

When a Plan Comes Together

Acts 2 / Eph. 4

Intro. Finish this sentence with me... *"I love it when...a plan comes together."* I think many of us are breathing a sigh of relief and saying things like this after our week of VBS...especially Pastor Dale! What an awesome job he did heading up the program this summer. Do you know who really loves it when a plan comes together? The Lord! Yet unlike our plans, His always come together! **Psa. 33:11 - ...the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.** But when the dust settles, I'm always overwhelmed by the spirit of unity and cooperation that makes our VBS such a great success. I've said this before, but if ever there is a time when a church works the way God intends it to, it's during VBS. With one objective, everybody pitches in to do their part. From those whose efforts are behind the scenes and unnoticed to those in more upfront positions, the program has once again come together in a wonderful way.

Before this vivid illustration has a chance to escape our minds, I want to seize the moment and be reminded of what the NT says about how the Church is to work and grow as it works. This AM I want to support a main idea three ways. The main idea is this..."Christ has designed His Church to function and grow by way of *obedience / unity / and maximum participation.*

I. Precedents for Church Function and Growth – Acts 2, 6

The Book of Acts provides the historical precedent for the function and growth of the Church. During the first century, the Church grew by leaps and bounds. Thousands of people were influenced to trust Jesus Christ through the witness that began with about 120 disciples.

As many have observed, the growth of the church in Acts was never a stated objective. There were no church growth seminars. Instead, growth is consistently reported as the consequence or result of certain conditions. In gardening we know that growth best occurs when conditions are favorable. In the same way, growth is the normal result of a church that functions according to God's design. It's the blessing He adds when His people are spiritually healthy and using the grace we were given.

Let's turn to **Acts 2**. Notice the last words of **Acts 2:47 - And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.** Jesus taught that those who come to the Lord are drawn by the Holy Spirit. The Lord is the only One who can save people and add them to His Church. While God worked through the planting and watering efforts of Paul and Apollos, **only God...makes things grow.** (**I Cor. 3:7**) The Church can organize crusades / have pew-packer Sundays / and do all sorts of things to get people in the doors, but only God has the power to save and add people to His Church. His inner work in individual hearts something we can't do.

But here in **Acts 2:47**, God's pleasure in saving people and adding them to His church is stated as a *result or consequence* of conditions stated in the preceding verses of this chapter. The conjunction **And** indicates this is the case. Church growth occurred as the result of certain other conditions. Let's quickly review what was happening in this first century church.

- 1. Acts 2:1 - When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2:44-46 - All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 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.** Notice the repetition of the word **together**. Among the nucleus of those already saved there existed a clear sense of oneness and togetherness. Through personal sacrifice and sharing they expressed their devotion to the Lord and to each other. VBS brings so many of us **together** for a couple of weeks of concentrated service.

2. **Acts 2:4 - All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...** The nucleus of disciples who were instrumental in the growth of the Church were filled with the Holy Spirit. These believers were obedient and yielded to God so that He might work in them and through them.
3. The Word of God was the focal point of the message they proclaimed. The objective of their preaching was to point people to Jesus. Even through the special miracle of tongues, their purpose was to proclaim God's truth. **Acts 2:8, 11 - Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?... we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"** In **vs.16-21** the phenomena of tongues speaking was explained as the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Then to support the uniqueness of Jesus who was resurrected from the dead and ascended to heaven, they quoted the Psalms in **vs. 25-28** and again in **vs. 34, 35**. The point is this...the Word of God was central to their message. What a thrill it was last week to hear God's Word taught at so many levels from nearly every room of our building and outdoors as well! Remember, **the word of God is living and active - Heb. 4:12** God's power to effect change in lives is released as His Word is proclaimed.
4. **Acts 2:42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** We see from this verse that constant attention was given to certain spiritual activities. These first believers understood the necessity of being personally and vitally connected to Jesus Christ by the inflow of His Word / through fellowship with other believers / through the refreshing benefits of communion / and through regular communication with God. This is a picture of spiritual branches drawing nourishment from the vine. **(Jn.15)** Do you know for whom these spiritual resources become increasingly important? For those actively serving. You see Jesus really meant it when He said, **"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."** - Jn. 15:5
5. **Acts 2:46, 47 - 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.** A spirit of gladness and enthusiasm effervesced from all they were doing as everybody shared in Gospel ministry. I sensed that last week? VBS is exhausting and we all do our share of moaning about it. But night after night the atmosphere was electric with a sense of satisfaction as we served the Lord Jesus together. We praise God for this unusual opportunity to serve so many neighbors. And like the first believers, we enjoy the favor of so many who love to bring their families to VBS at Mayfair.

I'm sure other characteristics could be mentioned but I think these are the main ones.

And once again, notice the end of **v. 47 - And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.** The earlier verses report what the believers did. Now **v.47** reports what God did. The conditions present in this first church favored growth. As a result, the Lord's blessing was added as many people turned to Jesus Christ.

I read recently of an outspoken lady who was part of a group that was touring the famed Westminster Abbey in London. When the guide asked the tourists if anybody had any questions, this lady asked... *"has anybody been saved here recently?"* Acting as though the question was completely irrelevant to the tour's purpose, the guide said she didn't think so. When the church forsakes its original design and purpose...when it becomes a country club / an activities center / a political headquarters / a monument or anything else...it forfeits its relevance. When facilities are not being used to proclaim the the Gospel and God's people aren't united around the task of reaching others, something is seriously wrong. The church has strayed from its original design and function.

In **Acts 6:7** we find a similar statement to the one in **Acts 2:47**. In the situation reported here, the unity of the Spirit was threatened by an internal problem. The culprit causing the problem was actually growth and increased numbers. **6:1 - In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.** As the number of believers increased, those involved in ministry were stretched and no doubt, stressed. The growing work load drew the Apostles away from the priorities of prayer and the ministry of the Word. Some the church ministered to felt neglected and overlooked. They felt they were not getting their "fair share". The situation was ripe for a split between Greek speaking believers and Hebrew speaking believers. But the Lord gave wisdom to the apostles (the spiritual leaders at that time). An amendment was made to their church constitution. (Funny I should mention that this AM!)

According to this adjustment to the way things were done, a volunteer committee of seven men was established to share in the work of the ministry. These men were the first deacons. Though challenged by the threat of division, the crisis was averted and the unity of the Spirit prevailed. Resulting from this peaceful solution, **v.7 says, So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.** Once again, growth and evangelistic success was a result that accompanied certain conditions. When boiled down to basics, I see three conditions that stand out in both of these passages. These three conditions are key to the function and growth of the Church.

1. The first condition is the **obedience** of the disciples. Jesus said wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Spirit and that's what they did. Jesus said, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem first, and that's what they were. Together, these first believers were busy about the work Jesus gave them to do. They responded to His Word with obedience.
2. The second condition I see is the **unity of the Spirit**. This first church moved forward like a unit, like a single organism. There was harmony among them even though the group was so diverse. They loved each other and met each others needs. Before Jesus was crucified He prayed specifically that unity like this would bind His followers together. **Jn. 17:20-23 - "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.** In His High Priestly prayer Jesus revealed that unity of heart and mind that is so essential to effective evangelism. He prayed for complete unity so the world would know the reality of the God's love revealed in the Incarnation. Listen...the effectiveness of our testimony to Christ's power to change lives hinges on our unity...our ability to resolve conflicts and work together as a team.
3. The third condition we see is **maximum participation** in Lord's work. The membership of this first church was actively involved. You can't miss this when you read the book of Acts. Even when persecuted, they didn't give stop serving Christ. It was their priority. To the Christian of the first century, being saved was the beginning of a new occupation. A whole new set of values and priorities had opened up to them and serving the Lord was now uppermost in their thinking.

Like the way the wall was built in Nehemiah's day, **the people had a mind to work** and everybody was involved. That's not to say everyone did exactly the same thing. But with the gifts the Lord gave them and the enablement God's Holy Spirit, everybody got involved.

And get this...not a single one of these believers had a seminary degree! I'm all for education when it results in mobilization. But education that leaves us idling in neutral isn't worth much. So with unity of purpose, these first believers gave themselves to kingdom work and the Lord blessed their efforts. So the Book of Acts presents the precedent for the function and growth of the Church. The vitality of the Church was seen in the obedience / unity / and maximum participation by those who were saved.

II. Pictures of Church Function and Growth – I Cor. 12

Like a photo album, the NT compares the church to several different things. Jesus compared His Church to a building when He told Peter, **"I will build My Church" - Matt. 16:18** For 20 centuries Jesus has been doing just that. Through the hands and hearts of believers, the Savior has been reaching out to save and bring sinners into His kingdom. The image of a building appears again in **I Pet. 2:5 - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house...**

Among other images, like a **brotherhood** and a **bride**, the image that appears most frequently in the NT compares the Church to a **body**. Paul used this image extensively in **I Cor. 12**. In **12:27** he wrote, **Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it**. The fact that the Church is a body reminds us that we are a living organism as opposed to an organization. This is underscored by the fact that we share a common life. **12:13** says, **For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink**. This spiritual oneness we enjoy was accomplished by our common salvation experience. It's the internal basis for our cohesiveness.

Even though the body of Christ is made up of many different parts and each has different functions, each part is vitally important to the function of the whole. According to Paul, a local body or church is not formed by evolution or by chance. **v.18** says, **But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be**. All of this is reminiscent of David's psalm of praise for the wonders of his own physical body. In **Psalms 139:13-16** he acknowledged that his physical body was the product of God's creative activity. In **vs.15** and **16** he spoke of how God secretly fashioned each part of his body in his mother's womb. Medical science is just beginning to understand the mysteries of the DNA code that determines our individual characteristics. Yet just like our physical bodies, the Body of Christ is **fearfully and wonderfully made**. Each believing member is written in God's book and included in the church for some useful purpose. With heartfelt intensity Paul urges us to preserve unity as we recognize the essential and functional necessity of every part.

On July 5th, the US Women's soccer team won the FIFA World Cup defeating Japan 5-2. In that thrilling final match, midfielder Carli Lloyd scored three goals! Yet as vital as Carli's contribution was to her team, she couldn't have scored even one goal without her team mates. This is precisely the point Paul makes in **I Cor. 12**. Each member, no matter how significant or insignificant they may seem...each one is important to the function of the whole. No part is unimportant or useless. That's because each of us who believe has been given grace to contribute something. And like our human bodies, the body only functions well when every part does its part. Clearly implied throughout the NT is the fact that every believer should be serving the Lord with the gifts and talents he/she received. The portrait of the church functioning and growing is spoiled by the uninvolved member. Instead of advancing as a healthy unit, a body with non-functioning members just limps along as best it can. Instead of a vibrant, growing assembly, the church of today is often hampered by a lack of commitment and inactivity. Often there are more spectators in grandstands than participants on the playing field. Only a minority are suited up for active involvement. Yet from what we learn in the NT, every member is a necessary functioning part of the Body. This is what was so thrilling about VBS. Well over 100 of you signed up to contribute something to the ministry. But VBS is a one week a year event. Our challenge as leaders is to solicit a greater degree of involvement year round.

So when we have our ministry fair on Sun., Aug. 22, I hope you'll come anxious to sign on to some ministry or area of service. When we serve together as a team it's a thing of beauty that brings praise and blessing to God. It's something God approves and adds His blessing to.

III. Practical Exhortations for Church Function and Growth – Eph. 4

Church growth has virtually become a science in recent years. Growth specialists write books and travel the country giving lectures on the mechanics of church growth. Some of their material is helpful but I think some of it promotes growth that is artificial and short-lived. With all the information available, I'm convinced nothing improves on the Word of God. The N.T. Epistles contain timeless principles that thoroughly explain how the church is to function and experience growth that is genuine as opposed to growth that is artificial...and fruit that lasts as opposed to fruit that is temporary.

Eph. 4 introduces the practical part of Paul's letter. Please turn to that chapter. Notice that unity is the first subject Paul addressed in **vs.1-3**. **As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.** The **unity of the Spirit** is essential to the healthy and productive functioning of a church. Few situations are more counter-productive to our purpose of making Christ known than when Christians collide and divide. If we claim to have the answers to the world's problems, our answers had better work here first...don't you think?

So **v.3** says, **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.** The spiritual unity God has created among His people is certain to be tested and challenged in all sorts of ways. So every speaks to believer **v.3** and says, **make every effort to keep** or preserve **the unity** God has created. In other words, do everything within your power to promote peace and ward off divisiveness. Satan's strategy is to divide and conquer. We play right into His game plan when fail to **be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.**

Next the sevenfold basis of our unity is stated in **vs.4-6**. Like rebar in a concrete slab, these spiritual ties were established to bind us together and keep us from splintering.

But notice **v. 7...to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.** Why is God pleased...and why does He add His blessing when there is unity and maximum participation among His people?...Because **to each one of us grace has been given.** To every saved person God has sovereignly given the desire and the ability to serve Him in some capacity. When the Lord sees us serving Him in the unity of His Spirit I imagine Him saying, *"I love it when a plan comes together!"* In fact, **Psa. 133:1** says, **How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!**

I've never yet met a Christian who couldn't do something to serve the Lord...and do you know what?... I never will! Johnny Farese lived a few doors down from my parents when they lived in Boca Raton, FL. Sometimes I would visit him when I was there visiting them. Until Johnny went home to be with the Lord in March of 2014, this man who was bedridden and completely paralyzed for most of his life maintained a vibrant internet ministry of spiritual encouragement. You can read his life story on line. But here's what Johnny's pastor said at his memorial service. *"...Johnny was incredibly useful to his local church and the global church, even with a body that was almost completely incapacitated. His life is a rebuke to me, but a testament to God's incredible power in giving a man the ability to overcome crushing weakness, and fill him with a spirit of love and service rather than bitterness and regret."* Wow! Most of us are blessed with health and strength. We have years of life ahead. Do you have a plan to use these gifts for God and His kingdom?

God has called us and gifted each of us to serve Him. But His grace can be ignored / neglected, received in vain / and not put to use. Quite often that's what happens. The Body is crippled / hindered / and paralyzed by believers who don't put to work the grace they've been given. **Rom. 12:6-8** says, People gifted to teach, ought to do it. Men gifted to lead and administrate should set aside disagreements and excuses and do what God has equipped them to do. Those with the gift of giving / helps / or mercy should seek practical ways to express these gifts.

But notice what happens when a church functions according to God's design. **Eph. 4:11-16 - It was He (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.** Here Paul describes the results or consequences when the plan comes together...the results in a Church that really works. What begins with the leaders doing their part to equip the congregation continues as every supporting ligament" does its part. The result is the growth and the building up of the body. Through these verses of **Eph. 4**, we again hear God's call to **obedience / unity / and maximum participation**. This is the plan. Our task is to follow it and watch as God gives the increase.

So let me wrap this up. Even though VBS requires many weeks of preparation, the program itself occupies only 1 week out of 52. Amen? But during that week the church really works like it was designed to work. Now it's unreasonable to think we can wear matching tee shirts and go all year at the pace we go during VBS. Some of us would fall over dead! But think about this...can't we use the formula that makes VBS work as a template for the rest of the year? The formula for blessing and growth all year long is *obedience / unity / and maximum participation*. God is pleased when we join hands and hearts in the work He's given us to do. With fall approaching, it's time again to gear up for another school year. Many workers are needed. It's that dreaded season of recruitment for some of us...but it shouldn't be that way. Instead of hunting for helpers, we ought to be training the willing. What privilege in all the world is greater than the privilege of serving the King of kings?

Do you how God called me to pastoral ministry? When I surrendered to Him, He began to ask me a series of questions like the one I just asked you. He asked, "*Will you do this for Me?*" I didn't always respond immediately, but I said, "*Yes, Lord. I don't feel up to it, but I'll try.*" Then when I responded, He asked me again, and again and again. By His grace and wisdom, each "yes" led me deeper and deeper in the work He planned for me to do. I don't say that to frighten you...but to encourage you.

So I would challenge you this morning to make plans now to say "yes" to some ministry the Lord may ask you to be involved in. Since we don't find time, plan now to **make time to serve the Lord**. Make plans now to be a functioning part of His kingdom program. If you need ideas of how you might become involved just put your listening ears on, hang around the ministry fair the 22nd, and ask questions of those in leadership.

My premise this morning has been this, God's plan comes together when there is obedience / unity / and maximum participation on our part. Where these are present, blessing and growth are the result. To the glory of God, let's put this formula to the test.