, of course, things like being welcoming are very important.
- And technology is kind of essential at the moment. But what is it that God considers the most important? The real keys for church growth?
- Well, today we see the church grow amongst the Gentiles, which Luke really uses to back up his point from last week.
- [2 : 1 5] But as he does so, we also see how the church grows. And so as I unpack the passage, look out for God's keys to growing his church, whether in number or maturity.
- But the passage begins with some Gentiles converted at Antioch. So have a look at verse 19 in your Bibles. Verse 19.
- 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.
- 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, notice this is really Luke's verification of last week.
- [3 : 2 3] Remember last week how God has granted life even to Gentiles. And we see this in our passage. By the way, Luke highlights at verse 19.

They went speaking the word only among the Jews. But verse 20. Some preach the good news to Greeks or Gentiles.

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

You see, Stephen's persecution mentioned in verse 19 actually happened way back in chapter 8. It's on your screens there. That's when he was killed and buried.

And that's when they went preaching the gospel wherever they went, even as far as Antioch. And so on the next slide is a map.

[4 : 24] It's a bit busy and hard to see. So let's zoom in on the next slide and look for the yellow circles. So down the bottom is Jerusalem where the persecution broke out against Stephen, after Stephen's death.

Then going up is Joppa where Peter was. And then a bit further up, Caesarea, Maritima, or just Caesarea, which is where Cornelius was last week.

And then going up, the Christians were scattered along Phoenicia, which you can see at the top of your screens. And then if we go to the next map, going north, you can follow on the left-hand side the circle.

Well, that's Cyprus, the island of Cyprus. And then up in the middle to Antioch. That's how far they went, which is actually Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, a very strategic place.

But the point here is that Luke waits until now to show us what happened there or to verify his point from last week, that God really has granted life even to Gentiles.

[5 : 37] And so at one level, this passage really belongs with Cornelius last week. And where we saw God's intervention, Peter's realization, the Spirit's confirmation, the Apostles' recognition, and this week, Luke's verification.

For the gospel goes to these Gentiles in the city of Antioch, and lots believe. Now, by the way, we may wonder why we don't see such great numbers believing in our city.

And one person even said they find reading Acts a bit depressing because our church life seems so much less exciting. But we need to remember a few things.

First, this was the beginning of the Christian church. And so God was working overtly to kickstart it. Second, God has worked like this at other points in history too.

Just think of the revivals and so on. So it can still happen. Third, it's hard to know actually how long the work at Antioch really took.

[6 : 47] Earlier in Acts, we're told 3,000 believed in one day. But here, it's more likely it took some time. But fourth, Luke summarizes what happened over time to verify his point that life really is for Gentiles.

And so because of those reasons, we need not be discouraged. But while this passage might belong to last week, we can still learn this week the real keys to church growth, can't we?

Because did you spot two of them? First, it was the Lord's hand that grew the church. Did you notice that? In other words, it's God who actually grows his church.

Now, we'll see this again. And so I'll come back to it later. But second, it was as they preached the good news about the Lord Jesus. I'm sure you noticed that.

The good news that although we deserve judgment for our sins, Jesus died in our place, rose as our Lord, and gives life eternal to all, even Gentiles who believe.

[8 : 01] which gives us hope and help through this life. Doesn't it? It really is good news. But the point is, if we want to see the church grow, then we need to speak this good news about Jesus.

And I say we, because did you notice it was ordinary Christians, people from Cyprus and Cyrene, verse 20, who were speaking the gospel.

You see, yes, we need to live authentic Christian lives, whether at work or at home or on social media, to make the gospel attractive. And yes, we need to stand out as salt and light in the world, that people might ask us questions or even gently say things to spark conversations.

I was visiting someone in hospital last weekend and he would tell the nurses and his fellow patients his dog and cat going to heaven joke. He says, when the dog fronts up to the gates of heaven and Peter is sitting there and asks the dog why he should be allowed in, the dog says, I'm man's best friend and would always sit, roll over and fetch.

But the cat simply said, you're sitting in my seat. Now, cat lovers know exactly what I'm talking about. Of course, Peter won't be sitting there and the real answer is, I believe in Jesus as my savior and Lord.

[9 : 37] But the joke might spark conversation. Perhaps how bad about it, how bad the joke is or whatever, I don't know. I'll have to ask him how he went. But the thing is, while we need to live those authentic Christian lives, at some point, we actually need to speak the good news about Jesus.

For that's how God grows the church in number. We can have the highest production level for our online services or a hundred person choir or the best ladies bathroom or a five course morning tea or whatever.

All nice to have. But the thing that actually grows the church in number, well, it's as Christians proclaim the gospel.

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

[11 : 00] 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, it's God's grace that is at work here.

It's God's grace that works amongst them. That's what we've seen before where it was the Lord's hand. Here's God's work again. But remember, verse 19 to 21 really follows on from chapter 8.

And so again, it's hard to know how much time has passed while the people were scattered and went preaching the gospel and the Gentiles were converted and the news came back to those in Jerusalem in verse 22.

Was it after the Jerusalem church had learnt the lesson from last week? And so, they were sending Barnabas to welcome the Gentiles?

Or, was it before they learnt the lesson from last week that God accepts Gentiles? And so, they were sending Barnabas to sort them out, rebuke them perhaps?

[12 : 10] We don't really know. Although, I suspect it was before they learnt the lesson. Because Luke highlights the character of Barnabas here.

Did you notice? His name means son of encouragement and that's what he does. In fact, Luke actually begins verse 24 with the word because.

And so, on your screens, when Barnabas arrived and saw God's grace at work, he didn't rebuke the Gentiles and say, oh, this is only for the Jews. No, rather, he rejoiced and true to his name encouraged them because he was a good man full of the spirit and faith because he got God's plan.

See, whatever the motives of the Jerusalem church, Barnabas encourages them to remain devoted to the Lord with all their heart. To stick with Jesus.

That's what pastors and teachers do because there are times when it's hard to stick with Jesus and to keep trusting him, isn't there? Perhaps even at this time.

[13 : 21] See, being a Christian is not a 100-meter sprint. No, it's a lifelong marathon. It's like that hymn that says on your screens, go on, go on, go on in the Lord, be strengthened, go on in the Lord.

Your labor is not in vain in the Lord, you must go on, go on in the Lord. Apparently, the hymn goes on for 47 verses, although I wasn't able to find them all.

But to go on, we need encouragement because in the marathon race, we can get tired, deflated, dehydrated. I was speaking with someone this week, a great guy who was feeling spiritually dehydrated from a lack of face-to-face Christian fellowship.

But to his credit, he went looking for encouragement, listening to sermons, opening up God's Word. Because that's the key place we find encouragement to go on.

Yes, we can find encouragement in fellowship and seeing role models and so on, but the key place is the Bible. So a friend of mine who used to attend our church and is now a college lecturer, has done some daily devotionals in the book of Isaiah on YouTube, working through that book.

[14 : 48] They're less than 10 minutes. I've put the link under the resources page on our website 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 them here by teaching them how good this news really is. I mean, what other Lord would die for you?

What other person saves you from sin and guarantees you life eternal in a new creation that will more than make up for any suffering?

They're the truths that God's word gives us that encourages us to go on, go on, go on in the Lord.

And interestingly, as the church is encouraged to go on in verse 23, God brings more people to Christ in verse 24. Did you know this?

[15 : 52] As the church is strengthened, you see, so more people become Christians. In other words, church strengthening leads to church evangelism.

Though again, it's ultimately God's work. Because if you notice in verse 24, these people were brought to the Lord by God.

But now that there are so many people there, Barnabas needs help to keep teaching them. And so 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 from the Apostle Paul. At the end of chapter 9 on your screens, they tried to kill him not long after he was converted. And so the Christians sent him to his home city of Tarsus in the region of Cilicia.

[17 : 00] And so on the next slide, if you remember the map, top left yellow circles are the city of Tarsus in the region of Cilicia. And Paul was probably preaching the gospel around that region during those seven to eight years.

But Barnabas traveled from Antioch, if you go back to that map from Antioch, that top circle on the right along that purple line to Tarsus looking for Saul.

And when Barnabas finally finds him, he brought him back to Antioch. Thanks. And what do they do? Well, they met with the church and taught them for a whole year.

Later on in Acts 20, Paul will tell us what he taught every church, the whole counsel of God, the Bible. So here is another key of church growth, teaching from the Bible, because the church grows in maturity as it's encouraged and taught from God's word.

And we know that that's what happened to this church in Antioch because they became so well known, they needed a new name for people to refer to them. And they were no longer like Gentiles or other Jews.

[18 : 25] No, they were Christians. Those who followed Christ, who spoke about him and lived for him.

I wonder if that's how people know you, me. as a Christian before an Australian. Not Bible bashers or hypocrites who ignore the Bible, but genuine Christians who gently talk about Christ when appropriate and humbly live for him.

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

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

They not only needed a new name, but they also became the mission base for Paul's missionary journeys, as we'll see later. And they also gave generously to support other churches, as we see next.

[19 : 43] 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.

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, sending their gift of money to the elders at Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul.

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

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

So he too was gospel partnership. You see, we're not meant to do church alone, which is why COVID has been so hard, isn't it?

[20 : 55] Rather, we're to do it together in community, working for the common cause of the gospel. people. It's why we send money to our mission partners and why we work together here, whether it's by serving the church at church through reading the Bible or serving others through providing meals and phone calls and the like, or whether it's sending money as you're able, or whether it's our gospel partnership between Holy Trinity and St.

John's, where Trinity sent people to St. John's, and St. John's has even sent someone back. Wally Gere, who's at the back of the church, helping with technology now, is from St.

John's. I thank God and I thank you for our gospel 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, isn't it? Because I hope you've seen the number one key for church growth is God.

[22:16] Verse 24, great numbers were brought to the Lord by God. And even verse 28, it is through the Holy Spirit that the famine was predicted. The number one key to church growth is God.

It's God who softens hearts to believe numbers. And it's God who convicts us of his word such that we grow more like Christ, maturity.

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.

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've inherited, to keep living and speaking the gospel, to keep encouraging and teaching the Bible, and to start meeting together as soon as possible, and to keep partnering in the gospel.

and so father, we pray that you would indeed keep growing our church, both at St. John's and Holy Trinity, and not just our church, but every church, your kingdom throughout the world, not for our glory, but for yours.

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