

Acts

Part 28: Strengthening Churches

Paul Cheng | Acts 15:36-16:5

March 16, 2025

If you Google the phrase “how do you grow a church?” you will come across various numbers of websites and suggestions. One website in particular offered 35 Growth Strategies That Work. I’d like to read the opening paragraph from the article.

Looking for a set of church growth strategies that actually work? Ready to ignite a spark that sets your community ablaze with faith and fellowship? If your heart is shouting “yes,” you’re in the right place!

Welcome to an epic journey where we unveil 35 powerful strategies, each a proven game-changer, ready to turbocharge your church growth. This comprehensive guide is your roadmap to a future brimming with potential, with strategies and guidance on how to grow your church.

Get ready to dive into the depths of market research strategies, learn how to convert visitors to new members, master church outreach strategies, church management solutions, inspire generosity through effective stewardship and discover the tools you need to accomplish unprecedented church growth.

After I read the opening paragraph and skimmed the 35 strategies that were listed, I came away with several different emotions, but the overwhelming emotion was sadness. Sadness for the pastors and church leaders reading these websites in either desperation or in eager excitedness. Sadness because if the strength of our churches is based on numbers and market research strategies, why do we have the inspired Word of God?

If churches are strengthened and grown through man’s ingenuity and prowess, what need do we have for the Holy Spirit? If I can subscribe to this company’s website and they can use AI and church strategies to take my church from the brink of closing to a successful and thriving church, what need do we have to preach through Acts, a book of the Bible that contains the history and events of the early church?

This morning, we are continuing our study in the book of Acts and we have a pretty straightforward piece of Scripture. It’s a portion of Scripture that while seemingly simple, has a sharp rebuke against today’s church growth strategies. Are we to trust in man’s ingenuity and cleverness when it comes to growing and strengthening our churches? Or are we to trust in the wisdom of God and the Scriptures to help guide and course correct us when it comes to strengthening and building healthy churches?

Our main point this morning is this, the strengthening of churches comes from being anchored in Jesus and the Scriptures. We will see this in 3 different ways: Strengthening of Churches through separation, through contextualization, and through discipleship. Our text this morning is going to show that despite relational separation, and differing views on how to do ministry, it is only by and through Jesus and His Word that we are able to faithfully build and strengthen churches.

So our first point this morning will be the Strengthening of Churches through Separation.

Last week, Tyler finished Pt. 2 of the Jerusalem Council, and this week, we find ourselves in Antioch right after Paul and the others from Jerusalem have just delivered the Council’s letter. This previous section that Tyler covered is one of the great moments of unity in the early church’s history. The early church had come together in Jerusalem in order to hammer out whether or not Gentile believers were required to be circumcised in order for them to be saved. But if you remember Peter’s response, he says “Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our

fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Therefore, we are saved by grace, through faith. No acts of ceremonial law, like circumcision, or keeping every iota of the Law could save us from our sins. It is only through Jesus’ death on the cross that we are saved: salvation by grace, through faith.

The church now has a unified missiological approach as the gospel continues to push out. In other words, as the churches have realized that this gospel, this good news, is not just for the ethnic Jews, but for all the peoples of the Earth, they are unified in not trying to force circumcision upon the gentiles after conversion. This is no longer necessary because in conversion, the heart is circumcised, not the flesh. Circumcision is not required for salvation.

But after this triumphant unity, comes Luke’s report of the schism between Paul and Barnabas. If you recall, this partnership stretches all the way back to Acts 9 when Barnabas brings Paul in shortly after his conversion and defends him against those that disbelieved that Paul was a genuine Christian.

If you’ll look at your Bibles and look at verse 36, you’ll see that Luke records that Paul wanted to return to the brothers in all the cities that the word of the Lord was preached on their first missionary journey. Verses 37 and 38 record that Barnabas wanted to bring Mark along for this second missionary journey.

If you think back a couple weeks ago in Acts 13, Luke tells us that after Paul’s missionary team had landed in Pamphylia, John left them and returned to Jerusalem. Now this John, is the same John that Luke records here in Acts 15. John is also known as Mark. This is not John the apostle, brother of James, who wrote the book of Revelation.

This is a separate John Mark that accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but left early on. He also happens to be the cousin of Barnabas. Now, Luke doesn’t tell us in Acts 13 or 15 why John Mark left them. But we can infer from the “sharp disagreement” that Paul and Barnabas have, that John Mark’s leaving wasn’t for good reasons.

Many scholars have disputed over why John Mark left and the reasons for it, but what’s clear from the text is that this was a premature leaving. There’s a TV mini-series called Band of Brothers, that chronicles the lives of the soldiers of Easy Company of the 101st Airborne during WWII. There’s a scene in the episode entitled ‘Replacements’ in which the men have a slight reprieve from the front lines after they made the jump into Normandy. They’re licking their wounds and finally sleeping in a bed with some hot chow. The new set of replacements begin to backfill all of the men they had lost in a short amount of time. There’s a poignant scene where the replacements are catching flak for just being a month too late to the war.

Had they enlisted one month earlier, they would have jumped into Normandy and went through hell with the other men. Instead, they flew into France smoothly without being shot at by artillery. There’s even a scene in which a Private Cobb, who was about to jump on D-Day, but was shot on the plane, while preparing to jump and didn’t end up jumping. He missed D-day and the ensuing battles on the ground. Even he is put into his place and told that he is less than because he didn’t actually ‘jump.’

I think this accurately describes Paul’s attitude towards John Mark. John Mark had seemingly abandoned the mission right as it was starting. Whether it was out of fear, one of his family members getting sick, or sickness for himself, Paul didn’t care. He didn’t want him to join. He left the team just as the missionary journey was beginning. He was given a chance and he wouldn’t be given another by Paul, at least right now.

In addition to all of the speculations on what led to John Mark's departure, there are equally the same number of speculations on why Barnabas thought it was ok. Was Paul just being immature and self-righteous? Was it because Barnabas was the 'son of encouragement,' and Paul was the unforgiving soldier? Was Barnabas just protecting little cousin Mark? Was Paul right, and John Mark had proven that he wasn't ready yet?

Whatever the real reason was, there are a couple of things that we can draw from this section of Scripture. When Jeff Mooney was here last month, a couple of us went to lunch with him after his seminar and someone asked, why did you do your Ph.D. in Old Testament? He said that he has always loved back stories, and the Old Testament is the greatest back story in the history of the world. I would also argue that the book of Acts is the ultimate back story of the New Testament letters.

Paul loved to commend and encourage his fellow workers in the gospel throughout his letters to the churches. Most of the time, these people don't show up anywhere else in Scripture, but there are times, like in our text today, that contain awesome aha! moments.

Paul, in writing to the Colossians, concludes his letter with: "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions-if he comes to you, welcome him)." Around the same time, Paul, writing to Philemon, says "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers." Finally, in Paul's last letter before his death, Paul writes to Timothy in 2Timothy to "get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry."

There is no reconciliation that is recorded in the book of Acts, but it's clear from three of Paul's letters that things changed for Paul and Mark after this split. Mark becomes one of Paul's most trusted companions, one who is called for at the end of his life. Mark would also go on to write the Gospel according to Mark. It would appear, at least on the surface, that Barnabas was right and Paul was wrong. While this might seem like conjecture to some of you, I would argue that this is incredibly encouraging.

Paul is often seen as a sanctified man, one who encourages us to daily die to our flesh as one who no longer has to because he's obtained the title of 'sanctified.' He is perfectly sanctified and is now just awaiting glory. Having this kind of thought about Paul, however, can make Paul's writings distant and disconnected from our daily lives. We unconsciously think: 'That's easy for you to say, Paul, you're basically the 4th person of the Trinity.'

But a passage like this shows us that Paul is as human as we are. He's fighting for holiness every day, just like us. So, when he writes for us to, "[bear] with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive," (Col. 3:13) I know he's encouraging me as one who has had to die to himself as well as we seek to forgive others for their past transgressions. This section of Acts shows me how real that exhortation is for Paul.

So as we read our Bibles, and we read the letters of Paul and the other apostles, let us not read them as some distant and cold letters from men that are unlike us. Yes, Paul was specially made and given the unique responsibilities we read of in the New Testament, but he was also a sinner just like you and me. He was in need of the new mercies that are ours each and every morning. He was a sinner, who seemingly made a mistake when it came to selecting a missionary teammate.

But praise be to God that we are not defined by our mistakes, past or present. We are defined by the one who was spit upon, tortured, and killed on our behalf, the perfect Lamb, and final sacrifice, and his name is Jesus.

The second thing that we can draw from this section is the Lord's sovereignty to use man's sin and disagreements for the spread of the gospel. Paul and Barnabas split up, then verses 39 and 40 tell us that Barnabas chose to stick with Mark and Paul chose Silas to go with him. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus, and Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia. One big team turned into two smaller teams.

I listened to a former missionary church planter in China speak about the 10 years he spent laboring in Shanghai, and he spoke about how the Communist Chinese government actually assisted them in church planting. He said that the magic number in Shanghai was 200. When their congregation hit 200 members, the police started sniffing around. So every time their congregation grew to 200, they planted in a different part of the city. It forced them to send out their best and continue to raise up new pastors and elders because church planting wasn't an 'if', it was a 'when.'

While Paul and Barnabas' split wasn't as amiable as this situation in Shanghai, the God who is behind it all is. Our God, the God in Acts, the God in Shanghai, is the same God that used the evil against Joseph by his brothers, as the means of salvation and the fertile ground in which he would grow his people in Egypt. What man meant for evil; God meant for good.

Even though Paul and Barnabas separated for seemingly human reasons, God was preparing for one missionary team to be doubled. The gospel was going forth and churches were being strengthened. Churches were being strengthened, because as Paul pointed out to Barnabas in verse 36, the goal was to return to the places that they had preached the gospel, and remind them of the gospel again. And this was accomplished despite the separation of man.

This leads us to our second point this morning, the Strengthening of Churches through Contextualization. The section we just finished sunsets both Barnabas and Mark in the book of Acts, but as I mentioned earlier, you see traces of their ministry as you read the letters from Paul. Beginning in chapter 16, Luke records that Paul returns to Derbe and Lystra, where Paul was stoned previously in chapter 14. We learn in verses 1 and 2 that there was a well spoken of disciple there "named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek."

Timothy would join Paul on his missionary journey and would later stay in Ephesus to shepherd the flock there. He is the recipient of 2 letters from Paul, and if you're not familiar with the Bible, these two letters are called 1 and 2 Timothy towards the end of the Bible. Timothy is important for a couple reasons.

First, we learn in Paul's second letter to Timothy, that Timothy was a third generation Jew and Christian. Paul records that Timothy's grandmother Lois and mother Eunice had a "sincere faith," and that Paul is sure that this same faith "dwells in [Timothy] as well." It's interesting to note that Paul doesn't mention his grandfather or father in his letter. We can't draw a conclusion about the men in his life from these two passages, but we can draw a conclusion about the women.

The women in Timothy's life clearly had an eternal impact on this young man. As a husband to my beloved wife and father to three young children, I get a first row seat to the work that my wife does each and every day. I always tell people at work that as hard as my job might be some days, my wife's is infinitely harder. I might be making big decisions at a hospital, but my wife's life is on display for our children each and every hour of the day.

The monotony and futility of mothering is often overwhelming. For all of the mothers and grandmothers in the room, let these two texts be an encouragement to you. The "sincere faith," the monotony of raising children in and through the Scriptures, disciplining and nurturing your children has lasting effects on our children. Your time is not wasted with them. While this does not guarantee salvation for our children, we

cannot summarily throw out the great benefit of living with Jesus at the center of our lives and our homes and the effect it has on our children.

We've been talking about evangelization of the lost and the unreached a lot in the book of Acts, but let us not neglect the children right in front of us. And for the members of the church who are not married or don't have children, this is part of how we 'belong together.' Part of our membership covenant to one another is to 'one another' one another. Therefore, we should be evangelizing and having conversations with the children and teenagers in this church. Let us love, pray for, share the good news with, and care for the children in our church, and may God raise many Timothy's from this church.

The second reason that Timothy is important is because of his other half, his Greek father. Luke records in chapter 16, verse 1, that "his father was a Greek." So why is this important?

Luke goes on to say that Paul wants Timothy to accompany him on his travels in verse 3 and so he had him circumcised. If I could add to Scripture here, I think Timothy would insert: "didn't we just spend the last two Sundays talking about how we don't have to be circumcised for salvation?" This has got to be the worst day of Timothy's life. The council of Jerusalem declares that circumcision is not required for salvation, but Paul says 'too bad Timothy.'

So why does Paul do this? I love how my New Testament professor put it; he said that this shows the 'great flexibility of Paul.'

Luke writes in verse 3 that he did this because of "the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." In other words, Paul wanted him to come with him on his missionary journey to evangelize and preach the gospel to those who were in darkness under the old Law. Throughout the book of Acts, we see that though Paul was preaching in Gentile territory, Paul's pattern was to go to the Jewish synagogue first.

Paul's heart bleeds for his people. This is what leads him to write in Romans 9 that he has "a great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." In other words, if Paul could, he would willingly give up his salvation for the sake of his Jewish brothers and sisters.

Even though Jesus had set him apart to reach the Gentiles, Paul never forgot his ethnic people. Therefore, he asks Timothy to be circumcised, in order to remove any barriers to the gospel that might linger. This was not going back on all that he argued for previously, he was not asking Timothy to do this for ceremonial reasons, but for gospel reasons.

Hudson Taylor was a British Protestant missionary to China in the 1800s. He is one of the greatest missionaries of the modern era. Many missionaries had gone to China before him, but they had generally stayed on the east coast of China. This was due to accessibility and timidity. People would get to China by sea mostly and land on the eastern coast where Beijing and Shanghai are. Unfortunately, they would stop there due to the ruggedness that awaited them if they pushed farther into the interior of China, and the sheer doggedness that would be required of those that would push into uncharted territories.

But Hudson Taylor was determined to reach all 11 provinces and Mongolia, no matter the cost. As you go inland, however, people are less exposed to outsiders and foreigners. Hudson Taylor was aware of this, and knew that if he and his teammates were going to reach the Chinese, they would have to become Chinese. Up until this point in modern missions, missionaries dressed like they did back home. Hudson Taylor is known to be the first to adopt traditional dress and hair. He and his team dressed like the other Chinese around them, and cut and grew their hair out to look like those they were trying to reach.

Why go to such lengths to reach these people? There's a fancy word in evangelicalism and especially in the mission's world called 'contextualization.' Depending on who you ask, you'll get a wildly different answer. However, I think a helpful definition is: "Contextualization is all about making adjustments — adjustments from one way of looking, communicating, and explaining to another way of looking, communicating, and explaining." In other words, the way that I explain, act, and talk to someone who lives in Darby, MT is going to look different with how I speak to someone in Jakarta, Indonesia.

This seems like it would be self-evident, but you would be surprised at how this is done really poorly sometimes. Hudson Taylor knew this was crucial for reaching the unreached in China, but he didn't get this from a popular missions book, he got it right here from our text, from Paul. Paul knew he wanted Timothy to join him. He also knew that Timothy was half Jew/half Gentile, who happened to not be circumcised, and he knew that the Jews knew it. Therefore, Timothy had to be circumcised for the sake of contextualization and removing barriers for the gospel. For, as Tyler said last week in his sermon, contextualization is about not letting the messenger get in the way of the message.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9, after explaining that he has become a Jew to the Jews, one under and outside the law to those under and outside the law, he writes: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." As Ellyn and I, Lord willing, are sent out from Sovereign Hope as missionaries, we are going to learn how to contextualize in order to reach the people we are being sent out to live among.

This may look like us changing our schedules, our eating habits, the openness or closeness of our home, our language, our dress, our preferred climate, and our idea of what living should look like. We are also going to have to learn how to communicate the gospel in a way that this people can understand, without surrendering the true and Biblical gospel. You see, how we communicate the gospel might change, but the gospel doesn't.

This is why we can go with confidence to wherever the Lord would send us, because the gospel that saved a wretched sinner like me, is the same gospel that will save those who have been steeping in the darkness of Buddhism or Islam their entire lives.

I think it would be really easy right now to think that this just applies to missionaries and cross-cultural workers. Those are issues that Ellyn and I will have to deal with, or maybe our GCF staff as they minister in the country of the Republic of the University of Montana. But brothers and sisters, this is for us here and now, for us to practice putting down our preferences for the sake of another.

Several of our members continue to meet with our Afghan friends, even though our English classes have ended. Whether our Afghan friends are coming into our homes, or we go into theirs, contextualization is happening. What we eat, what we drink, what we wear, they all contribute to us being able to one day, sharing in the blessings of the gospel together. Are our preferences so needed in our day to day life, that we can't lay them aside, for even a meal, so that we might win another soul to Christ? Brothers and sisters, the gospel is big enough to handle our momentary uncomfortability, for the sake of eternal joy.

But don't hear contextualization and think toning down the offensiveness of the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus has done everything required to save sinners and reconcile us to God. But that good news starts with bad news, and that bad news is that we are sinners who stand guilty of the sins we have committed. Everyone stands guilty. As the Psalmist declares, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." It is only through the repentance of our sins, and our whole trust in Jesus and his finished work on the cross are we covered and saved from the wrath of God.

Friends, if you're here with us today, and you have not repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus, the Son of God, then I need you to hear that you stand condemned. If you've been on the fence on whether or not this is true or worth it, please hear this. But also hear that there is one who has come, who died, who rose, and now sits at the right hand of God, and his name is Jesus and he is bidding you to come to him. The very fact that you are a sinner qualifies you to come to him. Don't wait for next Sunday, or tomorrow; believe on the one whom this whole book is about.

Brothers and sisters, this gospel is scandalous and offensive; there is no contextualization that can numb that, and if it does then you have moved away from contextualization and moved into conceding and cheapening the blood bought salvation of Jesus. We all contextualize. We will talk differently to different people to relate and convey messages, but as we do this, as we become all things to all people, let us not compromise the gospel. A discounted gospel that is easier to swallow condemns people. It is Jesus and the good news of the gospel, alone, that saves.

Strengthening of Churches through Discipleship

But herein lies the vacuum that plagues the church globally. What are those that trust in Jesus and are saved by the grace of God supposed to do afterwards? This leads us to our final point this morning, the Strengthening of Churches through Discipleship.

Now, after Timothy has been circumcised, Luke tells us in verses 4-5 that "they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."

These verses are pretty straightforward. Paul and the crew begin to make their way through various cities and they share the letter written by the council of Jerusalem. This strengthens the churches and more conversions begin happening.

But if we backtrack a little bit and remind ourselves of why this is all happening, we recall that in verse 36 in chapter 15, Paul wanted him and Barnabas to circle back and visit the churches and believers from the first missionary journeys. I think we can read verses like these and just gloss right over them because they are so straightforward. But I want you to think about it for a minute. What was Paul's intention of circling back? Paul says, let's "visit the brothers...and see how they are." Was it so they could just share a meal with them, or to catch up on life?

Fast forward to verse 4 in chapter 16, and Luke gives us a more specific picture of what this actually entailed. This included sharing with them the letter and decisions from the Jerusalem Council, and as we saw last week, the reading of the letter was followed up by Paul and Barnabas "teaching and preaching the word of the Lord."

Many people know the Great Commission from Jesus from Matthew 28. Go therefore and make disciples from all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It's a call to evangelization and a call to missions...if you stop there. Many believers, including myself, often just stop there and leave off the second half of the commission. For the Great Commission is not only a call to evangelization, but it's equally a call to discipleship. Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

When we take into account the Great Commission, we see that Paul was following Jesus words. Paul was determined to not only reach the unreached, he was equally concerned with teaching them all that Jesus commanded.

A couple weeks ago, Jonny asked a really good question: Are we able to share the gospel with someone that asks us to share it with them? So to piggyback off of Jonny's question, I want us to ask ourselves: are we prepared to disciple those whom, Lord willing, hear the gospel and respond in repentance and faith?

In other words, are we preparing to be proactive rather than reactive. Praise God that we have seen a great change in our church over the last 5 years that I've been here of a desire to reach the lost in our neighborhoods and workplaces and college campuses. For example, our community group prays for those that we are evangelizing each week. We pray that the Lord would convict them of their sin and that they would place their trust in Jesus. Only He can bring dead hearts to life. But my next question is: do you know what to do once the person you've been evangelizing to becomes a Christian? What do they do next?

This is personal to me, because after I became a Christian, I had no idea what to do. I wasn't consistently going to one church when the Lord saved me, so when He saved me there wasn't an easy onramp for me to find.

I was a broken-down train before I was saved, in the back of the repair shop, but after the Lord saved me, I was a train that was put back together, repaired, put back on the tracks, and then left there with no one to tell me how to turn my engine on or which direction to go.

Praise God for a young pastor named Tyler, that began discipling me, before I even knew what that word meant during pre-marital counseling. It was the first time that a man had ever come alongside me, called out my sin, pointed me to Jesus, and was more concerned for my soul than my temporal happiness.

I know I'm not the only who has experienced this and wandered for months or years before finding a healthy church or someone to disciple them. So, as we go and make disciples of all nations in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and across the world, let us not settle for sharing the gospel and walking away. Let us be prepared to show them why the church matters, why being in the Word matters, why holiness and sanctification matter, how to do this thing called being a disciple of Jesus, and what it means to put off sin and to put on the righteousness of Christ. Let's be prepared for discipleship, church.

So as a part of Paul's discipleship of those who were saved during his first missionary journey, Paul shares the letter from the council. What did the letter contain? The letter detailed the council's decisions regarding circumcision not being required for the salvation of Gentiles among other things. An easier way to classify these things would be doctrines of the Christian faith. This letter did not contain every single doctrine of the faith, but it began to systemize the doctrines of what we believe.

This is why we encourage you to come to our Tuesday night classes that begin again next month. Tyler has been walking through doctrines of our faith and the importance of them. We can often just right these off and say those are just for pastors and theologians. But did you notice who the letter was read to and who was strengthened? The church! If you thought these people were all educated seminarians and theologians, you are very wrong. The people of these 1st century churches were full of slaves, servants, and uneducated people, but it was sound doctrine that strengthened these people

I currently work in a job where I have to prepare my staff at the hospital for any question or situation that might come up, and part of that job is coming up with policies and procedures for everything. This ranges

from how to properly clean a wound to how to execute a mass casualty incident. These are policies and procedures that my staff can fall back on so they know what to do in a certain situation.

In a similar way, the doctrines of our faith, based in Scripture, are what we fall back on when we are unsure of something and help us move forward in confidence. For these 1st century churches and believers, this letter and the teaching and preaching from the returning missionaries helped solidify, refresh, and show them that salvation was not by works, like circumcision, but was by the grace of the Lord Jesus alone. And this strengthened the church greatly!

So come to our Tuesday night classes. Read good books. If you don't know what a good book is, start with the books at our Ephesians 4:12 bookstore. If you've already read those, come find me or one of the elders and we would love to point you in the right direction. Doctrines are like the bumpers at a bowling alley that keep us out of the ditches and on the straight and narrow path of Jesus. But if we don't know our doctrines and core truths of the Christian faith, how can we use the bumpers?

Verse 5 also contains many implications for our church today. Did you notice the order in which Luke records the events in verse 5? Luke writes, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."

The strengthening of churches goes hand in hand with the increase of conversions. This is often flipped in evangelical church strategies. We often think that if we increase in numbers then we will have a healthy church. But when we look at the book of Acts, we see it is quite the opposite. Instead, holding fast to sound doctrine, the preaching of the Word, discipleship, Biblical conversion, and strengthening of churches leads to more conversions. We have switched the result and the means.

How often have we thought this though, even subtly in our minds? Maybe we've been a part of churches that have overinflated numbers to make themselves look good, to give the impression that they're doing well. In the missions world, there will be missionaries that will report back that they started over 100 churches in just one year. They either feel forced to over report, or they use methods and strategies that literally form churches out of 2-3 unbelievers that meet to read the Bible together, because numbers = health, right?

If we bring this back to our context of American evangelicalism, how many times have we thought that if we have more attractive programs for every life stage like kids, teens, young adults, couples without kids, parents with young children, parents with teenagers, empty nesters, and retired folk that we could grow our numbers even more? What if we brought in some business consultants to help with our marketing to help get our name out there?

For some of you, this sounds ludicrous, but I can imagine that many of you have been a part of churches like this. But if we come back to the Word of God, and what he has described and prescribed for how we ought to live together, serve one another, and gather together, we begin to see a much simpler portrait of the church and how God intends to nurture and grow it.

As we look to this passage today, we see that God has chosen to grow and strengthen his church through the often slow and simple work of preaching the gospel, and teaching others how to observe all that Jesus commanded. While that doesn't sound sexy, or the way that Amazon would do things, one thing will remain standing and be united with its bridegroom on that last day; and that's the church. So let us remain steadfast to this biblical pattern of strengthening and growing churches and cling tightly to Jesus our groom.