

Introduction:

Many churches have begun in someone's home with a few members. Then they grew like gangbusters, hired a preacher, appointed elders, and constructed a building all the while bringing more people to Christ. Each year they had more members. But almost without exception at some time they stop growing. The church continued to baptize new people, but never got any larger. **Ephesians 4:15-16** explains why this happens. Jesus provides the growth of the body, but He does so through "every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly." In other words, the church will grow to the limit of the combined strength of its membership. For instance, a church may be made up of 100 people; the combination of those 100 people, due to their individual strengths, can only do so much work. The church can only do so much evangelism. It can only provide so much care for the spiritual needs of its membership. Thus, 10 people may be baptized in the year, but the congregation's ability to maintain the souls of its membership won't allow much more than 100. Regrettably, when that is the case someone is going to slip through the cracks, and the church will remain at about 100 people. There is really only one way to break this barrier. Since the church is going to grow to the level of the combined strength of its members, each of the members must grow individually. Here, among the Christians that meet on Livingston Avenue, we are obviously able to manage, maintain, and support around 350 members. We must make sure this does not become a growth ceiling for us. Each of us must examine our roles in the congregation and determine how we can grow individually to supply more strength to the group. You may recall the seven keys to the victory of the Jerusalem church that we learned about a few weeks ago. These will provide a good outline for where our personal and congregational growth needs to begin. The first key we noticed was that the Jerusalem church was devoted to God. For this congregation to grow like Jerusalem did, each of us must improve our devotion to God (**Acts 2:42**). In our overview lesson, we briefly encountered the four aspects of their devotion to God. Let's look at them more closely.

Discussion:

I. "Apostles' doctrine": Devoted to learning from God.

- A. Jesus had promised the apostles that he would send the Holy Spirit to them to remind them of all that He had taught them (**John 14:26**), and also to guide them into all truth (**John 16:12-13**). This revelation would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (**John 16:8-9**). The Holy Spirit would need to convict in these three areas because 1) the world had not believed in Jesus. They had not accepted what Jesus taught about sin. Instead, they sinned by putting Him to death. 2) Jesus is gone to the Father and we can no longer see Him. If He were living among us, we would have a living revelation of what it means to be righteous. But since Jesus has left the world, we need the revelation that has come from the Holy Spirit. 3) Because the ruler of this world has been judged. In the death of Jesus, judgment was meted out on Satan. The Holy Spirit would proclaim that judgment.
- B. This is the work the Holy Spirit was accomplishing through the apostles. They were revealing all truth. They were convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. These early Christians were devoted to that. They wanted to understand God's will for their lives.
- C. Why? Because of fear. Notice **Acts 2:43**: "And awe came upon every soul..." (ESV). The term translated "awe" is used four other times in Acts: **Acts 5:5, 11; 9:31; 19:17**. Considering its use in **Acts 5:5, 11**, I think we recognize that this is more than just simply some type of wonderment at how cool God is, as if the disciples were simply surfer dudes expressing, "God is so awesome, dude." This is fear. But they were saved from the wrath of God, so what is this fear?
- D. Consider this. Have you ever had a close call? Perhaps you pulled out onto the street only to hear screeching tires and see a truck barely miss you. The danger has now past and you are now safe, but your palms are sweaty, your heart is pounding, and you are filled with fear. How do you drive for the rest of the trip? With great care. You fear getting in a wreck, and so you drive so carefully that you don't have to fear getting in a wreck. In **Acts 2:37**, these people realized they had been a heart's beat away from eternal damnation. They had seen the result of following their own path. They had slain the Messiah. They knew the eternal punishment they deserved. What a shock they received when Peter actually had a response to their despairing cry, "Brothers, what shall we do?" They learned Jesus had died for them. They could be saved by His blood. They were relieved. But that close call was still heavy upon them. They wanted to be devoted to God and His will.

They didn't want to have that brush with eternal damnation again. Therefore, they devoted themselves to learning from God. They feared God, so they didn't have to fear God. After all, they had learned that their own way failed. Now they were convinced that God's way works.

- E. But how did they devote themselves to this? They devoted themselves by being present when God's way was taught by the apostles. More than that, they devoted themselves by heeding God's way taught by the apostles. If we want to devote ourselves to learning from God, we will avail ourselves of the teaching times made available to us. But more than that, we will spend time in God's Word. We will spend time meditating and thinking about it. We will surrender to it, trusting that this teaching will lead us in the paths of right.

II. "Fellowship": Devoted to loving like God.

- A. These early disciples understood that a devotion to God was not just about listening to God's rules and trying to follow them. It was about a relationship. Not only about a relationship with God, but also a relationship with His other children. Jesus didn't purchase individuals with His blood. He purchased the church of God (**Acts 20:28**). Thus, participating in that blood automatically puts us in relationship with everyone else who participates in His blood. Being devoted to God is not just about learning from God; it is also about loving like God loves.
- B. When we enter Christ's church, we enter a community. Think about how we use this term in other situations. I remember in Beaumont, Texas, they spoke of the Hispanic community. When I was in Franklin, Tennessee, we were able to do a small amount of teaching in the Russian community. There is the homeless community, the black community, the white community. When we speak of these communities, we mean there are people interspersed throughout the area who have a similar background, similar culture, similar goals, similar language, all of which is distinct from other people around them who are not part of that community. They pool together based on these common bonds. We need to understand that a new community was started on that day of Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago—the Christian community.
- C. We are part of that community. We have similar background, culture, language, goals. Because we are in Christ, we now have more in common with each other than we have with everyone else in the world. Or we should have. And even within that, we recognize another layer of community that we have in this local church. See how this sense of community played itself out in the lives of these early Christians in **Acts 2:44-47**. First, they met together daily to express their devotion to God. But being part of this community did not just impact what they did when they came together. It also impacted their time as individual Christians. They met from house to house. They ate with one another. They praised God with one another. They spent time with one another. Sure, they had busy lives. But they were part of a community and they knew how much they needed each other. Further, they cared for and served each other. There was an immediate material need and these new Christians sold their own possessions to care for each other.
- D. The sad problem today is that too few of us as Christians are so different from the rest of the world that we need the community that only our congregation can provide. Too many Christians find too much community with the world. We find too much support from the worldly. When that is happening, we are not nearly as devoted to God as we think. If we will grow, we need to be devoted to God and to loving like God.

III. "The breaking of bread": Devoted to God's grace.

- A. Since the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking (**Romans 14:17**), I do not believe this phrase in **Acts 2:42** is referring to a devotion to eating common meals together from house to house as some suggest from **Acts 2:46**. Rather, this is an understood reference to the Lord's Supper (cf. **I Corinthians 10:16**). It referred to the breaking of the one bread that is Jesus. We know from **Acts 20:7**; **I Corinthians 11:20**; **16:2** that these early Christians participated in the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week. They gathered weekly to observe this memorial.
- B. Alain de Botton, who, sadly, is an atheist, did a remarkable job, though unwittingly, with explaining why this observance is so important. In a TED video¹, he said, "In the secular world, we think, 'If an idea is important, I'll bump into it. I'll just come across it.' 'Nonsense,' says the religious worldview. The religious worldview says we need calendars; we need to structure time; we need to synchronize encounters." His point was that some ideas are so important we need to schedule a purposeful encounter with them instead of just leaving it up to chance. That is exactly what God has done with the Lord's Supper, and that is exactly what these early Christians did. God has purposefully established a memorial that causes us to encounter the doctrine of God's grace. On every first day of the week, we take the Lord's Supper. Sadly, I think too many Christians do that

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0.html

simply to prove to God and the world that we can get a pattern about the Lord's Supper right. But that isn't the point. The point is for us to bump into God's grace.

- C. We've already talked about the close call these early Christians had with eternal damnation. We have had that same close call. The only thing that saved us is the grace of God in the form of Jesus dying on the cross. We need to encounter this grace on a regular basis. Why? Because we all mess up. We need a regular reminder that we aren't saved by our perfection, but by God's grace. But also because in Christ we are growing and getting better. We have progressive victory over sin and it is very easy to start to think we are saved because of how great we are doing. We need an encounter with the death of Jesus Christ on a regular basis to remind us that we aren't saving ourselves. Only the grace of God can do that.
- D. These early Christians were devoted to the Lord's Supper because they were devoted to the grace of God. If we will grow as they did, we need to have this same devotion to God's grace. We need to see taking the Lord's Supper as more than an act of worship. We need to see it as more than a dividing line between us getting the pattern right and the rest of the world getting it wrong. It must not be just a formula that proves we are right and other churches are wrong. This is a bumping into and an encounter with the greatest of all ideas—the idea that God loved us so much He sent His Son to die for us so that any of us who believe on Him will not perish but have everlasting life (**John 3:16**). If this church will grow, we must never lose sight of what it is that has brought us here—God's grace through the death of Jesus Christ.

IV. "Prayer": Devoted to God's power.

- A. This devotion to prayer didn't begin on the day of Pentecost. As the disciples were waiting for that day, **Acts 1:14** says they were devoting themselves to prayer. We see in **Acts 3:1** that Peter and John were going to the temple at the hour of prayer, demonstrating a daily plan to pray. Then in **Acts 6:4**, we see the apostles start delegating labor so it wouldn't interfere with their own devotion to prayer. But we don't grasp what was really going on here until we look at a couple of examples of these early Christians praying.
 - 1. Consider **Acts 4:23-31**. Peter and John had been arrested, threatened, and charged not to teach in Jesus' name anymore. The first thing they did when they were released was meet with their community and pray. What did they pray for? They prayed that God would grant them boldness and continue to stretch out His hand to perform signs. Then the text says the place in which they met shook and they went out with boldness.
 - 2. Consider also **Acts 12:5**. James had been executed. Peter was imprisoned, and his execution was scheduled. What was the Christian community doing? They were praying. We know what happened. Peter was rescued.
- B. What do we learn from these two accounts? That being devoted to prayer was not simply being devoted to a ritual. They weren't simply working their way through a regimen of prayers or reciting their daily or nightly speeches. They were devoted to the power of God. Having recognized whose grace it was that saved them, they knew whose grace would sustain them throughout their trials and turmoil. They knew that no one could deliver them but God.
- C. They understood that apart from God they would not survive. And so they prayed. Prayer was not a religious rite or ritual. Prayer was not simply what they did to open and close their meetings together. Prayer was their lifeline. It was their connection to God. They knew the battle they faced and the enemy they were up against (cf. **Ephesians 6:12-13**). They knew that the only way to win was to be plugged in to God. They were devoted to the power of God; so they were devoted to prayer (cf. **Ephesians 6:18**).
- D. If we would grow, we need to recognize the power of God. We need to understand that apart from the power of God our plans and programs are pointless. According to **Acts 11:21**, in Antioch, a great many believed and turned to the Lord because the hand of the Lord was with them. There is no growth apart from the hand of the Lord. Therefore we need to start there, asking for His hand. This is more than spending a few minutes each week in opening and closing prayers. This is about making prayer the foundation and bedrock of all that we do.

Conclusion:

The Jerusalem church has blazed a trail for us. If we would grow like they did, we must have the same devotion they did. It begins with a devotion to God. Where is your devotion?