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

The Early Church Pattern for Evangelism, Part 1
Scripture: Acts 5:12-16
Code: 1717

INTRODUCTION

In Acts 5:12-42 Luke reveals the early church's pattern of evangelism.

A. An Analysis of the Church's Growth

1. Rapid growth

From its inception the church grew rapidly. Acts 2:41 says that on the Day of Pentecost "there were added unto them about three thousand souls." Acts 2:47 says, "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." In Acts 4:4 we discover that "the number of the men [Gk., an[ma]er, "adult male"] was about five thousand." Acts 5:14 says, "Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." In Acts 6:7 Luke records that "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." Acts 8:6 notes that in response to Philip's ministry "the people with one accord gave heed." Acts 9:31 says, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied." In Acts 11:21 Luke says that "a great number believed," and verse 24 reiterates that "many people were added to the Lord." The church was growing so quickly that within weeks, thousands had joined. Believers were actively evangelizing--the church was reaching the world.

2. Real growth

That tremendous growth continued, although being a Christian back then wasn't easy. The price was high, the demands were extreme, and total commitment was essential. But after having counted the cost, many were still coming to Christ. There's nothing wrong with tremendous growth if it's the result of evangelism--that's the only kind of growth that is real. Those Christians wanted to win others to Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they did. Their only motive was God's glory, so the Holy Spirit magnified their work. Later in Acts when Paul and Barnabas reported the conversion of Gentiles, "they caused great joy unto all the brethren" (15:3). There's nothing more exciting to the people of God than being used by God to draw others to Himself.

3. Regular growth

Today some would suggest that when a church reaches 600, 1,400, or 2,000 it should stop reaching out. The early church in Jerusalem had 3,000 the first day--and had just begun! It's tragic for a church to become satisfied with its growth. Regardless of how many believers there are, there need to be more. Those who know Christ can't be content just to attend their churches, feast on the Word, and excuse themselves from reaching others, thinking there are so many here already. Everything we learn should make us more effective in winning others to Christ because evangelism is our mission.

B. The Annals of the Church's Growth

In Acts 1 we see our Lord equipping the future church, as it still remained in the womb of God's promise. Then in chapter 2 the church was born. Immediately it began to grow and was nurtured in "the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (2:42). Naturally with growth came opposition, and its infant muscles were tested. But it became stronger as a result. The church's task was simple: to reach the world. And it was totally committed to it. In chapter 4 they prayed, "Lord, behold their threatenings; and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child, Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness" (vv. 29-31). These members of the early church were committed to evangelism.

They were committed not only to evangelism, but also to each other. Acts 4:32-37 stresses that there was unity and sharing. That text describes two essentials for effective evangelism: individuals proclaiming the Word and a collective unity. Jesus emphasized the importance of unity when He prayed that His followers might be one so the world would believe that the Father sent the Son (John 17:21). In John 13:35 He tells His disciples, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." So their evangelism flowed naturally from personal communication and collective unity. But at that point Satan struck. In chapter 5 a great sin, which threatened to be a blight on the church, surfaced. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit in an effort to be considered spiritual. God disciplined them before the whole church by taking their lives, illustrating the severity of sin in the church. Thus God immediately cut out the cancer that had crept into the church. So when we get to verse 12, the church is pure again, and evangelism is ready to flourish.

LESSON

Acts 5:12-42 highlights five progressive features that are keys to effective evangelism.

I. PURITY (vv. 12b-14)

"They were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest dared no man join himself to them; but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."

A. A Mandate for Purity

1. The proof

a) Stated

In Acts 5:1-11 God disciplined Ananias and Sapphira because the church must be pure to make an impression on the world. Nineteenth century Scottish minister Robert Murray McCheyne said, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God" (Memoirs of McCheyne, Andrew A. Bonar, ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1947], p. 95). So to reach the world the church must be pure. I believe God still purifies the church as He did in Acts 5. Hebrews 12:6 says, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." First Corinthians 11:30 reveals that God took the lives of some Corinthian believers because they had abused the Lord's Table. First John 5:16 refers to "a sin unto death." Although God still disciplines directly, today He has primarily committed discipline within the church to its leaders and members. We are responsible to discipline not only our own lives but also the lives of those around us. After examining our own hearts, we must be alert for sin in the church. Ephesians 5:11 says, "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness but, rather reprove them." First Timothy 5:2O says, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." In 1 Timothy 1:20 Paul mentions Hymenaeus and Alexander by name, saying they were "delivered unto Satan, that they [might] learn not to blaspheme." In Titus 1:13 Paul exhorts Titus to rebuke unruly believers "sharply, that they may be sound in the faith." In Luke 17:3 Jesus says, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him." The church must examine sin within itself because purity is basic to evangelism.

b) Illustrated

First Corinthians 5:1-6 says, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication [sexual sin] among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles [heathen], that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up [proud of your sin], and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of

our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan [to put him out of the church] for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. . . . Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" The church must deal with sin.

2. The process

In Matthew 18 Christ presents a clear process for dealing with sin in the church.

a) Matthew 18:15--"If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." It's amazing how many Christians refuse to go to the one who has done wrong. Instead they create a circle of talk and gossip. It is biblical to approach the person himself first.

b) Matthew 18:16--"But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Your responsibility doesn't end once you have gone to a sinning brother privately and he has refused to listen. Take two or three others with you and lovingly confront him with his sin again.

c) Matthew 18:17a--"If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church." This is what you do if he refuses to listen to you all.

d) Matthew 18:17b--"If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a tax collector." That doesn't mean he loses his salvation; it means he should be put outside the fellowship because he will harm it by bringing in his sin. The church is committing the sinning brother to God's discipline. Practicing church discipline can raise some difficult problems. But the early church never sidestepped difficult issues. Those believers understood what was at stake: not the feelings of a sinning brother but a pure church from which to communicate the gospel to the world. It's a question of priorities.

3. The pattern

God Himself was the first to practice church discipline to show how critical purity is. Harry Ironside said, "If the Spirit of God were working in that way today, what a lot of work there would be for the undertakers!" (Lectures on the Book of Acts [N.J.: Loizeaux, 1975], p. 132. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was a gash in the lovely body of the infant church; a splash of filth on the white raiment of God's chosen. In 1 Peter 4:17 Peter says, "Judgment must begin at the house of God."

B. A Model of Purity

Acts 5:12b-14 is a large parenthetical comment that discusses the purity of the early church in Jerusalem.

1. A record of the church's purity (v. 12b)

"They were all with one accord in Solomon's porch."

The sin within the church had been rooted out, and all were with one accord--the church was pure again. That doesn't mean all the members were sinlessly perfect. It means they were being honest with God and confessing their sin, not hiding it deceitfully as were Ananias and Sapphira. Luke said they were all in "Solomon's porch," which was one of the elevated sides of the great court of the Temple. Peter and John healed a man there, and then Peter preached there (3:17-26). Thus Solomon's Porch had apparently become a customary place for Christians to assemble daily for the times of prayer in the Temple. It was a perfect spot, because at the times of prayer masses of people crowded into the courtyard. Those Christians who were elevated slightly on Solomon's Porch would be able to catch the eye and interest of everyone there.

2. The results of the church's purity (vv. 13-14)

a) Stated negatively (v. 13a)

"Of the rest dared no man join himself to them."

No one else dared to join the Christians who had gathered in Solomon's Porch. Usually when something is new, exciting, and fast-growing, people are eager to jump on the bandwagon, but not in this case. Verse 5 explains: "Ananias. . .fell down, and died; and great fear came on all them that heard these things." Verses 10-11 add, "Then fell [Sapphira] down immediately at his feet, and died. . . . And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." People weren't anxious to join that movement because it was dangerous! You could die! So only those who were totally committed to Jesus Christ became part of the church. It was too risky for those who weren't. People naturally avoid any relationship where their sin will be confronted--unless they're totally committed. So only those whom God was adding became part of the church. Discipline in the church is important because it makes our evangelism pure and protects us from the infiltration of the world.

Total Commitment: Jesus' Requirement for Church Membership

Today's churches are filled with sinning saints. Because there's no price to belonging, people who don't belong constantly infiltrate the church. There's nothing to fear, and church membership can be advantageous to them. The problem is that most churches don't require any deep commitment of their members. Consequently unbelievers, hypocrites, and people with shallow commitments infiltrate the church and prevent the purity that should characterize it. Membership in the church of Jesus

Christ demands a total life commitment. God's standard is perfection, even beyond what we can experience or understand. When anyone who wants to can belong and become deeply involved, the church becomes impure and obscures the truth. I am not saying we shouldn't welcome those who don't know Jesus Christ--we welcome them wholeheartedly with His love because we want them to come to Christ. But when they come to unite with His church, we must stress God's standards for admission. By that we're not trying to keep them out, but to tell them what God demands to get in: total commitment to Jesus Christ.

b) Stated positively (v. 13b-14)

"But the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."

Only believers were added to the church. That is the way it is supposed to be. We need purity that is motivated not by legalism but by a love for God, who desires to keep His church pure. What plagues Christianity today is the multitude of unsaved church members who can hide in the church, because it never confronts sin and allows membership for anyone who asks. A frequent excuse for not disciplining is that we might offend someone. But that's like saying, "I don't want to tell my lungs that they have cancer because they might be offended."

The Church's Check System

When I talk about the responsibility of the church to discipline, I'm not talking about the church on the corner or a denomination, but about every Christian. Each believer has the responsibility to maintain personal purity and to help fellow believers do the same. We do that by our example and rebuking them of sin we are aware of. Knowing that other believers are lovingly watching our lives helps us to be pure. It's a check system. If you know something in your life is wrong, make it right. If you know of sin in the life of a brother, go to him privately, and in love admonish him. If the church is pure, our evangelism will be also.

Some--often because of the fear that they themselves will be discovered--argue that such teaching will keep unbelievers from attending church. However, real evangelism starts with a pure church. When the church is pure, God adds genuine believers to it. If the price of membership is high, as it ought to be, the church will be composed of legitimate members. Although our love extends to everyone because of Jesus' death for them, people must understand the cost of belonging and weigh it carefully. Our churches must not allow unbelievers to hide in the church as members. Because we love them, we should want them to truly know Jesus Christ.

Jesus' High Standard for Belonging to Him

Luke 9:57-58 says, "It came to pass that, as they went on the way, a certain man said unto [Jesus], Lord, I will follow thee wherever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." Somewhere between verse 58 and 59 that man leaves and never returns. Verse 59 says "he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." His father probably was still living. Perhaps he wanted to wait until his father died and he had received his inheritance before following Christ. The Lord responded, "Let the dead [those who are spiritually dead] bury their dead [those who are physically dead]; but go thou and preach the kingdom of God" (v. 60). Apparently that man also left. Verses 61- 62 continue, "Another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, who are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Christ demands total commitment.

In Matthew 10:32-39 Jesus says, "Whosoever, therefore, shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father, who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father, who is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I am come not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in- law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." He seeks people who will lose everything and follow Him.

Some may think that kind of commitment produces a weighty and slavish life. Others may wonder why anyone would want to become a Christian. In Matthew 11:28-30 Christ balances the demand for total commitment by saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The Lord demands total commitment, but once we are willing to make it, He shoulders the rest of our burden. Knowing Jesus Christ is truly a great joy.

Notice the last part of verse 14 speaks of "multitudes both of men and women." The church grew so fast that they stopped counting. A pure, saved, fully committed membership is the key to real growth. Evangelism begins as we emphasize purity within our own lives and churches.

II. POWER (vv. 12a, 15-16)

A pure church will always have power, and the church in Jerusalem had it. The Sanhedrin had threatened the apostles against any public ministry (4:18). No one could speak about the resurrection. But it's impossible to hide the power of a pure church, so they were bold, and the church progressed.

A. Seen Through Signs and Wonders (v. 12a)

"And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people."

The apostles were regularly doing miracles. The gifts of miracles, healings, tongues, and interpretations of tongues were sign gifts, which God gave to the apostles and certain Old Testament prophets to confirm the Word. After seeing the miracles that the apostles did in the name of Jesus Christ, the people were open to hearing about Him. Those miracles verified the apostles' message. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 12:12 Paul calls miraculous gifts "the signs of an apostle." Hebrews 2:4 speaks of the apostles having certain miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, which they used to verify the validity of their message. Jesus Himself used miracles to confirm His message. He went into a town, performed miracles, and then told the people who He was.

The miracles in Acts 5 are an answer to the church's prayer in chapter 4, where they said, "Grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child, Jesus" (vv. 29-30). But God couldn't grant that request until the church was pure. The Greek words translated signs and wonders emphasize their purpose. "Signs" point to something, and "wonders" create an attitude of amazement. All the miracles pointed to the deity of Jesus Christ, and created wonder in the minds of the people.

B. Seen Through Healings (vv. 15-16)

"Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds [the valuable, soft beds of the rich] and couches [the typical beds of the poor], that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them who were vexed with unclean spirits; and they were healed every one."

The streets of Jerusalem were an incredible sight. Everywhere there were beds occupied by rich and poor alike, all waiting for the apostles to move through town. The inhabitants of Jerusalem actually believed that Peter's shadow could heal. Some ancient peoples believed that a man's shadow carried his influence, so parents would place their children into the shadow of great men and snatch them

away from the shadow of someone they disliked. The text doesn't say that Peter's shadow healed anyone, only that the people believed so. Their actions display a tremendous respect for Peter. Great miracles indeed occurred.

Can We Expect Miracles Today?

Someone may ask, "If the church is pure today, will all those miracles continue?" No. The miraculous gifts have passed away because they were for the establishment of the church (cf., Heb. 2:3- 4). There is no biblical promise that those miracles would continue. Some people argue that such miracles can happen today because we live in the end times. But the Holy Spirit says that at the end of this age there will be apostasy, lawlessness, departure from the faith, false religions, delusions, and doctrines of devils--no miracles. However, the Bible does say there will be signs and wonders. Second Thessalonians 2:9 says there will be "power and signs and lying wonders" propagated by Satan. Although Paul is referring to the events surrounding the Tribulation, we've already begun to see "the mystery of iniquity" at work (2 Thess. 2:7). Some "lying wonders" are happening even now under demonic influence.

The early church was a powerful church. The church today can be too if we're pure. The same applies to every individual believer. Reminding Timothy of the priorities for ministry, Paul said, "Keep thyself pure" (1 Tim. 5:22). God uses only holy instruments.

CONCLUSION

Second Timothy 2:19-21 says, "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his; and, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man, therefore, purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and fit for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." Clay, wood, silver, and gold vessels are all in the Father's house, but no one wants to be a clay pot when he could be a gold one. No one wants to be on a shelf when he could be fit for the Master's use. Keep yourself pure. As each Christian keeps himself pure and keeps his brothers and sisters in Christ accountable, the church will have the power to reach the ends of the earth and minister spiritual healing to the multitudes--all to the glory of God.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What do Acts 2:41, 4:4, and 6:7 teach about the early church?

2. Everything we learn should make us more effective in winning others to Christ because _____ is our _____ .

3. What was the early church nurtured in?

4. What does Acts 4:32-37 stress? Explain.

5. Why did God discipline Ananias and Sapphira before the whole church (Acts 5:1-11)?

6. To whom has God primarily committed discipline within the church? Explain.

7. Explain the process Jesus gave for dealing with sin in the church (Matt. 18:15-17).

8. Where was Solomon's Porch? Why did it become a gathering place for Christians?

9. Explain why people who were uncommitted were reluctant to join the church.

10. Why is discipline important in the church?

11. Explain Jesus' standard for belonging to Him.

12. What was the purpose of the miracles performed by the apostles in Acts? Explain.

13. Are the miracles that occurred in Acts 5 supposed to occur today? Explain.

Pondering the Principles

1. In Matthew 18:15-17 our Lord gave us a clear directive for effectively dealing with sin in the lives of others. Unfortunately it is too seldom followed. When a believer knows a brother is in sin, the most common responses are to ignore the problem, to tell one's friends--occasionally that is excused as a prayer request--or to report his sinful actions to the pastor or someone else in authority. All those responses are unbiblical. Read Matthew 18:15- 17, noting the progression. You may want to memorize verses 15-17, or at least memorize that Matthew 18 contains the biblical process of confronting sin in the church. Ask God to enable you to react biblically the next time you know a brother is in sin. Read Galatians 6:1 to know the proper attitude for carrying out Matthew 18.

2. Although we are responsible to help each other stay pure, Matthew 7:3-5 graphically demonstrates that our first priority is to "cast the beam out of [our] own eye." Before we help others, we should investigate our own condition. Sometimes when we think of personal purity, we think only of external

behavior. But in 2 Corinthians 7:1 Paul says we should rid ourselves of "all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (emphasis added). Are you now guilty of some sin of the flesh or the mind? Have you sinned by what you have said? Stop now and acknowledge your sins to God, asking for His forgiveness and restoration.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).