

# A New Community: “A Church That Grows”

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West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
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## Scripture Reading

*“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47 ESV).*

## **RAPID GROWTH**

I was 4 foot 11 inches tall when I began high school. They were putting on the play “A Christmas Carol,” and I went to the large auditorium to try out for the role of Jacob Marley. Before I could even get a word out, the director said, “there’s my tiny Tim.” I jumped 8 inches from my sophomore year in high school to my sophomore year in college. That’s quite a leap.

I remember going to Ripley’s *Believe It or Not* in Gatlinburg and seeing a life-size replica of Robert Wadlow, who was born near St. Louis in 1918 with a problem in his pituitary gland that gave him an outrageous amount of human growth hormones. When he began to walk at 11 months, he was already the height and weight of an average 5-year old. When he started kindergarten, He was 5’ 6”, and wore clothes made for a 17-year old. And by the time he graduated high school, he was 8 ft. 4 in. That is quite a leap.<sup>1</sup>

But nothing—nothing—can match or even compare to the growth of the church in the first three centuries of their existence.

Did you know the early church, made up of a rag-tag group of fishermen, former prostitutes, widows, and orphaned children, grew from roughly a couple thousand members to 33 million in just 3 centuries? They went from 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of the world’s population to 56% of the world population in 300 years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Wadlow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wadlow)

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), p. 7.

According to Rodney Stark, the eminent church historian, in those first 3 centuries, the church grew by 40% per decade!<sup>3</sup>

### THE ANSWER: A LIFE, NOT A METHOD

Now I know that different contexts call for different methods. But when you have a model that worked that well so quickly, the likes of which nobody had ever seen, it might be worth, oh, I don't know, trying it out!

You'd think that all these church growth gurus would be making millions explaining to people how to do it. You might think "what an easy job for them!" All they have to do is read the Bible and do what it says.

There are two problems with that premise.

The first is that church growth was not a packaged commodity, and the early church was not writing a three-step script for you to run through the lines and reap the rewards. What we find in the early church is not a method. *It's a life*. Nobody—can I say this loudly for the people in the back—nobody in the New Testament frets over how to grow the church. Nobody writes a letter and says, "why don't you try a VBS this summer?" They aren't interested in methods to be reproduced. The New Testament records a vision, a gospel, that people couldn't help but fall in love with—so much so, that it changed who they were. And then it describes a people who took that love, that gospel, with unbelievable seriousness—affecting everything they did.

That's it. A gospel you fall in love with, changing who you are; and taking the gospel with utter seriousness, affecting everything you do.

I want to break that down for just a moment.<sup>4</sup> The first emphasis in Scripture is not on what we do---but *who we are*. Let me ask you a question: who has ever really changed the world for good? You might be thinking of really active people who did notable big things. Maybe Mother Teresa in Calcutta, or MLK on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. And if you wanted to be like that, you might think you need to sign up for a soup kitchen in Little Rock or a mission trip to Belize. *But actually, the ones who really have—and really are—changing the world for good are the men and women who reflect the character of Jesus in their every-day, ordinary relationships*. The best thing you can do for your family or

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<sup>3</sup> See the chart in James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Here I summarize the teachings of Dallas Willard as present in Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, pp. 13-19.

for the world is to have the character of Christ. It's not that we do a list of noble deeds; it's that our lives become gifts of grace to everyone we meet. People who are honest truth-tellers are like thermostats at the office—changing the dynamic for good. A person who is no longer ruled by fear or greed is like a homing beacon from heaven in every store they visit, and in every neighborhood in which they live. *Focus on actions or events shifts our attention to part-time doings, rather than full-time beings.* Jesus didn't have in mind your famous hunger fast several years ago when he said, "let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16). He had in mind the sweetness in your tone of voice that your child uses on a daily basis to identify you as some safe and worthy of trust. The cup of cold water for your thirsty neighbor. He was talking about a consistent character in ordinary, daily life. Not just the way you spoke to your spouse this morning, but whether you saw Christ *in* them, and felt your place in the universe is simply to be Christ *to* them. The serenity one could see across our face as we stood in line at Starbucks, surrounded by those living in fear and dread. Not just the way we overlooked the barista's mistake on our order; but the way we thought in that moment our order was not nearly as important as our interaction with a made-in-the-image-of-God person. Your life is hidden with Christ; your anchor is securely fastened. You are filled with spiritual strength to love with reckless abandon, to live without a hint of selfishness, to forgive the unforgivable, and to see every person and every moment as something God is longing to redeem.

When set against the dark backdrop of a world in chaos, that simple idea—a changed character lived out in ordinary, everyday life—takes on revolutionary appeal. Every Christian a unique story of grace in which the character of Jesus spills out into the world every day in the simplest of ways. Where our "daily encounters with others" become "The arenas in which our relationship with God becomes incarnate."<sup>5</sup> When that happens, all we have to do is talk, like Peter and John did, and others will be astonished until they realize—"these men have been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). And imagine if such people came together to live like that in unison. What would that look like?

*"Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41-47).*

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, p.19.

I told you the first problem with looking for a package to reproduce is that there isn't a method, there is a life, born out of a conviction that the gospel changes everything, and a willingness to take that gospel with utter seriousness.

But the second problem is this: what God does lay out (to borrow a line from G K Chesterton) is not something that's been tried and found wanting, it's something found hard and rarely tried. I titled this sermon "How churches grow" because I wanted it to be uplifting. But it could easily be extended to "and how churches die."

### **DESTROYING OURSELVES FROM THE INSIDE**

Let me tell you what I mean. But I want a line from Paul ringing in your ears while I do. The line is found in the middle of 1 Thessalonians 2. Here is the line:

*You are witnesses of how we lived among you... God is also a witness...*

I can tell you horror stories from church history—all of which come after Christianity became the official religion of any nation-state. Stories where the emperor told whole swaths of people, "you have two choices—you can get baptized down by the river, or we will slit your throat." They thought they were building a Christian army; all they were doing was bastardizing the gospel and creating deep seated animosity toward anything that smelled of the word "Christian."

I can tell you that the Rwandan massacre which took place over 100 days in 1994 is a singular atrocity, a genocide unlike anything in a generation—where the armed Hutu militia brutally raped over 500,000 women and, wielding machetes, killed over 500,000 Tutsi and even their fellow Hutu's who objected to what they were doing. The Tutsi responded in kind. When the dust settled, as many as 800,000 lay dead, as neighbors slaughtered each other. I would tell you more if it wasn't so sickening and so barbaric. But I will tell you one interesting fact. At that time, 90% of the population claimed some Christian church affiliation—making Rwanda the most "Christian" nation in Africa. And historians will tell you that for years leading up to this, Christian missionaries used the story of Ham and his curse to paint the Tutsi caste as Ethiopian foreigners, and thus, a lesser caste.<sup>6</sup> Casting a broader net, perhaps we could say that "the gospel imported into Rwanda failed to ever challenge the ethnic identities of its

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Totten & William S. Parsons, *Century of Genocide, Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2009, p. 421. Cited by Wikipedia entry: "Rwandan genocide." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan\\_genocide#cite\\_note-Totten-29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide#cite_note-Totten-29)

converts—they became Christian, but many remained first and foremost either Hutu or Tutsi.”<sup>7</sup>

Let me bring it home for just a minute. In 1957, *Time Magazine* ran a story claiming Churches of Christ in the United States boasted of 1.2 million members.<sup>8</sup> Six years later, *Time* ran another story, this time labeling our branch of the restoration movement as the single fastest growing religious body in the United States.

In 2019, Churches of Christ in the United States sat at...less than we had in 1957. Like 100,000 less. And that was **before** Covid, which wiped out 20% of our congregational attendees in churches all across the country. It would be understandable if your first reaction to this news is “Lets figure out what we were doing in the 1920’s to the 1950’s and do that now.” I want to give you a different set of lenses.

At the same moment of history when *Time* announced to the world that churches of Christ were the fastest growing religious body (and in the decades leading up to it), our churches were splitting left and right without changing the name on the sign—one leaving the error they discovered, the other saying “good riddance” to splintering brethren who are causing division.

Can churches pool their money together and form a society that sends out missionaries? We said, “of course we can,” and “of course we can’t.” And overnight, there were two camps within the movement. Did you know both camps still exist to this day? Figure out which camp you’re in, and I’d be willing to bet you don’t know many people in the other camp.

Should white people and black people worship together in the same assembly? We said “of course, we must!” and “I think everyone would feel better if we didn’t.” And overnight, we went our separate ways. Figure out which camp tradition the churches you grew up in came out of. You can probably tell by looking around.

Should we have Sunday school at church? We said, “of course we can,” and “absolutely not. There’s no example in the New Testament of the church ever doing that.” And overnight, we went our separate ways. I could name the leading figures in the other camp. But I’d be willing to bet you’ve never heard of them.

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<sup>7</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Brazos Press, 2008), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> “Religion: The Nondenomination.” *Time Magazine* (Monday, Aug 5, 1957). <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,867812,00.html>

Should we hire a local preacher? We said, “that would be fantastic,” and “over my dead body.” And we split.

Will the Lord come back before the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 or after the 1,000 years of Revelation 20? We said “who cares? Why is this a big deal” and “I care deeply, so much so I can’t worship with you anymore.” And overnight, a different sub-group of churches formed with their own churches and lectureships, many of whom you’ve probably never known.

Can we, as a church, give money from the church treasury to Harding? How about the local children’s home? How about Harding Place assisted living? How about the local nursing home? Can we have a fellowship hall or a gym? Can we eat meals in our church building? Can we use church money to sponsor something for our youth that is entertaining? While we are at it, can we have a youth group or a youth minister? “Those sounds great” we said, and “those sound unauthorized” we said. And overnight, two distinct groups were born, with churches and speakers. Find which camp you belong to, and I would be willing to bet you’ve never heard of most of the preachers in the other.

- Whether we can have multiple communion cups or just one.
- If women wearing veils in 1 Corinthians was cultural or for all time.
- If we can offer children’s church during the Sunday assembly.
- If we can have 6 song leaders or just 1.
- What the name on the sign out front of our church should say.

And I think of more. I bet you can too. And these weren’t small ruptures. They set grooves where even today people who have been in Churches of Christ for 50 years have never got to know or even darkened the door of a church building that belonged to any other sub camp. We started a new church after every disagreement in our monthly men’s business meetings! And everyone—in all these camps—on both sides believed in the 7 ones of Ephesians 4, were baptized into Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, believed the Bible is our final authority, and claimed to be “church of Christ” (whatever that meant), so *Time* didn’t have a reason to doubt that we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. Or that we pray that our unity will one day be restored. That took a while for us all to feel the full effects. We fragmented and fragmented with those of one circle having nothing to do with those of another. Fighting over things that are not gospel.

The early church—the one that grew 40% per decade for 300 years, had no grand organizer, no political power, no schools, no colleges, and no lectureships. But they did have a vision. A love that led to a way of life that was all-in with every other Christian.

It was a love that was intoxicating and dramatically different from anything any other group had to offer. And they were sound in doctrine, because the Apostle's doctrine is the gospel, and unity is sound doctrine.

God hates division, and the place where division was the least likely to be seen was in the church of Jesus Christ. Fellowshiping and praying together every day, from house to house, eating with one another with glad and generous hearts, they praised God and had favor with all the people. And the Lord couldn't help but flood their ranks overwhelmingly with people desperate for a vision of united love that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

### GENUINE RELATIONSHIPS

One Sunday night last year, I mentioned a book by Norman Bales, a preacher from the mid-west who wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. Claudette Bratcher came up to me after services and said that Norman Bales and her beloved Stan Bratcher were the best of friends. That's all the authority I need to quote Brother Bales.

In his book, *Belonging*, Norman Bales shares insight for any church that wants to reach their neighborhood and grow their local church. He said there is no method or procedure that takes the place of a genuine lifestyle change. One that invites others not into a 3-week Bible study, but a 3-year friendship. One that says not "look at my tract," but "look at my life." That is precisely the model Paul gives us in 1 Thessalonians 2. Do you remember that line that's been hanging in the background this whole time? I'd like to read the context in full.

*"Brothers and sisters, you know that our visit to you produced results. You know what happened earlier in the city of Philippi. We suffered, and people treated us very badly there. But God gave us the boldness to tell you his good news. We preached to you even when people strongly opposed us.*

*The appeal we make is based on truth. It comes from a pure heart. We are not trying to trick you. In fact, it is just the opposite. God has approved us to preach. He has trusted us with the good news. We aren't trying to please people. We want to please God. He tests our hearts. As you know, we never praised you if we didn't mean it. We didn't put on a mask to cover up any sinful desire. God is our witness that this is true. We were not expecting people to praise us. We were not looking for praise from you or anyone else.*

*Yet as Christ's apostles, we could have used our authority over you. Instead, we were like young children when we were with you. As a mother feeds and cares for her little children, we cared for you. We loved you so much. So, we were happy to share with you God's good news. **We were also happy to share our lives with you.** Brothers and sisters, I am sure you remember how hard we worked.*

*We labored night and day while we preached to you God's good news. We didn't want to cause you any expense. **You are witnesses of how we lived among you believers.** God is also a witness that we were holy and godly and without blame. You know that we treated each of you as a father treats his own children. We gave you hope and strength. We comforted you. We really wanted you to live in a way that is worthy of God. He chooses you to enter his glorious kingdom." (1 Thess 2:1-12 NIV)*

When I started teaching at Harding in 2006, I was blessed to be on faculty with Flavil Yeakley. He was one of 5 people in the entire country trained to do church statistics at the highest levels. And Flavil said lots of folks think the key to growth and evangelism is showing up as a stranger with a lesson. But the numbers beg to differ. When approached with the gospel, 75% refused to give in and adopt the lifestyle of Christ when they saw the gospel presented as a lesson designed to instruct them.

Flavil said that lots of people think that the key to growing a church is to put on emotion-packed revivals and gospel meetings with 47 verses of Just As I Am. But 69% of those who were baptized through emotional manipulation dropped out within a year.

Then Flavil leaned in and said this. But if the gospel was shared in a non-manipulative way as part of a shared life together, the numbers were remarkable. Of those who were converted this way, 96% remained faithful.<sup>9</sup> In survey after survey after survey, when asked "why do people become identified with church?" 90% of the time the answer was always the same: friendship. A true friendship with someone who modeled the trusting, relational, non-manipulative beauty of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

*"Our good news didn't come to you only in words. It came with power. It came with the Holy Spirit's help. He gave us complete faith in what we were preaching. You know how we lived among you for your good" (1 Thess 1:5)*

When is the church going to grow by 40% a decade again? I'll tell you when. When Christ gets a hold of our hearts and the gospel is not a tagline, used as part of a slick sales technique, or a way to feel secure as we thank God that we aren't like those other men. It will happen when Christ gets a hold of our hearts; when we are so in love with Jesus that nothing matters but the gospel, and then we take that gospel with utter seriousness. Then it won't be a story about our techniques. It will be a story about God.

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<sup>9</sup> Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., *Why Churches Grow* (Broken Arrow, OK: Christian Communications, Inc., 1979), pp. 57-58.

<sup>10</sup> See Norman Bales, *A Sense of Belonging* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian, 1989), pp. 77-80.