

A Biblical Response to the Church-Growth Movement

Selected Scriptures

GTY114

Well it's falls to me and it's a joy to kind of open up our conference and draw your attention to "Why every true Calvinist must affirm a biblical ecclesiology and reject church- growth theory." That would be a summation statement of what I want to say to you. If you believe that God is sovereign in salvation, if you believe that Jesus meant what He said in Matthew 16:18 when He said, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it," if you believe that Jesus spoke truly when He said in John 6, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me, I will not cast out and of all that the Father has given Me, I lose none but will raise him up on the last day and no one can come to Me except the Father who sent Me draws him and I will raise him on the last day," if you believe the words of our Lord that God has chosen and determined who He will redeem and has, as the Scripture says, written their names down in a book, the Lamb's Book of Life, even before creation, if you believe that Jesus will receive all those whom the Father draws and gives to Him will keep them, lose none and raise all at the last day, the question is...how does church-growth theory fit into that?

Sovereign election has already been determined. It has determined who will be saved and constitute the regenerate church. That was done in the councils of the Trinity before time began.

Furthermore, our Lord has fully propitiated the just anger of God over the sins of the elect by suffering in full the righteous judgment for all their sins. Scripture teaches that the death of Christ was an actual atonement, an actual satisfaction, not a potential one. Scripture teaches that the sinner for whom Christ died has received by grace alone the gift of a true and real payment for all his sins, fully borne by Christ. It is biblical to use words like "real, actual, definite, particular and specific" with reference to the atonement. Christ's substitutionary sacrifice was the divine work of the Trinity to accomplish redemption, not merely to make it possible, to procure salvation, not merely to make it optional. Jesus Christ, according to Scripture, actually bore the penalty for all the sins of all whom the Father chose and all whom the Father chose He will draw and all whom He draws will come and all who come Christ receives, and keeps, and raises.

Christ certainly did not do on the cross the same thing, make the very same provision for the people in hell as He did for the people in heaven. This is what Scripture affirms. Defending that is for another time, that is nonetheless what Scripture affirms.

That leads then to the necessary conclusion that I want you to think about today in our opening session, that since the Lord has determined His church, draws His church, regenerates His church, justifies His church and brings His church through sanctification to eternal glory, this is all a supernatural work. It is also true and revealed in Scripture that this supernatural work is not apart from means through which God does His work and in which we all participate. It is nevertheless the Lord building, regenerating, giving life, granting repentance, giving saving faith to His church and it will not fall short by one soul.

The question for us then is this...as the Lord builds His church, by what means does He do it? And secondly, has He revealed the means to us? If we are the under-shepherds of Christ, if we are ministers of Jesus Christ, if we are the called and the gifted by the Holy Spirit to be the human instruments by which Christ builds His church, then we need to understand how it is that He does that. We're compelled to get in line with the divine pattern.

Now I will acknowledge that there are many, many ways to build the first church of the tares...many ways. Behind which Satan is the real power. And it can be done very effectively. The church of the tares can be very effective, it can be big and it can be enduring. The Gnostics did it and it's still around. The Roman Catholics have done it and it's still around. The liberals have done it and it's still around. The cults have done it and it's still around. The church of the tares is actually bigger than the church of the wheat. And today those who call themselves evangelicals are busy doing it.

And there's a long list of locations called churches where tares assemble in increasing numbers with a scattering of weak wheat stalks among them. The successful assemblies of tares will eagerly market their skill at tare development. It can be very seductive to those who are motivated by numbers or pride or popularity.

So, if you want to take a shot at competing with the rest of the tare pastors to see how many tares you can get in a building, there's ample information, lots of seminars, plenty of books and data on the Internet that you can draw down to work on building your church of the tares with a smattering of wheat.

However, if you serve Christ and you recognize that He is the one head of the true church and He it is who builds the church by divine design, determined by the Father, energized by the Holy Spirit, then all you want to know is how can I be useful to Him in the building of His church. And I assume that's why you're here and not somewhere else. So we're back to our one essential issue, how does Christ build His church and has He revealed that to us? Or are we in the dark? Is there some wiggle room here that allows for some of the contemporary approaches to this?

Well I'm happy to say to you, the answer is not vague, the answer is not obscure. When you ask how does Christ build His church, the answer is not debatable, it's not complicated, it's not even difficult. It is simple, it is straightforward, it is so clear that it is inescapable. It is so singular as to make every one of us duty bound and accountable to the Lord of the church for faithfulness to His will and His means so clearly revealed. If you are caught up a little in chasing every passing fad for church growth, if you are buying the bags of church growth stuff that clever entrepreneurs and marketers are selling, if you're reading every survey that comes out and doing your best to analyze culture, you're trying every device to increase numbers, I sort of want to throw the gauntlet down today and ask you to make a choice. If you want to build the church of the tares, you're on your own, get all you can. You want to be a means by which Christ builds His church, that's a different thing all together.

And the heartbreaking reality is that I am not going to show you anything you don't know. I'm not going to tell you anything you haven't had in your own hands and before your eyes for years. It's not even hidden. It's not even under some subtle Greek nuance or some obscure historical contextual reality. It's just a plain message. Christ said He would build His church, the book of Acts describes how He did that. So let's turn to the book of Acts.

Is it too obvious, too junior-high Sunday-school class level to say that the book of Acts was given to us by the Holy Spirit to show us how Christ build His church not in theory but in reality, practicality? This is exactly how the Lord went about building the church that He promised He would build.

Now I want us particularly to see the amazing story of church growth in the early chapters of Acts. This is the greatest story of church growth in history...in history. And this is only the beginning. There's a hint at how big this is going to be in chapter 2 verse 39 where Peter says in his sermon on Pentecost, "The promise is for you and your children and all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself." That is...that's the key to this whole passage. In that verse is divine sovereign election. In that verse is effectual call. In that verse is the substance of everything I said to you in the opening few remarks about the fact that the Lord is building His church and it's for you and it's beyond your generation and it's beyond your nation. It's for those who come after you and those who are far away from you. This is a...this is an almost infinite verse. It goes on and on and on throughout all of history to generations and generations and generations and places and places and places until finally we get to heaven and we see that people are there from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, gathered around the throne and worshiping the Lamb. This is a hint at how this church Christ is going to build will extend itself through generations and across nations. Now how successful was Christ's effort in the early church? Let's go to chapter 1 verse 12. "They returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet where, you remember, Jesus had ascended near Jerusalem, a Sabbath's day journey away. When they had entered...they went up to the Upper Room where they were staying, that is Peter and John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with His brothers who had now come to faith. And at this time Peter stood in the midst of the brethren, a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together."

So, if we just start in Jerusalem, we have a hundred and twenty people...120 people. It doesn't last long. Chapter 2 verse 41, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls." That's within hours. The church goes from 120 to three thousand. The Lord is building His church.

Go to verse 47, end of the verse. "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." Those who were being saved. You go to chapter 4 and verse 4, "And many of those who had heard the message believed and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." And you can add to that women, the number is growing and growing. You come to chapter 5 and verse 14, "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number, or to the church." Now it's in the multitudes of thousands and tens of thousands.

You come to chapter 6 and verse 7, "And 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."

Now we don't have time to keep going. Chapter 9 verse 31, chapter 12 verse 24, chapter 16 verses 4 and 5, chapter 17 verse 12, chapter 19 verse 20, and even when you come to the very end of this wonderful, wonderful book in verse 31, preaching the Kingdom of God goes on and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness unhindered. And the church continues to grow.

So when I say that the simple obvious theme of the book of Acts is to answer the question...how does Christ build His church?...you can see it. There's great attention given to how the church grew. Now it will be helpful for us to go back and identify the components that produce this kind of stunning growth. And remember, this is coming out of no history. This is the first generation church.

What are the elements? I want to give you several of them to think about and I want to just kind of provoke your thinking and hope you'll have some helpful discussions through the week. Number one, and this is important, they had a transcendent message...they had a transcendent message. This is so obvious that it may actually embarrass many of us who have forsaken it. They had a transcendent message.

There's an underlying reality here of which I briefly remind you, 1 Peter 1:23, "You are begotten again by the word of truth," right? We all affirm that. What is the agency that produces, that is the means by which the Spirit produces salvation? It is the Word of God. How can they believe unless they hear? And faith then comes by hearing the Word of Christ, Romans 10. So we understand then that salvation comes by means of the Holy Spirit using the message and that message is a singular message. Agreed? It's a singular message. If you preach any other message...what? You're cursed. Any other gospel, you're cursed. So we have this singular message which then by definition must be a transcendent message.

What is plain is that the message of the early church transcended all languages, all nations, all cultures, all societal norms, all contexts, all levels of education, all notions about status. It transcended everything. And remember this, please, there was no global village. You understand that national identity was fixed and unmixed in many, many cases. They didn't have media to wash away all the differences in the sort of universal mentality that we're used to in our exposed culture. There are hard lines drawn between people groups and languages and societal norms and behaviors and forms of entertainment, etc. There was no mass media creating world norms. There were deep-seated distinct, cherished, ingrained, cultural perspectives all over the globe and they had no effect on the message...no effect. Jesus said, Matthew 28, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel. Make disciples, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." And all those great commission passages.

Go back to Acts 1 now verse 8. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." You'll receive power for evangelism when the Holy Spirit is come upon you and you will be witnesses of Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the remotest part of the earth. You notice the utter indifference to language, societal norms, social issues, racial barriers, they don't exist. The power of the Spirit and the power of the gospel, that's all that is necessary. You can take that message from where you are in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

In chapter 2 and verse 5, the Jews were in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. Sure, they would have had some commonality in their Jewish religion but they would have also had some very distinct characteristics in terms of societal experiences. They were all there at this particular time at Pentecost. And you know what happened, the power of the Spirit of God came and they were speaking in languages and it is noted in verse 8, "How is it that we each hear them in our language to which we were born? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, and Cretans and Arabs can be thrown in, we hear them in our own tongues speaking the mighty deeds of God." All that is necessary for the power of God to be released in a situation is that the truth of God be proclaimed. It is

irrelevant what the cultural expectations are.

And then Peter preaches his sermon and at the end, verse 36, Acts 2, "Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. And when they heard this they were pierced to the heart." Who was pierced to the heart? All these people from Jerusalem and from all these other countries. Peter simply proclaimed the truth concerning Christ and did an exposition of Psalm 16. Right? That's what he did. And they were pierced to the heart. And they said, "What do we do?" And Peter said, "Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." It is a message of sin and repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter what nation you're from, it doesn't matter what language, the message never ever changes. "For the promise...there we are in verse 39...is for you and your children, for all who are far off in the Gentile world, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself." We know who is going to respond to the message, the ones the Lord calls to Himself. And with many other words...many other words, "He solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation.'" Not only did he not identify with the generation, he said you've got to be saved from it. There were those three thousand souls that were added by God that day to the hundred and twenty.

The message is transcendent. You say, "Well what are the practical implications of that?" It didn't matter whether he was talking to Jews or Gentiles, the message never changed. And you can follow that through the book of Acts. It doesn't matter whether Paul's talking to Gentiles, or synagogue talking to Jews, the message never changes. The Jews said, "That's a stumbling block." First Corinthians, right? The Gentiles said, "That's foolishness." Paul said, "I will continue to preach only Christ and Him crucified." It's immaterial. The message never ever changed. Why would you do anything to change the message? First Corinthians 2, "When the natural man understands not the things of God." You're talking to the dead. If our gospel is hidden, 2 Corinthians 4, it's hidden to those that do not believe.

So, the Apostles went out with absolute disdain for...here comes the buzz word....any contextualization at all. The modern cry for contextualization is a curse...it's a curse because people are spending all their time fussing around with trying to figure out whether they should have holes in their Levis and a skull and crossbones on their Tshirt as if that's a means to drawing in the elect. Are you kidding me? This is a curse, instead of spending all their time trying to understand the biblical context.

The Apostles and the prophets of the early church took their transcendent message from Jerusalem to Rome, from the biblical literate to the biblically illiterate, from slaves to slave owners, from bond to free, from Jew to Greek, they crossed hard national, social, cultural lines and the message never ever, ever, changed. It was the Word of the Lord.

Contextualization...I call it Zip Code ministry. Is that what you want? We're big in our zip code. The message of Jesus Christ is transcendent. The message of the church is transcendent. The message of the Word of God is transcendent. You have the Bible in your hand, you must affirm the message transcended its original culture. It crosses the world. It ignores all the nuances of social order. It ignores all the peculiarities of style. It never descends to clothing and musical styles as if that had anything to do with Christ building His church.

So, I pose this question. Can your message go to any person, every person? Not only in your zip code but in your town, in your state, in your country, and can you take the message you preach on

Sunday any place in the world and preach it? Does your message ignore all the trends and fads and pop cultural superficial icons and bring heaven's truth down in its full alien reality? Can you take your sermons anywhere on the road and preach them? That's been one of the most wonderful things. I've preached my messages just about everywhere on the planet, from the high mountains of Ecuador to the sophisticated business buildings of Hong Kong and I never changed the message. I do the same...I take the same notes that I preach here. Nothing changes. Grace To You radio is on a thousand times in the English speaking world, around the world, and a thousand times in Spanish around the Spanish speaking world, books translated, I don't know, 30, 40, 50, 60 languages, Study Bible, 8, 9, 10 languages now being translated into Chinese and Arabic. This is not remarkable, this is just the way it ought to be. This is the way it ought to be. Or should there be a warning label on your CDs, "This message destructs in five seconds?" Or, "Discard three months after the date?", or a week after?", or whatever. Pretty obvious, isn't it?

The Lord built His church with pure, simple, straightforward gospel truth. The Corinthians, of course, they were very bothered that Paul wasn't contextualized. That ate at them. And he couldn't have cared less. He didn't care at all. John the Baptist was a little out of touch with his society. I don't think he found a whole lot of folks wearing camel's hair, so were all the Old Testament prophets for that matter. And so was Jesus. And please, do not appeal to anything in people that is innate to their fallenness. Wherever their corruption goes, don't go there...don't go there. The true gospel has to be alien, it has to be alien.

There's a second characteristic of the church...the church that Jesus built that comes out in the book of Acts. One, a transcendent message, two, a regenerate congregation...a regenerate congregation. There's an odd idea.

Is it too obvious to say that the church of Jesus Christ is an assembly of true believers? To call an assembly of non-believers a church is preposterous, outrageous. The Lord only adds believers to the church. There's a serious defect in a so-called minister content to be proud of assembling non-believers and calling them a church. Something deeply wrong there. Modern evangelicalism seems to exhaust every imaginable and unimaginable means to attract and collect non-Christians into a building and then call it a church and call it church growth. Maybe there's a better way to identify these places, let's just call them non-churches. Maybe it's just an evangelistic event.

But I want you to see that in the early church it was about a regenerate congregation. Chapter 2 verse 42, "They were continually devoting themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer." What do you have here? First of all, you have three thousand people that were saved, added to the church, three thousand people who made a public confession of Christ, and three thousand people who were baptized. Okay? And then you have three thousand people who were doing nothing but those things that are connected to spiritual life, the Apostles teaching, fellowship. That's the interchange of ministry, the one anothers, the spiritual gifts, breaking bread, coming to the Lord's table and prayer. That's a real church...that's a real church. They were doing what real Christians do.

You probably read some time back about Willow Creek saying that they've been doing it wrong all this time. And so now they're going to find another way to try to do it. So they had a conference with Brian McClaren and they're going to come up with a new way to collect non-Christians and call it a church. That's not a church...that's not a church. Here you have together all those who believed, engaged in spiritual ministry, everyone kept feeling a sense of awe, many wonders and signs were taking place through the Apostles, and all those who believed were together. That's a key line...all

those that believed were...what? That a church...that's a church. And they had all things in common. They actually got a point where they actually sold property and possessions in order to give to people who had need and day by day continuing with one mind...there it is again. They were all together. They all believed. They had one mind. They were devoted to the spiritual disciplines, even taking meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart. This is the real deal, praising God, having favor with all the people. That's a church. That's what you want in a church.

And what is the result? Verse 47, "The Lord was adding to their number day by day." With a transcendent message, the Lord added three thousand in one day, day by day hundreds more, each week, in a matter of weeks, thousands and tens of thousands.

The Lord defines His church as an assembly of regenerate believers, totally devoted to Christ, true worshipers gathered for spiritual purposes, engaged in the spiritual disciplines. I love this, they were continually devoting themselves, continually being the operative word, to these spiritual disciplines. This is a far cry from what goes on in the non-church today. An event is designed for unbelievers and there are a few straggler believers in the assembly of tares getting nothing to lift them up from their spiritual weakness. But the Lord builds His church from the foundation of true believers.

There's a third element in the book of Acts. When Christ builds His church it is marked by a transcendent message, it is marked by a regenerate congregation, and it is marked by a valiant perseverance. It is marked by a valiant perseverance. This is something you've got to see a little balance on.

The church does not, as its primary objective, seek to be popular with the world. Would you agree with that? Obviously. Jesus said that they're going to kill you because they killed me. They're going to hate you. Get ready for persecution in the Olivet discourse that He gave, Luke 21 He talks about this persecution that's going to run between His first coming and His Second Coming. And it's going to escalate and escalate and escalate, that's just the way it's going to be. He reiterates that in John 15 and 16. And so we understand that all who live godly in this present age will suffer persecution. We understand that.

But there's a balance with that as well. It's an interesting thing. The church does not seek to be popular with the world. It knows that in its true expression, it offends sinners, right? The essence of our message offends sinners. But it is also true that the world can have a basic respect for Christians. We find that. Acts 2:46, having favor with all the people. The people could appreciate integrity. They could appreciate honesty. They could appreciate virtue. They could appreciate kindness and the graciousness that goes along with being a Christian.

In chapter 3 of the book of Acts, when, of course, there was a healing, Peter and John were there in the temple. Verse 9, all the people saw him walking and praising God and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms. They were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. There are similar indications of the wonder and amazement of people. In chapter 4 verse 21 they were all glorifying God for what had happened.

So there's a sense in which people do see the church and see amazing evidences of transformed lives. They may see a drug addict, an adulterer, they may see someone with a dissolute life of criminal, somebody out of jail. They may see someone totally transformed, even families see members transformed by the power of Christ. That's why in chapter 5 verse 13 it says they held them

in high esteem.

So, from, I guess you could say, from the personal level, at the level of the people, they can see and realize that there's a transformation. And I think that's what Jesus meant when He said, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." There's a platform, isn't there, for evangelism based upon the credibility of your life. So there's that element there as well.

Second Corinthians 4:2, Paul says that he's commending ourselves to every man's conscience. We want to live lives of virtue and character, showing the power of Christ. Like the German philosopher said, "Show me your redeemed life and I might be interested in believing in your Redeemer." So I think there is something to say critical for that. First Timothy 3:7 says even elders are to have a good reputation of those who are out...with those who are outside the church.

But alongside that general awe or that general esteem, or that general respect, and we've all experienced that at the hands of some of the most non-Christian people, they respect us because they see virtue and manifest character, etc., etc., but alongside that while they respect us for the evident power in our lives or the evident difference in our lives, they resent us for the message. They resent us for the message. The resentment comes at the point of the truth preached and proclaimed.

So, in the modern strategy you go big with the number one idea that they like us because we're nice, and if you just pull back the message, they'll keep liking us. But if you're honest enough to give the message, the message is a damning and judgmental message. And so it was in the book of Acts. Verse 36 of chapter 2, "Therefore, let all the house of Israel, says Peter, know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus, whom you crucified." When they said, "What shall we do?" Peter said in verse 38, "Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And then in verse 40 he goes on solemnly testifying and exhorting, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Don't go to hell with everybody else. And he's talking to religious Jews. He's talking to religious Jews. Chapter 3 verse 17, Peter again, "Now, brethren, I know you acted in ignorance just as your rulers did also, but the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and return that your sins may be wiped away in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and He may send Jesus the Christ appointed for you." Again the message clearly is repentance. And it's the same again in chapter 4, "Let it be known to you...verse 10...and to 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." Again there is this continual tone of indictment. The same in chapter 5 verses 17 and following. You can read it on your own.

So the picture that emerges here is this, there is necessary a kind of integrity and personal virtue that's manifest in the life of the church in the world. But the message when preached faithfully and honestly and directly is rejected. It is hostile. It is offensive.

There's a trend today in reading about it to eliminate the Law from evangelism. I don't know if you've been listening to this going on a lot now. Let's not talk about the Law because absolutes offend people. Proverbs 16:6 says, "By the fear of the Lord, one keeps away from evil." And you only know why you should fear God if you know what God demands. I don't think you can take the Law out of evangelism. I know that's the new idea, but I don't think you can do that. One, because you're going

against the work of the Holy Spirit. John 16, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, judgment. Those are all legal issues. That's the Law. You also have an ally in the human heart if you're talking about the Law because according to Romans 2:15, the Law is written on every heart. There's even an ally in the unregenerate man with regard to the Law. And in addition, he has a conscience that excuses or accuses him based upon how he responds to that Law. There's much more about that in the epistle of Paul to the Romans.

We can't back away from the idea of sin, righteousness, judgment, calling for repentance, forgiveness, escape from hell, not perishing with the perverse generation. This is an offensive, narrow, exclusive, condemning message. It puts all those, listen, all those who do not believe the gospel into the category of being damned forever. And all people who propagate any other kind of religious idea except the true gospel are hypocritical, liars, who are damned themselves. There's no way around it. We are called to alarm the sinner...to alarm the sinner.

And what's that going to do? That's going to create persecution, hostility. Jesus said, you're going to have to take up your cross if you want to follow Me, you're going to have to hate your father, your mother, your sister, your brother, those of your own household, even your own life. This message is very hostile. And the early church felt it big.

Look at chapter 4. "As they were speaking to the people and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." That's the gospel and its ultimate end, eternal life. "And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day because it was already evening." There they are preaching the gospel and the authorities come and arrest them and put them in jail.

Now you would conclude if you were in a church-growth strategy session, that is not good for selling the church. If people think that they're going to jail if they believe this, that's not good...that's not good. We want to be popular. We want to be accepted with everyone. We want to be accepted not only with the neutral people, we want to be accepted with all the other religious people. We want the Jews to like us. We want the cultists to like us. We probably have the same Jesus the Mormons do anyway. We have the same God that the Muslims do. We want everybody to like us so that this doesn't happen because this is counterproductive to evangelism.

Look it's tough enough to get them to believe something that is foolish or a stumbling block. It's tough enough to tell them they have to be slaves to Christ in a world filled with slaves where they can see the abuses of that and what it meant. And then you add to that that if you do believe and become a part of the church, you might be arrested, put in jail, and executed. That's not going to work.

Oh yes it is. Verse 4, "But...very important little word, right?...many of those who had heard the message believed and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." Persecution does not retard the church because people don't come to salvation because they think it's a soft way. They come because the Spirit of God draws them because they are chosen by the Father. If you go through the book of Acts, chapter 12, Herod laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them, you know the whole story of Herod. And it's told in chapter 12. Come down to verse 24, "But the Word of the Lord continued to grow and be multiplied."

The church has a valiant endurance. It has a valiant perseverance in the face of persecution, the gates of Hades cannot stop it. The gates of Hades is a euphemism for death. Even the threat of

death cannot stop the church. We don't need to mitigate the cost of becoming a Christian.

Number four, it's a little frustrating because I have more thing I want to say but I need to be done here...number four, the church growth plan in the book of Acts, the way Christ builds His church, involves a transcendent message, a regenerate congregation, a valiant perseverance, and fourth, an evident purity...an evident purity.

And let me tell you what the danger in the early church was. You want to know what the really big danger was? The big threat to the early church, this will surprise you, it wasn't persecution, we just read that. They arrested them and the church grew. They arrested them and the church multiplied. That wasn't it. The biggest threat to the church was this, there were so many signs and wonders, there were so many miracles attracting people that unbelievers might come to church for the wrong reasons. That's the deadly danger.

There are a lot of sick people, lots of people who were infirm, diseased, disabled. Miracles were going on in there. Signs and wonders were going on in there. Listen, this is beyond a light show. This is beyond a rock band. This is beyond a skit or a drama. This is the real deal and the fear in the church was that unbelievers would come in and they already knew that the Lord said that the devil would sow tares. The church was in danger of being leavened by the world. So the wonder of it all had to be mitigated with fear. In fact, the fear had to be so powerful and so great that it stopped non-Christians outside the door. This is absolutely upside down from modern church growth strategy. They could really draw a crowd if they chose to. But there had to become such a deadly dread and fear that unbelievers wouldn't dare go in to the church.

Acts 5, God Himself provides the horror. I like this story. "A certain man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property. Kept back some of the price for himself with his wife's full knowledge." In other words, they didn't have to sell it, as the story tells, they didn't have to give it all but they did sell it and they did say they were going to give it all and they didn't, kept back some...deception. "Bring in a portion of it," verse 2, "Laid it at the Apostles' feet." That's how they took the offering, the collection in the early church in Jerusalem, they laid it at the Apostles' feet.

Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?" He acts like an unbeliever and that pollutes the church. "While it remained unsold, didn't it remain in your own. After it was sold, wasn't it under your control? Why is it that you have conceived the deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God. And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last. Huh, he dropped dead. Of course, the next line, "Great fear came on all who heard of it." That was the reason for it. Ananias was a sacrificial lamb to send a message to anybody who thought he could willy-nilly roll into the church and live anyway they wanted to live. You're liable to drop dead in there.

"And the young men arose and covered him up and after carrying him out, they buried him." And there lapsed an interval of about three hours and his wife came in. Come on, how long does it take to do your hair? Are you kidding? Three hours? That will tell you whether she was a true believer or not, you know. She's going to make her show because when she gets there everybody is going to be wowing her husband for this big gift. I also like the fact that church went on over three hours. How wonderful is that? I mean they take him out and bury him and they're coming back in and she's walking in, looking fine. Has no idea what happened.

"Peter says to her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price.' She said, 'Yeah,

that was the price.' 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 they'll carry you out as well.' She immediately fell at his feet, breathed her last. The young men came..." this is not the normal duty for early church ushers, but this is the way it was working out. "The young men came in, found her dead," probably said to each other this is getting ridiculous, how long are we going to do this? "Carried her out, buried her beside her husband." And here's the point, "Great fear came upon the whole church."

You know what you do when you go to church? You don't go to church and lie to God. You don't go to church and lie to the Holy Spirit. "Great fear came upon the whole church." The church has to live in fear and awe of the holiness of God and upon all who heard of these things. That's exactly what it said back in verse 5. The word went out of that church through that area, through that community, through that city.

"And at the hands of the Apostles, many signs and wonders were taking place among the people and they were all of one accord in Solomon's portico." The church always one accord. All who believe are together. They have all things in common. They're engaged in the spiritual disciplines and they're having a wonderful time together.

Verse 13, the Lord got what He wanted, "None of the rest dared to associate with them. However, the people held them in high esteem." There's that balance. Don't go there, you might die. That's a far cry from, "Let's go there, it's fun."

You say, "Well, that will church growth. What kind of a strategy is that?" Verse 14, "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to the church." Why? Because that's not a human thing.

The Lord builds His church around a transcendent message, a regenerate congregation committed to purity. You know, you have to be so careful in the church. The first instruction in the church is Matthew 18 and it says, "You would be better off drowned with a millstone around your neck than ever to lead another believer into sin." That's what Jesus said. The first instruction to the church is don't cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble. You as a pastor, you as a church member never want to be responsible, directly or indirectly, for leading another believer into sin. Even the holy angels watch the face of the Father who shows His concern for His little ones and they're dispatched to their aid because He doesn't want any of His little ones to be devastated. As a pastor, I want to have joy with my people. But church is not about being a jokester, it's not about funny, clever pop jargon, it's certainly not about coarse, gross dirty talk.

It's so interesting to me to watch the flow of church growth. It starts out with sort of meeting people at their social level. They need associations, friends, singles need to meet singles, let's have restaurants for them, let's have recreation. That's the first wave that connects with them socially.

The second wave goes a little deeper and says, "No, they've got all these felt needs, you've got to have 45 Twelve-Step Programs, so let's connect psychologically." So the new wave of church growth says, "Let's connect psychologically." And now we're in the third wave which says, "Let's connect sensually. Let's connect them at their visceral gut level, the level of their over-exposure to immorality. Let's laugh at crudeness and rudeness. Let's tell dirty jokes and let's say explicit things on the pretense of identification, having planted evil thoughts in their minds, then trying to recover them."

The new church-growth plan seems to be to identify people with people at the level of sensual lust, explicit speech that panders to the flesh followed by a transition to the truth. Worldliness, simple thing, anything said or done that appeals to the flesh...anything said or done that appeals to the flesh. That's why James says, "Stop being so many teachers for theirs is a greater condemnation." If you can't control your mouth, you shouldn't be doing this.

Holiness....pursuing holiness, that's what we do in the church. We take the high ground, a holy people, people set apart. True shepherds grieve over sin. True shepherds don't lead their followers into fleshly thoughts. True shepherds grieve over the sins of their people, like Paul did. He says, "Who has sinned that I don't feel the pain?" They long for their holiness. Galatians 4:19, they're never satisfied until Christ is fully formed in them. They want to present the church a chaste virgin. Godliness is the high ground. You deal with sin, you confront sin. You pursue holiness, you pursue godliness. And the Lord will add to His church. He always does cause it's His church.

Finally, a transcendent message, a regenerate congregation, a valiant perseverance, an evident purity and a last thought, a qualified leadership...a qualified leadership. Again the trend is against this in church growth...in the church of the tares movement...unqualified people, untrained people, untested people, people with little or no accountability.

But look at Acts 6. Very familiar. The need to minister to some Hellenistic widows brought this about. And in verse 3, there's a call for leadership because the Twelve, Matthias having replaced Judas, don't want to neglect the Word of God. So they say, "Select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom whom we may put in charge of this task. We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. And the statement found approval to the whole congregation." Of course, because it's a real church.

When they wanted spiritual leaders, they wanted spiritual leaders. They wanted what all Christians want. "And so they chose, Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." Isn't that what we were looking for? What are you looking for with leadership in your church? "And so they chose these others, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas a proselyte from Antioch, these they brought before the Apostles. After praying, they laid their hands on them." They weren't looking for men full of business savvy. They weren't looking for men full of marketing experience. They weren't looking for secular wisdom on what sells, secular strategies for successful enterprises. They wanted men full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, able to minister to people the Word of God. That's how the Lord grows His church.

Look at verse 7, "And 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 a great place to end, obedient to the faith. Salvation is an act of obedience to the faith, the body of Christian doctrine that constitutes the gospel. Now all of this, of course, happens in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There's one more consideration, and it is this. There is clear instruction in the New Testament about the kind of church the Lord rejects. Clear instruction about the kind of church the Lord rejects, I'm just going to suggest it to you. It is contained in Revelation 2 and 3. Okay? It is contained in Revelation 2 and 3.

Two churches out of seven, He acknowledges and affirms. Smyrna, troubled and poor and suffering and persecuted and faithful. Philadelphia, a little power, faithful to the Word, hadn't denied His name,

they're blessed. There are five churches that He condemns. And in one way or another, He says, I'm going to judge you, I'm going to condemn you, I'm going to put out your light. What are they? Ephesus, no love for Christ...no love for Christ, not driven by a consuming love for Christ. Pergamos, tolerating heresy...tolerating error. Thyatira, comfortable with sin...comfortable with sin. Sardis, programs and no life...programs and no life. And the famous Laodicea, the church at room temperature. Perfect, upsets nobody...lukewarm, popular with everybody, no threat and He spews it out of His mouth. And seven times those letters end like this, "Let him who has ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And in 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." That's not an invitation to salvation, that's Christ knocking saying, "Do you have a place for Me in your church?" Are you going to be a part of the church where Christ is the head?

Father, we thank You for a wonderful time this morning in fellowship and song, trying to think through some of these wonderful realities in the book of Acts. What an encouraging experience it is to go through this portion of Scripture. We don't have to run all over the place trying to find the secret to how the church grows, it's all here. May we just be faithful to that. May everyone of us here take the high ground, step on the side of Christ building His church and leave behind men building their churches. We want to come along and be the means by which our great Savior does His great work. What a calling. We're unworthy, we're grateful. Give us a great week, we pray in Your Son's name. Amen.

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