

The Flourishing of the Church: *Built to Grow* Acts 1:1-8:3

Introduction: *Human flourishing* has become a bit of a buzzword phrase, with emphasis being placed on thriving and prospering. It is the idea that we seek for ourselves and help others find well being and happiness in a holistic concern for the spiritual, moral, physical, economic, material, political, psychological, and social context. The Bible is NOT against this desire and has actually called us to thrive in this world. The key to unlocking the answer to flourishing is found in how the aim or goal of life is presented. If the focus is on us alone, true happiness can never be found since we are by nature broken and flawed by sin. If our aim is the fulfilling our purpose in glorifying God, flourishing is not only possible but necessary. According to Psalm 19, nature flourishes when it fulfills its God glorifying aim by following its God-given course. Nature's aim is to glorify God. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Nature glorified God by running the course given to it by God. When the sun runs its course, meaning it rises and sets, its personified as something capable of happiness and joy. Happiness comes within nature's fulfillment of its divine calling.

This is not only huge for us, but huge as we think about the church. Individually we all seek after happiness, prosperity, and thriving, but when we look *down* for those things, we are ALWAYS left wanting. When we look *up* and realize that we are living for God's glory alone, we unlock the ability to know happiness and joy by fulfilling all that God has for us. When it comes to the church, she flourishes **when she operates according to her God given design and purpose**. We looked last week at how the church exists because God seeks to glorify Himself and we seek to make His glory known. The church is NOT AN ORGANIZATION but **an organism**. It is made up of individuals, not systems, programs and buildings. If this building went away, we would still be a church. If there was not a single program here, the church would still exist. When we mix that up we think that the church flourishes with BIGGER buildings and programs, missing the focus on **God's glory, the gospel, and people**.

The church was designed to grow. It was intended to spread out over the earth, to reach the unreached, to call the nations to repentance, to join the unified song of generations who were called to follow Christ. We want to look at **how the early church flourished**, to take note of what they focused on, what the essentials were, and how they moved from a group of people gathered to pray in a room to an unstoppable force that continues today (and into eternity). The book of Acts tells us what happened, the story of the church becoming visible. We are NOT trying to reproduce what happened, but glean the principles of how they operated in a hostile environment and **flourished**. We will look at **7 principles** that we still strive for today, and we'll take those and consider how these affect us.

Spirit-Filled Venture (Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 38; 4:8, 31; 5:3, 9; 6:10; 7:53)

At the close of Luke and beginning of Acts, the same story is told: *Jesus left*. The teacher, Master, and Lord had left the disciples, but He did not leave them alone. He told them to **wait for the promise of the Father** (1:4) where they would receive **power** when the Holy Spirit came (1:8). The book of Luke traced the life of Jesus on this earth. The baton was not only passed on to us as witnesses, but the focus of Acts is the **ministry of the Holy Spirit**. He is the consistent character throughout the book and into the present since He points us to Christ. So first we see that it was the Holy Spirit who enabled the early church to flourish:

Gifts to accomplish

At the celebration of Pentecost (50 days after Passover), the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and *filled them* (2:4) and enabled them to begin to speak in tongues. These allowed them to preach in the

native languages (dialekto) and tongue (glosso) of the many visitors to Jerusalem who spoke a myriad of different languages. This was **real language**, speaking in the dialects of the heart languages of people, from a group of uneducated men who did not even have Rosetta Stone. This was not ecstatic or angelic language but was given so that everyone gathered could hear the good news of the gospel. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to build up the Body of Christ, and still does today, just not in this unique way.

Boldness to carry out

There is nothing in Acts that connects the filling of the Holy Spirit with singing, raising hands, or expressive worship. That is often what we equate the working of the Spirit with today. However, the Spirit was abundantly active in the church to give them power to preach in the midst of opposition (4:7-8), astonishing all who hear uneducated men preaching about Jesus (5:13). The church was threatened yet did not back down. They were not popular with the leaders, they were not cool, nor were they trying to be accepted by everyone, but instead prayed for boldness to speak the word of God. *"And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word with boldness."* 4:31)

Dependency in Devoted Prayer (Acts 1:14, 24; 2:42; 4:31)

Prayer declares our dependency on God in everything. Prayer can easily become token (meals and bedtime), but that is categorically different than a **devotion to prayer**. We spend time working on those things we are devoted to: work qualifications, working out, hobbies, etc. Talk is cheap when it comes to talking about praying. Devotion to prayer means it is a significant allocation of time. In Acts, prayer was not secondary, but primary.

Before moving ahead

In the time between Jesus leaving and the Holy Spirit coming, there was undoubtedly some uncertainty and the hardest kind of time: *waiting*. What do we see the disciples doing: *"All these with one accord were **devoting** themselves to **prayer**, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers."* (1:14). Prayer is imperative *before* we begin great ventures, seeking God's face and preparing our hearts for what's coming, making sure we understand that we are seeking God's will, not our own.

Unified front

After being threatened, Peter and John came back to the church. They prayed to the **Sovereign Lord** to do whatever **His hand and His plan had predestined** (4:24, 28). They prayed for continued boldness in the face of opposition. They prayed that they would speak the word of God in the midst of threats. Their prayer was focused on God's will and their mission. This meant that they were walking in step with each other, not arguing about temporal things or the runnings of an organization. Prayer keeps us centered and focused on our mission, not on all the distractions presented to us.

Restored Witnesses Required (Acts 1:12-26)

At the end of Luke, the twelve disciples lost one of their number as Judas carried out his dastardly deed, selling His Lord for 30 pieces of silver. Not only this, but each of the disciples had run away at the crucifixion, fearing for their own lives and reputations, leaving their Savior to die alone. Not only did Jesus restore Peter in relationship (John 21) and the rest, but in the beginning of Acts, Jesus restored their numbers. Through prayer, the leading of the Holy Spirit, and the casting of lots, Matthias was chosen to replace Judas, giving them a full team. In other words, the men chosen to lead the early church were redeemed, reconciled, and redeemed men.

This is an important point. The true church is made up of redeemed humanity, those called out of darkness into light who belong to Christ through repentance and resulting forgiveness. There will

always be those who "hang out" with the church, having been befriended and served by the church. But just as someone can only join my family through marriage or adoption, only those who truly know and are known by Christ are a part of His church. Its much easier to be a part of a corporation, since there are many entry gates. However, with God's church, there is only one: Jesus Christ. Commitment, growth, and flourishing in and of God's church is when true believers live out their restored reality. This means that if you have not repented of your sin and believed that Jesus died, rose again, and is now Lord of your life, **today is a day to respond IN FAITH to this reality.**

Clear Vision of Mission (Acts 1:8; 2:38; 3:19)

This is perhaps one of the hardest things for any church to achieve. Clarity in vision seems like something every church chases but too few find it. In the early church, there was no dichotomy of their mission with each other and their mission in the world, no dissension between worship and evangelism, in caring inward and reaching outward. They were clear on the message of the gospel, the priority of preaching, and that **every believer was a disciple maker.** How did they achieve this?

Preaching the Word

There was one source of preaching and teaching, whether in the church (2:42) or to the lost: It was God's Word alone. We talk about relevancy today, which usually is a code word for putting the Bible lower and elevating modern thinking. These early witnesses of the church were in a hostile place with skeptical people who had **heard it all** concerning the OT. Yet it was the OT that they went back to in order to explain God's plan and Jesus' work. **Peter's first sermon** was based on Joel 2:28-32, referencing Psalm 16:8-1 and 110:1. His later sermon (3:11-26) cited Deut. 18:15, 18, 19 and Genesis 22:18. Stephens sermon which got him killed alluded to Exodus 3 and 32 as well as Amos 5:25-27. Notice a couple of things here. **1)** They each gave *explanation* to Scripture. **2)** Their sermons were eerily similar, even though they were given in different contexts by different men **3)** They were not *formulaic* like a script, but came from the same source. The flourishing church believed in the power of the Word of God to change lives, even though there were *always* some who disbelieved and others who threatened to kill. When the Word of God is less than primary, the church loses clarity and power.

Proclaiming Repentance (2:38; 3:19; 5:31)

Jesus left a simple message: *preach repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus to all nations.* Seems so simple, but it is so difficult to keep on point. We want to preach a version that does not call people to change, or offers the benefits of salvation without yielding our lives to the Master. We want God and heaven but we do not want to die to our own life. But the early church consistently called the stubborn masses to **repent**: When asked "*what shall we do*", Peter answered, "**Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.**" (2:38). Later he declared, "Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out." There was NO GOSPEL without repentance, and no salvation apart from it. Repentance was the word, was the response of faith by sinners, and was the entry gate into forgiveness and the church.

Unified in Heart (Acts 2:42, 44; 4:32-34; 6:1-6)

Care for each other

One of the marks of a family is its commitment and loyalty to each other. No one messes with family, and there is nothing like the reaction when someone does something to my mom, daughter, or wife. The church is not simply a gathering for a few hours on a Sunday, or for some of us 1.3 Sundays a month if there's nothing better to do. Church is a family, a community committed to each other. I just talked

to a man the other day who was looking for counseling but did not want to go to his church because they would then know the crud in his life. The church is where we know the crud and still love! We can be fully known and fully loved! The early church cared for each other like family does. In Acts 6, men were assigned to help a certain segment of **widows** who were being neglected. Everyone was cared for, not just the best, the leaders, or the strong. If the world sees our love and sees something different (John 13:35), they should see us caring for each other.

Sharing with one another

This care went beyond word and service, it went to hard earned dollars. They **shared all things in common** (2:44), there was no needy person among them (4:34), and when someone had extra means, they would sell it off and lay it at the apostles feet for distribution (4:35). This feel so weird to us because it seems like a form of government we grew up confronting. But because there was clarity of mission, unity of heart, and true commitment to each other, there was a willingness to **lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth** (Matt. 6:21). This came from a recognition that all things belong to God, and meant a releasing of personal ownership, allowing the leaders of the church to distribute to the real needs of the church.

Embracing of Suffering (Acts 5:41)

Suffering stinks. I like comfort and shy away from pain. But suffering is part of God's plan for the gospel to go forth. Paul was instructed that he was going to preach the gospel and suffer wherever he went (Acts 9:15-16). The early church understood this far greater than we do, and because of this, embraced suffering as part of life. The early church faced **threats** (4:21), **imprisonment** (5:18), **intimidation** (5:27-28), **beatings** (5:40), and **stoning** (7:58). What was their response?

Rejoicing in suffering

After getting beaten for simply proclaiming the name of Jesus, the apostles response was extraordinary: **"Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted WORTHY to suffer dishonor for the name."** They did not complain. They did not question their methods. They did not cry out to God for leaving or forsaking them. They REJOICED for being counted WORTHY! If this does not prove Christians are weird, this should seal the deal. They knew this was part of the deal, and were not trying fit in to the culture or gain comfort. In order to proclaim an offensive gospel, they had to be willing to take the predictable response. When they suffered for being obedient and loving, they were able to embrace it knowing this was God's will, thus it was a means of joy and happiness.

Scattering in suffering

Suffering was not only a means of delivering the gospel, it was a means of spreading the gospel. For the first few years of its visible existence, the church stayed in Jerusalem. The church reached out, but only locally or those who travelled to them. In order to accomplish Jesus' command to reach the ends of the earth, it would mean **some would have to leave, some would have to go, and some would have to move**. We see the church releasing missionaries in Acts 13, but before this, God used **persecution** as the driving force:

*"And Saul approved of his execution (Stephen). And there arose on that day a **great persecution** against the church in Jerusalem, and there were all **scattered** throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles". (Acts 8:1)*

God used seemingly negative circumstances to spread the church, with those who left Jerusalem starting the church in Antioch (11:19). This means that when God moves us from here, when we are scattered, He does so with a larger picture in view. We are committed to sending/releasing some to

plant churches here and overseas. We are committed to sending out pastors who will equip other churches. And we are committed to the belief that when God scatters the Schuster and Kocsis families, He's doing it to grow His church and extend its reach. So in this, we rejoice (even though it stinks a little bit).

Fearing the Lord Drives (Acts 2:43; 5:11)

As awe inspiring worship

"And awe (fear) came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." (2:43)

Finally, the flourishing of the church is driven out of a proper, faithful, and continual fear of the Lord. Fearing God is reverential awe, a sense of hopeful dread knowing you are in the presence of terrifying greatness yet can come close to Him. As the church gathered and functioned as a family, eating, praying, and studying together, the glue that kept all of this together in worship was the fear that they all had for God. Fear seems like a strange term for worship, especially if we think of worship in terms of self and how we feel. However, fear is exactly what is needed to worship properly. Miracles were happening daily, which is NOT what we experience. Yet, a sense of awe and fear is present when we understand that God is in control of all things. When He acts, heals, saves, provides, answers, and cares for us, we see all of life as a gift from His hand, remembering that if He does not do this, we have nothing.

As a catalyst for growth

"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things." (5:11)

But fearing the Lord is not our basic drift, since we typically think about ourselves first and God second. In Acts 5, there is a story about Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple who became an example to the whole church, past and present. The church was selling property and laying the proceeds at the apostles feet who distributed them to those in need. However, this couple decided to do what we do far too often. They sold land and brought it to the church with the understanding that they gave the *whole amount*. They wanted it both ways: outward credit for giving, but private enjoyment of money. The truth is that giving part of the proceeds would have been acceptable, but not the credit for it.

The story lays out that each spouse, in turn, were killed in front of all the church for **lying** to the Holy Spirit. Think of that! How often have we done that? Not only did they deserve this fate (as we all do), but it provided a positive warning to the church, filling them with **great fear**. When we lost this type of fear, we begin to drift away from holiness and into self-indulgence, meaning our joy is diminished and our effectiveness is nullified.

Results:

- **2:47** - The Lord increased to their number day by day those who were being saved
- **4:4** - Many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about 5000
- **5:11** - And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things
- **5:42** - And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ

- **6:7** - And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many priests became obedient to the faith

Takeaways:

- We will **devote ourselves to prayer** - prayer for God's guidance for the future, to develop and send leaders, and to prepare the harvest
- We will **seek to send** - Not only send people to other churches, but start other churches, in neighborhoods and communities that need the gospel
- We will **continue to care for our own** - We will seek to take care of our own physically, but especially care for their spiritual condition
- We will **preach the word** - Get used to it folks, we will teach and preach God's word, expositionally, because this is the most effective way to continue to fear the Lord and have our heart and mind transformed.
- We will be **relentless and continual to move forward** - We are far from done. We are built to grow. We've been around for 50+ years, and the best(and hardest) is yet to come. We are **committed, convinced, and convicted** to see this church thrive, to flourish as we live out all that God has for us, seeking to glorify Him and live out our time joyfully.