

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **How the Lord Builds His Church**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 80-336

Wow, it's wonderful, all those men up here filling up the platform. One of the great riches of this church is the fact that God has blessed us with so many men who serve and lead, not only their families but in ministries in our church. How rich we are. And what a force of men who rise up to serve the living God.

Before I am gone for a while this summer in a combination of ministry and catching up on some important reading so I can serve you better in the future and also getting a little bit of rest, I have this one opportunity this morning to take you to the Word of God. I told you last time that we were not going to pick up the next portion of Luke until I return in August because that begins the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And in those months toward the end of the year, we will finish out the great gospel of Luke. But for this morning, I want to stick with Luke, if I can, but in a different book. Luke wrote another book, not just our beloved gospel according to Luke, but Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, another long and important book, another historical book, another record of the work of God. In his gospel, it is the record of the work of God through Christ and in the book of Acts it is his record of the work of God through the Apostles and the growth of the early church.

Now the book of Acts would be in itself a compelling and powerful and wonderful, wonderful study for us and we have done it, as you will remember, some of you, many years ago. But what I want to do this morning is just to give you a perspective of the purpose and intent of the book of Acts. It is, in fact, the Acts of the Apostles, as it has historically been known, but in reality it is the act of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles that determined their acts. It is really the record of how God works through the Holy Spirit as the gospel is the record of how God worked through the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. But in particular the book of Acts is how God worked through the Holy Spirit to build the church...to build the church. It is the story then of the church and its growth. And I want to give you, this morning, a bit of a sense of how the Lord built His church because however He did it here, historically in the book of Acts, is how He is doing it today. There is so much discussion today about church growth, how to grow a church, how to build a church, the pattern for that has been firmly established in the inspired, inerrant, unalterable record of the book of Acts that the Spirit of God gave us through beloved Luke.

Now, some introductory statements to help you get a perspective on what I want to say. We remember that the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:18 said, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." In other words, I am going to build My church and nothing can stop

Me...nothing can overpower Me. In John 6:37 He said essentially the same thing a different way. "All that the Father gives to Me," meaning souls, "will come to Me and whoever comes to Me I will not reject. And of all that the Father gives Me, I lose none but raise Him up at the last day. No man comes to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him and I will raise him at the last day."

In other words, the end has been written from the beginning. Our names were written in the Lamb's book of life from before the foundation of the world. The Lord knows from before there is the creation of anything who will be His own, who will make up His bride and the church, who will be the eternal people of God, who will be in heaven...that is predetermined by divine sovereign uninfluenced election. And it will be accomplished. What God determines God does. God's purposes are His ends and nothing is lost. Whoever the Father draws, comes. Whoever comes, Jesus receives. Whoever Jesus receives, He keeps. Whoever He keeps, He raises at the last day so that all the elect will be in the end be glorified, the church, the people of God will be completed in redemptive history and taken to eternal heaven. In that sense, the church is invincible., the true church is invincible, unalterable.

Now we could say at that point, "Well there's really nothing for us to do," except for the fact that the Scripture indicates that there is much for us to do because God has not only ordained ends, but He has ordained means to those ends. We could say that God is going to bless us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus, so why pray? But we are instructed in the Scripture to pray. We could say the Lord is going to save whoever He's going to save, so why evangelize? We have been commanded to go into the world to preach the gospel to every creature. We could say that if we're all going to go to heaven anyway, why worry about sin and the flesh? But as we read in Romans chapter 6, we are instructed to be obedient to the things of righteousness and not yield our members as instruments of unrighteousness. There are means to the ends, and those means are part of God's purpose not only for His own ends, but for our eternal blessing as well as our temporal joy.

So yes, the end is established. The end will be accomplished. What God purposes He does. No one can thwart His plans, the Bible is clear on that. The Lord will build His church.

Now the question for us is by what means does the Lord build His church? That is the compelling question. By what means does the Lord build His church? Because whatever that means is, that's what we want to be engaged in so that we can be a part of what He is doing and He will not have to move to someone else to use them instead of us, thus forfeiting our usefulness, our joy and our eternal reward. The question then is, "If the Lord will build His church, by what means will He build His church?" And then corollary to that, "Has He revealed that means to us?" Obviously He has, that is the meaning of the book of Acts. It lays out for us the means, the elements which the Lord uses to build His church.

Now let me say at this juncture, this seems to be a big question today, in fact, a question that appears to have not an obvious answer. Everywhere I go, it doesn't matter what state, what city that I go, people ask me about churches and they tell me these long dramatic stories about what's wrong in churches. They can't find a church, or they found a couple of churches but they're all kinds of leadership problems in the church. The church seems to be lost as to what its direction is. They had one pastor who tried this, another pastor who tried this, another pastor who tried that, and now they need a pastor again, they don't know what kind of pastor to get. They're looking at this plethora of pastoral options and styles and they're caught in the paralysis of analysis trying to figure out before we can identify a man, we have to pick a paradigm in which these men function. How do we know what kind of men we need? It seems to be so debilitating to some churches that they go years without being able to make a selection of a pastor. And when they do make a selection, it turns out to be disappointing to the vast majority of the congregation, and to, as well, the man that they chose. It's just chaos everywhere and it goes back to the fact that you can't pick the man if you don't understand what the man is supposed to do. If you know what he's supposed to do, if you know what the church is supposed to be engaged in, then you can find a man who is committed to and capable of doing that. But if you don't have any idea what the means are by which the Lord builds His church, then you don't know what you're looking for. So this is very foundational, I think.

Now there are a lot of ways to build the church of the tares...a lot of ways. A lot of very successful ways to build the church of the tares. There are big so-called churches in this country and other countries very large, full of tares, not wheat, indistinguishable maybe on the surface from the wheat but clearly not true believers. You can build churches like that a lot of ways. There are many means to those ends. They have to do with sensibilities toward cultural expectations, psychological needs, etc., etc., etc. You can build the church of the tares understanding that the real power in the church of the tares is Satan, because, after all, it is Satan who sows the tares.

The Gnostics did it effectively and they do it continually. Gnosticism effectively built a false church. Roman Catholicism has done it. The Orthodox Church has done it. Liberal churches have done it, the cults have done it. The radical Charismatics have done it. The prosperity preachers have done it, they have built a kind of organization, a kind of structure, a kind of movement that says it's church, but it's really a collection of the tares. And there is a popular kind of evangelicalism today that continues to do this. There's a long list of churches where tares assemble in large numbers and they're very successful in assembling the tares with a little bit of wheat scattered in there, and they're so good at assembling the tares, they write books and present programs and they'll teach you how to assemble tares in your building, too. They become very famous for being successful tare gatherers.

But if you serve Christ and His church and His purpose and the gathering of the wheat, the true believers, then you have to understand that Christ builds His church and ask the question, "How does He do it by what means?" While there are a thousand ways to build the church of the tares, or ten thousand, there is only one way to build the church of the wheat, the church of Jesus Christ. And to

answer that question, all we need to do is look at the book of Acts, that's why we have it, and see how it was done. Whether I'm in this church, or not in this church, whether I'm your pastor or not your pastor, now or in the future, this is THE pattern for the church, not just this church, but every church. And the answer to, "How does Christ build His church? By what means?" The answer is not vague, it's not obscure, it's not debatable, it's not complicated, it's not difficult, in fact it's revealed so obviously that it is simple and inescapable and you have to work really hard to get around it. You're going to think you're in a junior high Sunday school class today, it's that simple.

So for those who are chasing every plan for church growth, every fad for church development, packaged and marketed by every clever entrepreneur, everybody who is out there reading every survey trying to analyze cultural perceptions, trying every device to increase numbers, it's time to decide...do you want the church of the tares, or do you want the church of the wheat? Do you want to be a part of the church that Christ is building, or do you want to compete for the false church?

Now the answer to what means does the Lord use is found in the book of Acts. Let's look, to begin with, at chapter 2 verse 39. Acts 2:39, the promise, that is the promise of salvation and forgiveness of sin through the name of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, salvation, in verse 38, the promise is for you and your children and all who are afar off. You and your children, Jews from generation to generation and all who are afar off, non-Jews, Gentiles, now and into perpetuity, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself, here's how the church grows. "The Lord our God calls people to Himself from among the Jews and the Gentiles, your generation and your children and those afar off in the future. It is a work of God." The pattern is the Lord calls effectually, savingly, it is a regenerating call, not just an invitation, and the Lord calls from this generation and the next generation, among the Jews and the Gentiles, and that is how the church grows. It is by the effectual transforming regenerating, justifying, sanctifying power of God, sovereignly determined and dispensed.

Now as we see this calling of God that results in salvation begin to happen in the book of Acts, we see the church begin to grow. Chapter 1 and verse 15, this is the first time you have a collection of believers in the city of Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it's a small group, relatively speaking. "At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren, a gathering of about 120 persons was there together." A hundred and twenty people gathered in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem, and this is where the church began. As we know, they were all together, chapter 2 verse 1, in one place, then the Spirit of God comes, they're all filled with the Holy Spirit, etc. These are believers. And now on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit of God comes who has been with them but is now to be in them and the church is born...120 people.

On that day, that day of Pentecost, Peter preached a great gospel sermon. Chapter 2 verse 41, in response to that great sermon, those who received his word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls. This is church growth, the likes of which no one has ever seen since. A hundred and twenty in the morning, three thousand one hundred and twenty in the afternoon. This

is dramatic church growth, amazing church growth.

It doesn't stop, that's just the start. The next day, and the next day, and the next day, verse 47, they're praising God, they're having favor with all the people, the Lord is adding to their number day by day, those who were being saved. This is explosive. Chapter 4 verse 4, "Many of those who had heard the message believed and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." And in addition to the men were women, this could take the church in a matter of days, perhaps at the most a few weeks to twenty thousand plus, that's the last specific number.

Now the growth is so rapid, it can barely be counted. Chapter 5 verse 14, "All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number." It's explosive now, it's exponential. Chapter 9 and verse 31, "So the church throughout all Judea started in Jerusalem, moved to Judea and Galilee, moved north to Galilee, moved north and east to Samaria, the church is now filling." And, of course, the Apostles were accused of literally filling Jerusalem with their doctrine, turning the world upside down the growth was so dramatic.

Throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria, they enjoyed peace being built up, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it—the church—continued to increase. Now there are no more numbers after chapter 4, you just can't even count it, it is so explosive.

In chapter 12 and verse 24, "The Word of the Lord continued to grow and be multiplied." And now it's jumped from the borders of Israel and it has begun to expand into the Gentile world. Chapter 16 and verse 5, and you can see all the way through the book of Acts, Luke puts these sentences in, commenting on the growth of the church because that's what he's demonstrating, not only trying to tell you that it's growing but give you stories and incidents and anecdotes, an illustration of its life as it grows. Chapter 16 verse 5, "The churches...now not just in Jerusalem but other parts of the Gentile world...were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily." The dramatic growth of the church was daily, not weekly or monthly, but daily.

Chapter 17 and verse 12, "In Berea, many of them therefore believed along with a number of prominent Greek women and men." Chapter 19 verse 20, here we are in Ephesus, the Word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing. And even when you come to the end of the book of Acts, the last chapter, 28 verse 31, we'll jump to that for time's sake, Paul is two full years in his own rented quarters and welcoming all who came to him, preaching the Kingdom of God, teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness unhindered. And this is happening, of all places, in Rome. The church has exploded across the Mediterranean world. That's the story of the book of Acts. You forget the numbers after chapter 4, it's unable to be counted. That's the growth of the church.

So, you say, let's go back to the beginning of the book of Acts now, now that we see the pattern in the book of Acts, we ask the question, how does it grow? By what means does it grow? You say you

want to grow the church, you say you want to be a part of church growth, then go back and find out what contributed to, what produced this kind of growth... number one, and I'll give you five things to think about. Number one, a transcendent message...a transcendent message.

Now you need to understand something very obvious. The world at the time of the Apostles was not a global village. There was no radio, there was no television, there was no universal sort of unifying over-powering kind of cultural norm. Every family lived in a degree of isolation in a primarily agrarian world.

People lived in tribes. They lived in traditions that were inimitable to their tribes and their towns and their villages and their cities. And there was not a lot of crossover culture so there were distinctions, and perspectives, and traditions, and mores, and standards and expectations that were inimitable to groups of people, even as small as extended families. There were varying languages and the borders in the world today are only, in a sense, soft borders, they were very hard borders in the ancient world. When you crossed, you crossed into a new world, new thinking, new ideas, new patterns, and in many cases language distinctions. And so there were all different languages, nations, cultures, societal norms, contexts. There were wide rangers of exposure to education. There were variations in status. There were the uneducated and the educated. There were the poor and there were the rich. There was a slave population and the masters who owned the slaves. There were all these deep-seated distinct cherish-ingrained perspectives all over the world.

Now, if you were going to try to come up with a way to communicate the gospel to all of these people and you thought you had to develop an understanding of every culture to do it so you could repackage the message in cultural garb, you would never get out of town. You would never get out of town...bottom line. You would be paralyzed.

But they had a transcendent message, a message that was beyond any of those cultural limitations. It was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul said, "I am determined to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified." And, of course, he was condemned by the Corinthians because he lacked cultural sensibility, because he ignored the things that they loved, fancy speeches, labyrinths woven into oratory, including oratorical proficiency. He ignored all of that and gave this simple message of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, paying no attention whatsoever to their contextual expectations for what orators and teachers should be.

John the Baptist, by the way, is another great example of somebody who didn't care about cultural contextualization. He was an odd ball, to put it mildly. Didn't dress like anybody, didn't eat like anybody, didn't live like anybody, didn't talk like anybody. And Jesus, as well, had no problem preaching the gospel to legalistic Pharisees on one part of the day and preaching the same gospel to prostitutes and tax collectors in another part of the same day. And the message never changed...it never ever changes, it never can change. This is where all church growth starts, with a transcendent

message that, if you will, ignores cultural expectations. We're not concerned about superficial cultural expectations, we know all sinners, everywhere in the world, have something in common, they are sinful and they know it and they need to be rescued by gospel truth and by the power of Christ. It doesn't matter what the other stuff is on the outside.

So the Apostles went everywhere, starting in Jerusalem, look at this in verse 41, on the day that there were added three thousand souls...do you know where those people came from? Yeah, they were in Jerusalem that day, they were in Jerusalem because it was the Passover. But if you want to know where they came from, go back to chapter 2 and please notice verse 8, it says they were hearing in their own language to which they were born. When the Spirit of God came and they spoke in languages, those in the Upper Room, the 120, people started hearing in their own languages, all these languages, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the districts of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs,, we heard them in our own languages speaking of the mighty deeds of God. This is one conglomeration of cultures in the city of Jerusalem, hearing from the lips of Peter the same transcendent message of the gospel of Jesus Christ...in complete indifference to their specific cultural norms and expectations. The message transcends everything, every culture.

They took their message, the early Apostles did, from Jerusalem to Rome, from the biblically literate to the biblically illiterate, from slaves to slave owners, from bond to free, Jew to Greek, crossing hard national, social, cultural lines and the message never ever changed. It was always the Word of the Lord and the Word of the gospel. Contextualization at a zip code level is shameful. The idea today that you've got to look at your zip code, find out the cultural demographics and tweak the message...foolish. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is transcendent. It crisscrosses the world. It ignores the nuances of social order, peculiarities, pop culture style, never descends down to the level of music and clothes and superficial things.

I told preachers at the Shepherds' Conference that you need to look at your preaching and ask this question...Can your message to any person, every person not only in your zip code, your town, your state and your country, but anywhere in the world? If it can't, then somehow you missed it. Does your message ignore all the trends? Does it ignore all the fads? Does it ignore all the temporary thinking? Does it ignore all the pop cultural icons? Does your message touch truth that is transcendent in its full alien reality? Can you take your sermons anywhere in the world and preach them to anybody, either in your language or translated into their language? Or should there be a warning label on your sermons' CDs, "This will self-destruct in thirty days?" Like the bottle of fruit you get at the grocery store, on the bottom it says, "Expires September of 08." Does your message expire or is it as eternal as the Word of God?

That's the way it should be.

Or should we warn people that your message is not valid for anybody beyond ten miles from the point of its origin? The only context you need is the biblical context. The only context any preacher needs is the biblical context.

What you want when you seek a pastor, what everyone must desire when they seek a pastor if they want the Lord to build His church is someone who understands the message transcends the culture. You look around you at Grace Community Church, and ask yourself, "How many cultures are represented here? How many people from how many countries? How many people from how many parts of the world are here?" I don't even know all of these cultures and I don't know the nuances of these cultures, but that is not an issue. What I do know is the transcendent message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that captures people in any culture and every culture.

There's a second element to Christ building His church. First, a transcendent message. Second, here's another obvious one, a regenerate congregation...a regenerate congregation. Is it too obvious to say that the church of Jesus Christ is an assembly of believers? Is that too obvious? To call an assembly of non-believers a church is preposterous. A church is an *ekklesia*, *kaleo*, called out, called out of death, called out of sin, called out of slavery to Christ. We are the called-out ones. A church is an assembly of believers.

There is this trend today to gather unbelievers in a group and call it a church. How misleading is that? In fact, those who are paraded as the most successful evangelical pastors in our society today are those who are the very best at collecting non-believers. I don't mind collections of non-believers, I enjoy a football game...baseball game, basketball game, concert. I don't mind a collection of non-believers. I just don't like a collection of non-believers called a church.

First of all, it's not a church. And secondly, it sends a message to the world that if it is a church, this is how the church is. How confusing is that? And yet we seem to be committed to an almost inexhaustible effort to find every possible way to collect non-Christians into a building and call them a church.

What about the true church? Acts 2, again, verse 41, "Those who had received his word were baptized." Yes they were baptized. Why were they baptized? Because they were told, "Repent and be baptized." Why? Because this gave them an opportunity to make a public confession of Christ open. And not only a public confession of Christ, but a public confession of Christ in a symbolic demonstration that would portray their death to the old life and the resurrection to the new life, immersion. It was about a public declaration of one's faith in Christ that led to baptism.

By the way, does it concern you when you hear these political candidates being asked about their faith? Which is really synonymous for no faith, no true faith, so often. Well, my faith is a private



matter. Really? Then it's not the Christian faith because the Christian faith is a public confession. So if I were a politician, God forbid, I wouldn't last very long, but if I were a politician and somebody said to me, "Tell me about your faith," I would be bound in my conscience to say this, "I will tell you about my faith, I confess Jesus Christ as God and Lord and Savior and the only hope of salvation for the world. I am a Christian because I confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." That is a Christian confession, it is not private, it is public. And if it's private, it's not a Christian confession.

This is what happened in the early church. It's not about people feeling good about Jesus, it's a collection of people who have been baptized. It's a collection of people who have made a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ openly to the world. That's the church. It's all who receive His Word. It's all who believed.

Go down to verse 44, "All those who had believed were together. Those who believed, those who openly, publicly confessed." Turn to chapter 4 verse 31, they're all together here and when they prayed, the place where they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. It's all who received the Word. It's all who believed and it's all who were filled with the Holy Spirit. And they began to speak the Word of God with boldness. It's all who are bold about the gospel.

Let me tell you. True Christians heard the Word, believed the Word, received the Spirit, publicly confessed Christ and do with boldness. Verse 32 then, "The congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul." That's a church, it's a congregation of believers...one heart, one soul, regenerate believers.

Oh an unbeliever may come. First Corinthians 14 says an unbeliever may come. What he should see is a group of regenerate believers, worshiping, rejoicing, hearing the Apostles' doctrine, fellowshiping, celebrating the cross, praying and fall on his face and say, "God is in this place." To design an event for unbelievers is fine. To design an event for unbelievers and call it a church is to misrepresent the truth. And to assemble tares with a few straggler wheat is to send a terrible message to the world about the church and what it really is. The church is the meeting together of a regenerate congregation to which the Lord adds truth by the proclamation of the transcendent message.

There's a third component in the early church in the book of Acts. By the way, that does work for church growth. Look at chapter 2 verse 47, the end of the verse. "The Lord was adding to the number day by day those who were being saved." So regenerate congregation is essential and it doesn't prevent evangelism. The Lord keeps adding to His church, He's the only one who can. You can add tares by your ingenuity, only the Lord can add wheat.

So when Christ builds His church, it's marked by a transcendent message, a regenerate congregation, thirdly, a valiant perseverance...a valiant perseverance. The church doesn't seek to be

popular with the world. Yes we should be respected for our integrity, our virtue, our character. Look at chapter 2 verse 46. It says at the end of the verse that they were marked by gladness and sincerity of heart, verse 47, praising God, and as a result, having favor with all the people. There was no question that they had a corporate testimony of gladness, joy that came from hope and the thrill of forgiveness and peace with God and pervasive love and humility. And it was the real deal and it was powerful. And they were joyful and they were sincere and they were full of praise and they were attractive to people. I mean, it was a very, very different group of which...the likes of which the world has never seen. As Paul says it, they were commending themselves to every man's conscience. They were gaining a good reputation with those who were outside the church.

But at the same time, their lives were attractive, inescapably different because they had been regenerated and sanctified. At the same time that they were attractive, they were also despised because though you respected them for their integrity, you resented them for the narrowness of their message, right? And that's the tension in which the church has always lived. The false church has no problem with that. The false church wants to make the tares happy so the false church mitigates the message, alters the message, changes the message. But the true church is going to hold is in a kind of tension. On the one hand, they're going to respect us, on the other hand, they're going to resent us. On the one hand, they're going to admire us, and on the other hand, they're going to despise us. On the one hand, they cannot help but see our joy, our peace. I remember one night Larry King said to me off the air, "I wish I had your faith, I wish I had your faith." I understand that. I understand that unbelievers wish they had what Christians have.

But on the other hand, the message is so narrow, so judgmental, so condemning, so confining that the message to them is unacceptable. The life is attractive, the message is unacceptable. And so we're left then to understand that while we would like to be popular with the world, the true church is going to have to manifest a continual perseverance through persecution. It's not going to be easy for us. We are a regenerate congregation in an unregenerate world and we must maintain a valiant perseverance, taking persecution when it comes.

The early church preached a very, very condemning message. Chapter 2 verse 40, here's the message of Peter, "Be saved from this perverse generation." That's pretty confrontive. You just called the populace of Jerusalem perverse. And you follow it in chapter 3, preach the same kind of message. Verse 19, "Repent and return that your sins may be wiped away." Chapter 4 verse 10, "Let it be known to all of you and all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. By this name this man stands here before you in good health. He was the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, which, however, became the very cornerstone and there is salvation in...what?...no one else." Now that is a very exclusive message...very exclusive message.

The same kind of message comes forth, as you know, again in chapter 5. The picture that emerges here, folks, individual believers live lives of integrity that cannot be gainsaid. They are remarkable for their joy and their peace and their contentment and their love. And the world sees that. But the tension is created because while they admire us for character, they resent us for the message. And so the church has always had to persevere under this kind of tension.

The church was persecuted very early. And who led the persecution? None other than Saul of Tarsus. Persecution breaks out early. James is killed. The Apostles are arrested. Paul breeds fury against the church. Stephen is stoned. Persecution comes early from basically the leadership while the people are sort of trapped in the tension of admiring and despising, and so is those who are Christ's today and as the church today, we live in that same tension. You can't mitigate the message. The message cannot...cannot, must not change.

Chapter 4 is a good illustration of that, verse 1. They were speaking to the people. Preached to the captain of the temple guard, Sadducees came on them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. Laid hands on them, put them in jail. Did that stop the growth of the church?

Well the idea today is persecution will hinder the growth of the church. Really? Look at verse 4, "Many of those who had heard the message believed and the number of men came to be about five thousand." Persecution doesn't stop the growth of the church because the church doesn't grow by human ingenuity, it grows by the power of God through the purposes of God unfolding in the Spirit of God.

The gates of hell can't stop it. You're only asking the question, By what means does the church grow? A transcendent message, a regenerate congregation and a valiant perseverance...and the Lord will grow His church...He will grow His church. And there will be no confusion about whether it's the true church or not.

Now all of this leads to a danger because the church does have a winsomeness about it. The church does have an attractiveness about it. Repeatedly and early in Acts it says that they were amazed. They were stunned. They were in awe of what they saw among these believers, the power of God, the transformation of lives. And the people were looking at it and for many of the people it was very attractive, it really was. It wasn't a superficial kind of attraction like musical style, or that kind of thing. It was a real attraction. It was attractive not because of style but because of substance. It was attractive not because of the surface but because of the depth. It was attractive because of hope and joy and love and fellowship and sacrifice and humility. It was attractive for all of those ideal realities that still reside in the human heart by virtue of the image of God even though marred. It was attractive for substantial reasons. And since it was attractive, non believers might be drawn into it. Wouldn't that be great?

No, no that wouldn't be great. The church would be in danger of being leavened by the world. It would be in danger of being leavened by the world and a little leaven leavens everything.

So the Lord had a plan, and there's a fourth means by which the Lord builds His church, I'll call it an evident purity...an evident purity. How does the Lord prevent non-believers from feeling comfortable in a church? How does the Lord prevent non-believers from finding a place in a church that's cozy? How does the Lord keep them out of the life of the church?

Answer: By dealing strongly with sin. Look at chapter 5. You know this great story. Very early, a few weeks after the church has begun, or a few months, a man named Ananias got his wife Sapphira, they own a piece of property. Now what's going on is they're in the time of the celebration of Passover, there are pilgrims all over the place, Jewish people from all over the Mediterranean world, as well as proselytes, Gentiles who proselyted to Judaism, they're all in Jerusalem. They're there on the day of Pentecost, they come to Christ. They're converted. They become a part of the church. They don't want to go home because there's no church at home because this is the only church in the world. So they stay.

How you going to provide for them? They're...where are they going to live? They can't live in a Jewish home because the Jews won't have them. The Christian families can absorb so many of them then it becomes very difficult. Many of them are poor. What are you going to do?

So people begin to sell things. Take the money and give it to those who need it. It's not communism, not everybody is selling everything and dividing it all equally, just people selling what they had that they didn't need and giving money to the people who needed it. So Ananias and Sapphira want to feel spiritual and parade themselves as if they really are. And so it says they sold a piece of property with a view that they're going to give all the proceeds to the church to be given to the needy.

However, they kept back some of the price. He did it with his wife's full knowledge, commiserated, brought a portion of it later to the Apostles' feet. But the pretense was, this is all of it, so they lied.

Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back some of the price of the land?" Boy, that must have been a jolt. I mean, he walks up there, you know, with a big grin on his face waiting for the spiritual kudos as he puts his money there. Peter un.masks him in one sentence. And then he says, "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own, you didn't have to sell it?" God didn't make you sell it. After you sold it, you could have kept all the money if you wanted. "Why is it that you conceived this hypocritical deed in your heart? You've not lied to men but to God. And as he said these words, Ananias fell down, breathed his last." Boom...dead...bang. Whoa. "A great fear came on all who heard it."

So you know what the word around town is? You know, those wonderful, happy, joyful people with peace and...people die in there...people die in there. Some men...you don't want to go in there, you really don't want to go in there. Great fear came on all who heard about it. And believe me, everybody heard about it.

“And the young men arose and covered him up, now that he's dead, carried him out and buried him.” The Jews didn't embalm, so they buried him immediately. There lapsed an interval of about three hours...my kind of church service...still going on. His wife came in....how long does it take to do your hair, ma'am? Three hours later...but it was a big day. I'm assuming it was a big day to arrive three hours later to get her accolades, I guess.

She comes in, not knowing what happened. Her husband's already been buried. “Peter responded to her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for such-and-such a price.’” You know, when you come in late, you really don't want the preacher to notice you, in one sense, to call you out and ask you a question. “She said yes, that was the price. And she lied. Peter said to her, ‘Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door and will carry you out as well.’ She fell immediately at his feet, breathed her last and the young men came in, found her dead. They carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”

Wow! “And great fear came on the whole church and upon all who heard these things.” The people who thought they might rush to the church to get some of the joy, some of the gladness, some of the peace, some of the mercy that was there, some of the love were stopped cold in their tracks. People die in that place. And the Lord's desire for His church is holiness, and evident purity.

You say, “Well, that will kill church growth.” Really, you think so? Verse 14, “All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number.” Why? Who does the adding? The Lord...the Lord. He desires the holiness of His church. It just had the right effect, not the opposite effect, it didn't stop the growth of the church. Holiness in the church, godliness is the key to church growth.

This is what I've been trying to say for a long time. Pastors who are interested in church growth, the key New Testament plan for church growth is church discipline. You think the Lord's trying to stop the church from growing? No, He will grow His church by transcendent message, a regenerate congregation, a valiant perseverance through persecution and an evident purity that is manifest. And finally, a qualified leadership...qualified leadership.

So many in churches today, so-called churches, are unfit, unqualified, untrained, uncalled, ungifted. But because they have worldly skills, they're placed in leadership.

In the sixth chapter of Acts, the church needed to take a look at leadership. And so it said in verse 3, "This comes from the Apostles themselves, 'Select from among you brethren seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom whom we may put in charge of this task and we'll devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.'"

Just find men who can give their lives to prayer and the ministry of the Word and men who can come under those men who are full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, full of wisdom with good reputations, godly men and let that be your church leadership.

Now, you say, you just get a bunch of holy people in there, that church isn't going to grow. Where's the growth expert?

Well, they understood it, verse 5, "So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." We find that out pretty soon, don't we, in the next chapter when he's willing to be a martyr. "Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And they brought him before the Apostles; and after praying, they laid hands on them."

You say, "A bunch of godly people praying and preaching, that will kill church growth." Really, in verse 7, "The Word of God kept on spreading and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

That's how the church grows. These are the means that the Lord Himself has ordained. And every church in every generation in every culture, in every nation, in every language must follow these means if they would desire to be useful to the Lord in the building of His church.

Our, Father, we thank You that the Word of God is so clear and yet we grieve because of the seeming chaos as to the growth of the church. We don't want to build a church, we don't want to compete with You, we don't want to be skilled at developing the church of the tares, we just want to be useful to You by the means by which You have ordained and established and empowered by Your Spirit to do your own church building. So, Lord, may our church continue to be faithful to these things, these things which are so precious to us because they are precious to You, a transcendent message, the glory of the gospel and the Scripture which goes across the world and knows no bounds, a regenerate congregation valiantly persevering against all opposition and persecution. And, Lord, we thank You for an evident purity of life where sin is confronted and dealt with and disciplined for the holiness of the church as Your means to communicate to the superficial that this is a dangerous place if you're not concerned to repent of sin.

So, Lord, at the time that we look back and say thank You for leading us into the knowledge of these things, we also look forward and say keep us faithful to them because they honor You, they allow You

to do Your work in Your way to Your glory.

Now, Father, what a day, what a great, great day today to worship You. We thank You for all that we have sung and prayed and read and heard. And, Lord, may it collect around our minds and then around our hearts and then manifest itself in our lives that we might honor You and that Your church might grow according to Your purposes. May this church ever and always through its life until Jesus comes be a part of the church that Christ is building. This we ask because this is our heart's desire, in the name of Christ. Amen.

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