

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**

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***Stewardship and Church Membership***  
**How We Grow**

Acts 2:32-47 (NIV)

32 [Peter said:] *God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. 33 Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand 35 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.””*

36 *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”*

37 *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*

38 *Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

40 *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

42 *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 4:1-31 (NIV)

4.1 *The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. 2 They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the*

resurrection of the dead. 3 They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

5 The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. 14 But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. 15 So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. 16 "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. 17 But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20 As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

21 After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. 22 For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in

*them. 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’*

*27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

*31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

**[Slide 1]**    *Opening*

Good morning church! We are here again in this time when we take a few weeks to focus on stewardship and church membership. Our mission statement says that *“First Christian exists to make disciples of Jesus.”* We fulfill that mission through our personal lives and our shared ministry as we “Gather,” “Grow,” and “Go.” Last week we asked, *“Why do we gather?”* Today we’re going to look at the second of these three words: “Grow,” and ask the question: *“How do we grow?”*

**[Slide 2]**

It may seem a bit backwards to be talking about “growing” as we’re now well into autumn, a season where we mostly see things dying or going dormant. The leaves are turning gorgeous colors—right before they fall off and fill up our yards and gutters. Autumn is beautiful, but we don’t think of “growing” as the word that fits the season.

But according to gardeners—and I have to take them at their word, because I am definitely not a gardener—this is the crucial time to attend to your garden (or your bushes, trees, yard) if you want it to bloom and grow in the spring. So let’s take a hint from nature and from our Master Gardener and give some attention to what he wants to say to us about growing.

**[Slide 3]**

One of the odd things I’ve discovered about churches over the past half-century has to do with church membership. Across the board, with churches of all types, sizes, denominations, whatever, most churches have a huge discrepancy between the number of “members” on their official list and the number of people who actually attend and actively participate in the life of the church.

I discovered this first as a teenager. The church I grew up in had about three times as many “members” on the official roll than ever showed up on Sunday. After college, I realized that I was contributing to the problem. I was living in Kansas, I had a new church home, but I had neglected to let my “home church” know that I needed to withdraw my membership. I saw it firsthand when I pastored in Iowa. We were cleaning up the membership records and found a bunch of people’s names on the list who had died or moved away, sometimes decades ago, and other names that no one in the church had heard from or seen for ages, and some that no one recognized at all. And this is happening all the time—churches with inflated numbers on their membership rolls which they can report, and people who are “members” of multiple churches simultaneously.

This pattern might just be the result of carelessness. And that is probably a major factor. I suspect that there are many like me, who simply forgot to make the phone call or write the letter to set the record straight when they moved away. But I think there’s a bigger factor that goes to a deeper issue with churches and pastors. And that has to do with pride.

[Slide 4]

You see, churches and pastors love to measure themselves. We want to look good, and having a huge membership number makes us think that we look good. We want to know how we compare to the Methodists around the corner, or the Episcopalians on the other side of the alley. What we don’t realize is that the mirror we’re using to check out how we look is like one of those fun house varieties—and it is grossly distorting the picture.

[Slide 5] *The 80-20 issue*

It’s not just churches with official membership rolls that have this problem. I’ve been a part of two different churches that didn’t have a formal membership. Those who were involved and active, who had relationships with the leaders and the rest of the church were regarded as members. But even there, we saw discrepancies between those who showed up for worship (or potluck!) and those who were relationally connected to others and committed to the life of the church. One of those churches averaged about 2500 in attendance on Sundays. But only about 500 were actively involved in anything beyond attending the worship service (or part of the worship service). Those 500 were the ones who volunteered and served, who were part of small groups and classes, who were connected relationally to others in the congregation. And one of the staff told me once that only about 500 people (20% of those attending) gave more than \$500 a year to the church (which would have been a tithe for someone earning \$5,000 a year).

So you can have a crowd, you can have a lot of noise, and still not have a lot of connection—which raises the question, what does membership really mean? And what does it mean to grow?

[Slide 6] *Jesus and his followers*

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised at what we see in the church today. Jesus had differing levels of commitment among those he taught, differing circles of relationship.

There were those who were the crowds. They came to see the miracles, to watch the spectacles. Perhaps they came to be entertained, or to get some food, or to be cured of a disease or an ailment. Perhaps they were merely curious. Some came to oppose him, to mock him and to contest what he said—they were watching Jesus and looking for ways to discredit him.

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Jesus wasn't looking to simply draw crowds. When the crowds came, he gave them the opportunity to move to a closer level, to become followers. And even among the followers there were discernible differences of commitment and connection. There were those who were his disciples, who recognized him as the Messiah and their teacher. There were the seventy whom he taught, appointed, and sent out as his messengers. There were the Twelve, his specially chosen few, to whom he gave his most intense attention. Even within the Twelve, there were three—Peter, James, and John—who were privileged to go with Jesus to places the others weren't allowed, and to see what the others didn't see. And among the three, John was the one who was his closest friend.

[Slide 8] *Relationships in the church*

Jesus *was* looking for people who wanted more than what the crowds wanted, who wanted a new life, who wanted to know God and to grow spiritually. The most important relationship in church is your relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the relationship that most determines whether or not you will grow spiritually. Without a vital, living connection to Jesus, spiritual growth is impossible and church is empty and meaningless.

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But the second most important set of relationships is your relationships with others in the congregation. If those connections are real, and deep, and strong, then you are in a place where you can really grow. And as a result, the church as a whole will grow.

When I first came to FCC almost three years ago, one of the things that God spoke to me was to strengthen anything that built relationships, that helped people

connect. I understood why that mattered. Not only was it a solid biblical principle, but I had personally seen the results when that had not happened.

In my previous pastorate, I followed a wonderful man who had done a tremendous job in a short time. He had come into the church when it was still suffering from the damage brought in by a charlatan who split the church. The congregation was weak and splintered and had dwindled down to a handful of people. Under his leadership, the church tripled in size in three years, and was once again somewhat vibrant.

But then, to his surprise, God moved him on to a different church. And after he was gone, nearly everyone who had come into the church during his tenure, left the church. Why? Because they were all connected *to him*, but not to each other. I don't blame him for that; I don't think it was his fault. But it was a very instructive observation for me. Pastors matter. Preaching and teaching matters; doctrine matters. But churches aren't held together by pastors or doctrine or preaching. Pastors and teaching and doctrine are important because they give the church a foundation and a framework. But what maintains the church is the life of God pouring out through the relationships in the congregation, the shared commitment to follow Jesus together, to live by his word, and to love one another.

[Slide 10]

What does church growth look like? I can tell you, if we're trying to measure church growth, we have to be using the right measurements, or we'll be back in the fun house, deceiving ourselves into thinking we look pretty good, when the opposite may be true.

For instance, there are some, perhaps many, who confuse activity for health. If the church calendar is full of events, if there are lots of things happening in the building, then we must be growing, right? Maybe. Possibly. But we might also be more like the college freshman whose social life is off the charts, while he is flunking his classes. Lots of activities; no healthy growth. Or like the store that has a "humongous blow-out sale" and no customers, because there isn't anything worth buying. Again, lots of noise, no real growth.

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It's also possible to be fooled by a huge increase in numbers. This is what happened to all of those churches with the enormous numbers on their membership rolls. Today, with more and more churches abandoning the idea of formal membership, the illusion doesn't come from the numbers on the rolls, but from the numbers attending the services.

If we only measure the number of people showing up (or the amount in the offering), we're setting ourselves up for failure. Huge increases in attendance in a short time might make us feel like we must be doing something right. And yet, we need to make sure that what we're experiencing is genuinely healthy spiritual growth. Rapid growth can be a sign of healthy development, like a growth spurt. Or it can be a sign of a deadly tumor.

[Slide 12]

So what are we looking for? How do we grow spiritually and healthily as a congregation? As people?

This morning we read from the early chapters of Acts—descriptions of the earliest days of the church, at its very beginning, when they saw explosive growth and genuine spiritual growth among the people. Let's look a little closer.

[Slide 13] *Acts 2: The birth of the church*

In Acts 2, we read about the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost, about seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus. What do we see?

First, the church began when Jesus' disciples, those who had recognized him as Messiah, God's Son, and the rightful king of Israel, began proclaiming to those around them that he had been raised from the dead. Those who heard them believed their testimony that Jesus was resurrected; they repented, committed themselves to Jesus as his disciples, were baptized in water, and received the promised Holy Spirit.

That first step can never be ignored or evaded. It cannot be minimized or "prettied up." As Peter says later in chapter four, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*" Genuine spiritual growth starts with the gospel—the good news that Jesus, the unique Son of God, has conquered the grave and ascended to the right hand of God the Father, and poured out his Spirit upon his church. There is salvation in no one and nothing else—not in church attendance, not in helping the poor, not in sponsoring lots of activities for the kids, or getting people to come into our building. All of those things can be helpful, but they are not in themselves signs of spiritual growth.

We are not a club looking for new members to boost our influence and our prestige, to increase our cash flow, or to help us put on more entertaining meetings, so that we feel better about ourselves compared to the others in town. We are a people on mission—followers with a message and the presence of God. And that is what distinguishes us from the clubs and associations around us.

[Slide 14]

The next thing we see in Acts 2 is that those who believed gathered together. “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” They gathered to learn what Jesus had taught the apostles. They spent time praying. And they shared their lives together, learning how to live as followers of Christ.

The Christian faith has never been about getting your ticket punched so you can go to heaven when you die and then continuing to live however you wanted. Christian faith has always been laying down the life you were living in order to take up a new one that is built on Jesus—his presence, his word, his life. And that new life brings us into the community of his people—the training ground, as it were, for how to live as someone indwelt by the Spirit of God and seeking to see the kingdom of God extended in the earth.

[Slide 15]

The early church was characterized by this kind of gathering—not just gathering in general, but gathering to learn about Jesus. That’s the vertical aspect of spiritual growth: growing in relation to God, getting connected to him by absorbing his word into your heart. You know, the world loves to mock us for studying the Bible. It’s one of the most common stereotypes that gets mocked in teen movies—the goody-goody kids going to Bible study instead of hanging out with the cool kids who are having all the fun. But the truth is, if you get into the word of God and let it get into you, you’ll see so much growth in your spiritual life, in your wisdom, in your discernment—including why you’re so much better off than the cool kids who are rushing down the path of self-destruction.

[Slide 16]

The rest of what the early church did is the horizontal aspect of spiritual growth. They gathered together and shared their lives, not just an hour. They took time to eat together, to get to know one another, to learn about how to care for one another. They shared fellowship—the Greek word is *koinonia*—a word that doesn’t mean eating pastries, but a sharing in common of one’s life. That meant they shared real life stuff, the good and the bad. They cheered for one another and wept with one another; they listened and helped and learned what it meant to love someone as Christ loved them. And they prayed. They prayed for one another, for the coming of the kingdom, and for those who were still on the outside, who were challenging and disputing with them about Jesus, who didn’t yet understand who he was or what he had done for them.

[Slide 17]

Acts 2 also shows us another indicator of spiritual growth: it was how the early church understood giving. They gave radically. They sold property and possessions in order to give to others who were in need. They viewed what they owned as belonging to God, and therefore as available to be used for whatever he might choose to do with it. That's what it means to be a steward. We talk about stewardship, and it's easy to think that stewardship is a code word for "giving to charity." But that's not it at all.

Stewardship is recognizing that God owns everything, everything I have. Everything I have is a gift to me from God, who remains the owner of my stuff—my house, my car, my clothes, my tools, my toys, my bank account, my IRA, everything. It's all his. I'm a steward, a manager, someone entrusted with the use of what belongs to someone else. When we talk about stewardship, it is so much more than giving money to the church. It is about our lives—every part of them—belonging to Jesus, so that we are living each day in accordance with his word, to accomplish his goals in us and in the world, and to demonstrate with our stewardship that we recognize God as our Master and King.

[Slide 18] *Stewardship: tithing and giving*

This is what I teach, what I believe the Scripture teaches, and it is what my wife and I practice and live, and what our church leadership affirms. Everything we have belongs to God, and we acknowledge that by following his directions that he gave us in Scripture. God said, "*The tithe is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord.*" (Leviticus 27:30). And again, "*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,*" says the Lord Almighty, "*and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.*" (Malachi 3:10).

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The tithe is ten percent of my earned income; it belongs to God, and he says to bring it into the storehouse. The New Testament tells us that the apostles took that to mean giving to the church, and that was the practice of the early church as described in the New Testament. So that's why we follow the method laid out in the Bible. Offerings on top of the tithe are free will offerings, given as you choose, at God's direction. Alms are giving that is for the relief of the poor. All three types of giving are encouraged in the Bible, and all three ought to be a part of our discipleship as followers of Christ.

[Slide 20]

But just so you understand—when we ask you for a stewardship commitment, that is not so that we can secure an obligation from you. It is simply

to help us plan, so that we can be responsible in what we commit to do as a church. Whether you give, how much you give, is entirely between you and God. We encourage everyone to embrace the Scriptural pattern of tithing and see the blessing that comes as a result. But we will never know if you do or don't. We have no desire to check up on you, nor any authority from God to do so, or any reason to do so, for that matter. I have heard of pastors who keep track of their leaders' giving, or even of the congregation's giving, and I have heard their reasons for thinking that they should do that. But frankly, I can't imagine why any pastor would ever do that. I don't trust myself to be mature enough to treat people the same if I know what they were giving. That's why there are protections in place so that I don't know who gives or how much they give. (By the way, that's also why I will shy away if you ask me to take your offering and put it in the box for you. I appreciate your trust, but I want to keep everything above board when it comes to the sacrificial giving of the people in this church.)

[Slide 21]

Preaching the gospel. Learning from Jesus. Sharing life together. Praying. Giving radically. These were the hallmarks of the early church, and the means that led to tremendous spiritual growth. There are two more that we see in these chapters of Acts, though we won't be able to give them adequate time today, only a brief mention. Each is worthy of several sermons, and perhaps we'll take them up this next year.

[Slide 22] *Power of the Holy Spirit*

The first is that the growth of the early church, both in terms of its growth in size and in spiritual development, was directly connected to the power of the Holy Spirit, including the demonstration of the Spirit's power through bona fide miracles.

In between the passages we read today lies Acts 3, in which we have the account of the dramatic healing of a forty-year old man who had been lame since his birth. That miracle led directly to an opportunity to preach the gospel to more people and then to even more opportunities that resulted in a great number of people coming to faith in Christ.

The power of the Holy Spirit is given to the church in order to transform us and enable us to minister to the world and to spread the message of Christ. Another way to say that is to say that the power of the Spirit accompanies the preaching of the gospel. It is when we do what he has told us to do that we see God coming alongside of us and performing great signs and wonders through the power of the Spirit that works within us and through us or even in spite of us!

But what about the guy or the gal who says, “*Show me a miracle and then I will believe.*”? I can only tell you that God has rarely, if ever, performed miracles to convince a skeptic. But he frequently does miracles to help persuade those who are wondering or to help those who are in need, like the lame man in chapter three of Acts. And he is most likely to do a miracle when we are faithfully declaring the message of the gospel to people who need to hear it.

[Slide 23] *Persecution*

The final thing I want to point out this morning from these chapters is that persecution followed the apostles when they obeyed Jesus’ command to preach the good news. Persecution is not a sign of spiritual maturity or an indicator of spiritual growth. Sometimes—often—it happens to people who are barely getting started in their faith. But persecution is what the economists would call a “trailing indicator.” Persecution is not a sign of spiritual growth, but it will follow spiritual growth. As you grow in your faith, as you grow in your commitment to Christ and to his church, you can expect that persecution will follow in some form. It may be nothing more serious than being left out of the office gossip, or not invited to certain dinner parties. Or having that co-worker roll her eyes when you talk about what you learned from discussing an episode of “The Chosen.” But it might cost you being ridiculed publicly. It might cost you a friendship, someone who feels threatened because you don’t want to participate in things that you used to do before you knew Jesus. It might cost you a job.

[Slide 24]

As our church grows, so long as we are faithfully following Jesus Christ, you can expect that the temperature will get turned up a bit. The spirits in Lawrence who oppose Christ will not sit idly by while we assault their strongholds. Jesus told his disciples that we would be hated because they followed him—not something anyone here would like to come true. But it will happen. And when it does, whatever it looks like, I’d like you to remember two things. (1) Jesus told us it would happen, so that we wouldn’t flip out. And he promised that he would not leave us. He will be with us. (2) The church around the world continues to go through far worse persecution than we have experienced. Let whatever struggles we face, great or small, remind us to pray for them—and to pray for the ongoing triumph of the gospel around the globe. As Tertullian famously wrote, “*The blood of the martyrs is seed.*”

[Slide 25]

So as we think about stewardship, remember that it’s not just a code word for giving to charity. It’s about recognizing that we have given our lives to Jesus

Christ, and we're living for him instead of for ourselves. That affects everything—it changes everything: what I do with my time, my money, my relationships, my purpose for living. Church membership is just another way to steward my relationship with Jesus and with his people. And giving is just another way to express my stewardship as a disciple of Jesus Christ. And both of them are tied together as ways for me to grow spiritually, and to help God's church grow as well.

[Slide 26]

*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*

*Benediction /Blessing*

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]*

*Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership*