

I think it would be safe to say that we all want our church to grow. We have had a challenging few years through transition and pandemic, and our church is not as big as it was a few years ago. But the growth we want to see is more than just a greater number of rear ends in seats. We could fill up every seat in this church and still have little Kingdom impact. I'm talking about a growing number of people who call this place home, who call each other family, who gather to worship our God together intimately, who pursue their God-given purpose with one another in community, and who impact the world in the name of Jesus. That's the kind of growth we should all get excited about. But how do we do that?

The Church has tried to answer that over the years. Church historians would tell you the "Church Growth Movement" started in 1965, seeking culturally appropriate ways to bring people in the doors to grow them up as disciples of Jesus. With it came the seeker-sensitive and attractional models, and many good things came out of that movement. But what some started to question was if there was a greater focus on numbers growth instead of spiritual growth. In fact, Willow Creek Church, the bell cow of the movement, basically admitted that a decade ago, saying they could fill up rooms, but they didn't know if they were making disciples. So how do you grow a church by taking the best of what has come before us, a movement we are a part of, while holding on to what scripture shows us to truly make followers of Jesus?

Now, before we talk about anything we can do, we've got to start with God. Jesus said, "I will build my church", and the passage we will look at today includes [Acts 11:21a] **"21 And the hand of the Lord was with them."** Real growth starts with the providence and grace of God, joining him where he is already at work, and operating in utter dependence upon him. So, the better question is, how do we participate with God in order to grow his church?

[Acts 11:19-21] ¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

God continues to redeem the persecution that started with Stephen in Acts 8. Scattered Jesus followers landed in locations north of Israel, across the Mediterranean region, with many settling in Antioch. It is to become the new base of operations for the Church, but it's about the last place you'd think to put it. Antioch was located on the Orontes River in present-day Turkey, Syria at the time. It was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire and known for its corruption, depravity, and worship of many Greek gods. Yet the Gospel flourishes. **The church grows when courageous followers take new ground.**

While many scattered believers speak exclusively to the Jews, others are more daring by speaking to Gentiles (here, Hellenists are Gentile Greeks, not Jewish Greeks). The risk is great. It's not clear if the events between Peter and Cornelius have made the rounds, so their preaching of Jesus to Gentiles could have been off script. They are speaking of the one true God to a polytheistic culture, risking rejection and further persecution (remember, they were currently on the run). We take a risk every time we raise our hand and say, "I'm with Jesus."

Most exciting was who was doing it. Luke says “But some of them...” They are far from the church in Jerusalem, from the Apostles, from many other named leaders. But here, every day, anonymous believers devoted to Jesus preach his name right where God had them and the Kingdom advances. That means every one of us is a minister of the Gospel.

When we live like this, we follow the example of our Lord Jesus. Jesus showed up to preach about the Kingdom, to take new ground, and to do so at great risk. Today is Palm Sunday. It celebrates Jesus Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem, beginning the last week of his pre-cross life.

[Mark 11:7-10] ⁷ And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. ⁹ And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”

As Jesus advanced into the city, he took new ground for the Kingdom. He knew what was to come, that he would end the week hanging from a cross, paying for the sins of mankind but reconciling us back to God. He was devoted to the plan of the Father and courageously rode into the city to see it fulfilled. He has given us his Spirit to continue that same mission.

The greatest growth strategy for the church has always been God’s people courageously, consistently, joyfully, and unashamedly sharing the good news of Jesus with others wherever God has them. We can have an awesome website and digital ministry, brilliant strategy, incredible programs, the best coffee, really good looking people on the platform, and get people in that way. All of that is important and adds to the work of our church, for sure. **But imagine what would happen if every person who calls Fellowship home regularly preached the Gospel where they live, work, and play.** If you want to see Fellowship grow, it’s going to take all of us. It’s a team effort. The church in Acts grew to the extent that more people participated in the mission, and Fellowship Dallas is no different. And just like God used the disruptive moment around Stephen, God can use our disruptive moment to stir us up and send us out. **You are a growth agent of the church.** Let’s pray for courage to live that out.

The church grows when faithful followers invest in hearts and heads. When the church adds new believers, a church has new needs. Conversion is only the beginning.

[Acts 11:22-26a] ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.

Word gets out that there is new life in Antioch and the Jerusalem church sends reinforcements in the person of Barnabas, whose name means “Son of encouragement”. If we were to categorize him today, we’d say he’s an “essential worker” among God’s people. The new believers are

experiencing what it means to follow Jesus, the joys, the pains, the gains, and the costs. Just think of your own challenges in following Jesus. Barnabas is a devout man who recognizes the work of God, is full of contagious gladness, and through a caring, compassionate, and gentle heart, blesses the church by exhorting them to do what is sometimes the hardest thing for Christians to do: Keep going! And as they keep going, they keep adding to their numbers.

We all need spiritual cheerleaders who do spiritual jump splits and herkies on our behalf when things get tough. I am an unashamed glutton for encouragement and am so grateful for all of you who are Barnabas for me. One person in particular is Mary Beth Gaylor. She is 86 years young, loves Jesus, prays all the time for me, and sends me some of the most encouraging emails. She types in all caps, so I know she means it, and she says things like, “What a wonderful sermon you...and the Holy Spirit...preached today. So exciting to see God move at Fellowship. Let’s keep it rolling!” All of us need that kind of encouragement in our lives and all of us can be Barnabas to someone else. Do not be ashamed to need it and do not be slow to offer it.

But Barnabas also sees a need. These new believers need to know God’s Word to live a godly life, so he brings Saul and, together, they teach the new church for a year. The New Testament wasn’t written yet, but you can imagine Paul is teaching what he will eventually write. From the very beginning we see the centrality of God’s Word in discipleship and the results that follow. Barnabas and Saul spend consistent, relational time with the church to mature them in their faith and to show them how to do that for others. The church continues to grow, and we very quickly see the fruit of that maturity.

[Acts 11:27-29] ²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius) ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

You have Jews meeting the spiritual needs of Gentiles and Gentiles reciprocating by taking care of the physical needs of Jews. The reconciliation we saw between Peter and Cornelius continues here. There is a oneness on display. Two marks of a mature and growing church is unity and generosity, and we see both here because Barnabas and Saul invested in the people of that church and multiplied themselves in them. I wonder if Paul thought about this church as he was writing Ephesians.

[Ephesians 4:11-12] ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Though the apostles are still in Israel, there is apostolic work in taking new ground, evangelism in preaching Jesus to unbelieving Greeks, shepherding and teaching by Barnabas and Saul, and the church is built up to such a maturity that we will see it play a pivotal role in the rest of Acts. The church grows when everyone plays their role. No one person can do it. Jesus intends for it to take all of us, and when we do, the church grows.

The church grows when the world unmistakably knows who we follow. When you live like this church lived, others take notice.

[Acts 11:26b] And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

The ending “-ian” means “belonging to the party of”. “Christians” were those of Jesus’ party. Their testimony to Jesus is so strong, their daily devotion to Jesus so committed, their way of life so unique and compelling, that they got put in their own category.

Ohhh that we would all be labeled as Christians. Not because we say we are. Not because we go to church on Sunday mornings. But because when people look at us, they see him. When people hear our words, they hear his words. When people see us interact with others, they see us loving the way he loved. When people see what our life is about, they see Jesus first, and then everything else a distant second. Not Jesus and _____. Just Jesus. When we live so distinctly for Jesus, we get the world’s attention and give them an invitation to a completely different life. We help them see the distinction between life with and life without Jesus, and we give them the opportunity to make a choice. Some will say yes.

Determine what ground God is calling you to take. All of us have a next step in our relationship with Jesus. We are never stagnant. We’re either moving towards God or away from him. That’s why I’m so excited for this new event we’re holding called Next 90. If you have been through Repurposed or Yunique you should have received an invitation to it this week. You’ve been hearing me say over the last several months that we love getting people to their two words. The problem has been that we’ve treated it as a finish line instead of a starting line. We’ve had this clarity awoken in us, but we don’t know what to do with it. It’s like this bad habit Martha says I have where I tell her “Oh, I need to talk to you about something really important”, but I have no intention of telling her what it is in the moment. Next90 is a new quarterly discipleship rhythm where we are going to meet once/quarter and ask God to show us what new ground he wants us to take over the next 90 days.

If you haven’t been to Yunique or Repurposed, I want to again encourage you to do so. But in the meantime, pray and ask God what he would have you do. It might be to spend the next 90 days pursuing the Lord, joining a Life Group or meeting with someone weekly to talk about your relationship with Jesus. It could be living more intentionally, getting to the things God has been asking of you, or maybe God has shown you someone he wants you to invest in. And that may be in here, or it may be out there. **I’m confident God has something for you.** Ask him what it is, and if you want some help in figuring it out, ask us and we’ll connect you with someone. All of us can take new ground between now and the end of June. What will it be for you?

I’m confident that, as we do those things, this church will grow. But it’s going to take all of us. I dream of the day this place is packed and we’re having to figure out how to fit everyone in and having to call in reinforcements so that everyone is cared for. I rejoice when I think about how people will interact with someone from Fellowship, see Jesus, and want in. And when I pray “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done”, I pray he does that through us. Because, ultimately, it’s up to him, and we are dependent on his grace. I ask you to join me in that prayer because, more than anything, I want to be used by God for his glory and the salvation of mankind. We close this morning with a song asking God to do that very thing.