

THE CHURCH – UNIFIED

Acts 2:41-47

How do we typically define success? One possible definition is simply “to accomplish an objective.” That should raise the question “What are the important considerations for being successful?” A good starting place is to know the objective.

If the subject of consideration is the church, then we need to define the objective or mission of the church. The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us that we are here to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But, how do we do that? We glorify God and enjoy Him by living each day in submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ and by using the spiritual gifts that He has given to us to extend His kingdom. The context for exercising these gifts is in the local church, where each member works for the growth of the body, to build itself in love. We can make the argument that coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together leads to success. The recurring word that we see is “together.” Being “together” would be like saying that everyone is on the same page or that we are unified.

The ultimate goal or objective is to glorify God. In fact, the purpose of all creation is to bring glory to God. Specifically, we say the church is the body of believers through whom God is working to extend His kingdom or expand the rule of God and obedience to His commands and precepts throughout the world. We can make the argument that God (as Creator) is over all things and that He is sovereignly in control. However, the practical reality is that most people on this planet do not submit themselves to His sovereign rule or “lordship.” In consideration of that, the idea of expanding the kingdom should be considered with regard to the nominal and practical extensiveness and to the internal integral intensiveness of that kingdom expansion.

Nominally, there are segments of the world’s population that could be named to be “Christian” and there are others that are Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, atheistic, etc. These “others” are population segments that are opportunities for expanding the kingdom where there is little or no influence of Godly precepts. In the areas that could be named “Christian,” there are pockets of such populations that put the principles and precepts into practice and other segments of people who are more or less familiar with the basics of Christianity but these concepts have no “practical” impact on the way they live. This segment represents those who would be part of the “practical” expansion opportunity. For any who identify nominally and practically with Christianity, the expansion of the kingdom should take the form of intensifying (strengthening and deepening) the internal faith and ability so that these virtues become an integral part of who they are as members of the Body of Christ.

It is fairly clear that we would see ourselves as being in the category of those who are nominally and practically Christian and that we are making efforts to strengthen and deepen our faith and abilities. While we would get general agreement that this is a good thing, we need to ask “how should our improved faith and ability be used within the context of God’s purpose for the church?” An obvious answer would be so that we can be effectively used to expand the “extent” of the kingdom so that the prayer that Jesus taught of “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” can become a practical reality.

Let’s look at how the “expansion” took place from the very start of the church in Jerusalem that was birthed on the day of Pentecost ten days after Christ ascended.

Devoted – 2:41-42

⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand

souls.⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:41-42 (NASB95)

The impact of the power of God that was released upon those initial followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost drew people to question what was happening and allowed Peter to share the gospel message in such a way that it brought conviction and willingness to accept the truth of the message.

There are several things that seem to be immediately obvious regarding the early church and we could argue that some of these same characteristics would be applicable today. The first was that there was something distinctive about this group that was recognizable to those who were not part of the group. This distinctiveness was related to the presence of God in the ministry of the Holy Spirit working through the members of the church. It was not immediately discernable to those on the outside whether this distinctiveness was positive or negative. One thing for sure was that the coming and the presence of the Holy Spirit changed their status so that they no longer were able to just blend into the surrounding culture.

When something out of the ordinary happens, then an explanation is usually needed to put the event into proper perspective. Peter related the happening that the people had seen to a prophecy with which they were familiar and to recent current events that were related to what had gotten their attention. The explanation that was given also presented the people with a choice of destiny that involved "opposing what God was doing" or "becoming a part of His kingdom." That day, three thousand people recognized the truth and took a step of faith to become part of this community of believers.

That step of faith consisted, of course, in believing the message as truth and putting their trust for salvation in the work of atonement that Christ's death had accomplished for all who would receive it. It also included an internal and an external action on their part. The internal action was "repentance" or a radical turning in their world view and their attitude. The external expression was seen in these being baptized. The baptism ceremony was a public statement or testimony that marked a change in their life. It is my guess that those who saw the baptisms of these three thousand people did not know the full spiritual significance of what this ritual meant.

There was an immediate change in the everyday priorities of these new believers. It was not life as usual. We see that they were eager to learn about this new relationship with God through Christ and to cultivate new relationships with the other believers. Life in the community of the believers was characterized by learning, fellowship, and prayer.

We are not told the details how the learning/teaching was accomplished. We can see from Luke's account that they gathered together in the Temple and in homes. Those who were with Jesus for the past three and a half years were involved in teaching which we could assume was enabled by the Holy Spirit bringing to their minds past events and teachings they had experienced along with being able to reference those to prophecies related to the coming of the Messiah. The historical and religious background of these new Jewish believers should have been helpful in their understanding and being able to put all this new information into proper perspective.

The importance of fellowship in the church was that it created an environment of support, mutual encouragement and reinforcement of the learning experience they were encountering. Some have suggested that the "breaking of bread" was an essential part of the fellowship and it may have been mentioned as being what Luke meant by the term fellowship. Coming together for a meal seems to be what most Christians today think of when we hear the term fellowship. In today's world of superficiality, it is difficult to really get to know another person simply because we don't spend time with others. If the church is to be a functioning, interdependent body of

believers, then we need to know each other.

Some have suggested that the terminology “breaking of bread” was meant to describe an observation of the Lord’s Supper that was done in conjunction with the evening meal of Christians during this time. That would imply that they took the words of Christ in Luke 22:19 after He had broken the bread “do this in remembrance of Me” and put a literal interpretation on these words. It would not be surprising to see such an expression of their devotion and enthusiasm. Wouldn’t it be good if we let the simple, everyday activities of life remind us of our salvation and cause us to be thankful for all that God has done for us?

Prayer was a natural part of their lives and provided an opportunity for close spiritual fellowship or communion with God. They had opportunities to learn from the apostles, to fellowship with each other, to gain physical nourishment from the shared meals with other Christians and to experience a corporate worship experience in observance of the Lord’s Supper. Prayer was an opportunity to experience these same things in a one-to-one encounter with God. As they would commune with God during their prayer time, they could experience revelation from God regarding the truths that had been taught by the apostles. They would be strengthened through the fellowship with God during prayer and these encounters would be spiritual nourishment for them as they matured spiritually. The time of prayer would allow them to experience a deeper worship and renewal of their devotion than what might happen in a corporate worship observance.

Together – 2:43-47a

⁴³ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. Acts 2:43-47a (NASB95)

They grew as others joined them and found their needs being met in miraculous ways. They knew they were living in the presence of God. The sick and lame were healed, evil spirits were cast out, the dead were brought back to life. These wonders and signs were evidences of the “gifts of the Spirit” that Paul wrote about in his letter to the church at Corinth several decades later. Jesus had told the apostles that they would receive power with the coming of the Holy Spirit and this power was demonstrated as Christians simply believed and stepped out in faith to exercise the gifts that God had provided.

Just as we should examine what we do in light of the objectives and goals of what we are trying to accomplish, we should apply the same examination to what God was doing through these early Christians in the church. Since His purpose for the church was and is to extend His kingdom, then we could ask if those “signs and wonders” were beneficial to accomplishing that objective? An honest appraisal would be that these were effective as they helped people realize that “what was happening” was of divine origin and that it was not something that could be done just by human efforts.

Are there any obvious conclusions that we could draw from the lack of effective expansion of the kingdom and the absence of the operation of Spiritual gifts in and through the church today? If the current objectives for our churches are to build buildings, hire staff and present a program and community opportunities throughout each week, then we probably don’t need wonders and signs to get that done.

The early church was also a sharing and caring community where the grace of God was expressed in generosity one to another. Many times in trying to analyze what was happening in

this area, some will argue that this was done out of necessity since those who became part of this group (the church) likely lost their jobs and were being persecuted by other Jews. The implication of that argument would be that if such hardships and persecutions were not present, then sharing and generosity would not be needed as much. The problem with that argument is that we see in the first part of verse 47 that the initial response of the Jewish community to this group of Christ followers was that they had “found favor” with all the people. Persecution came later. The motivation was not so much a response to oppression but was coming from genuine care for those in need.

When Jesus taught during His earthly ministry He made a conscious effort to get people to start seeing spiritual realities and not just focus on the physical world that tends to demand our attention. Most people still are greatly influenced by physical world realities rather than spiritual world realities when priorities are determined. Clearly, these early believers had reevaluated their priorities and focused them on what would help accomplish the objectives of the church. That resulted in doing what was necessary with the resources that God had provided for them to extend the kingdom. So why don't we see such prioritization among church members today? Could it be that resources that are given wind up in efforts that are not focused on the objectives that God has set for His church?

Growing – 2:47b

^{47b} And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:47b (NASB95)

There is no evidence that the early church ever had a door-to-door visitation and shared the good news with people in Jerusalem. Their testimony started with the change in their individual lives and the demonstrated power of the Holy Spirit working through them in the context of the church. Apparently, this was enough to attract people who would ask the same question the three thousand had asked on the day of Pentecost: “What shall we do?” The answer was fairly simple, and had not changed since when they first heard it. Repent and immerse yourself in the character and nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Those who acted in faith to accept the truth of the good news of salvation through the work of Christ on the cross were described as “those who were being saved.” This should remind all of us that we are all “a work in progress” and that being born of the Spirit and being justified by grace through faith is the initial part of the process by which God is using all things in life to transform us into the image of Christ Who is the express image of God.