

Peter Messes with Success

Hespeler, 9 May 2021 © Scott McAndless – Christian Family Sunday
Acts 10:23b-33, 44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

When we arrive at the tenth chapter of the Book of Acts, we find ourselves dealing with a church that seems to have got everything figured out. The Christian Church, centred in Jerusalem and beginning to spread out into Judea and Samaria, has been experiencing some really extraordinary growth because they seem to have figured out the formula.

It works like this: one of the apostles or other leaders of the church gets involved in some incident that gathers a crowd. It might be a dispute, a miraculous healing or some other manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The apostle then takes advantage of the situation and addresses the crowd with a sermon. Since the speaker knows that his audience are all Jews who have the same grounding in Jewish culture and scripture, he is able to speak about these things and then draw a connection from them to the story of Jesus.

Every story, up until this point, has basically followed the same formula, with the only exception being the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, but even there when Philip first starts talking to the Ethiopian, it is clear that the man already has a significant foundation in Jewish thought.

A Wildly Successful Approach

This approach, the Book of Acts reports, has been wildly successful with every incident leading to the addition of thousands of new people to the young movement. In fact, if what is being described here is accurate, this has really got to be the most successful phase of growth in the entire history of the Christian Church. I mean, yes, when you start out with a group of 12 or maybe 120 original disciples, it is relatively easy to see that grow by hundreds or thousands of times. Today, with approximately 2.2 billion Christians in the world, that is literally impossible as we couldn't even multiply four times today without it consuming the entire world population. So, by any measure, the early Christian church seems to be riding an extraordinary wave of successful growth.

And if we were to pause right there, at the end of the 9th chapter of the Book of Acts and start to extrapolate about where the church is going to go from there, the outlook seems very clear. The church will continue to spread among the Jewish community through these kinds of public preaching incidents. Eventually, with this kind of extraordinary exponential growth, the church will consume the entire Jewish world, both in Judea and in the Jewish diaspora, and then, I suppose, it will have finished its work and the church will be established throughout the rest of human history, however long that might be, until Christ returns.



Why Mess with Success?

And that is it; that is where we are going at the end of the ninth chapter. And why would anyone mess with such a trajectory? When you have a winning formula like that, obviously you are just going to stick with it. This is just not the time to get creative in your approach.

Now, of course, as we look back on that history from about 2000 years later, we might recognize that maybe it wasn't quite the winning formula that it appeared to be. For whatever reason, that initial growth in the Jewish community did not prove to be as sustainable as it seemed. Maybe that growth was an illusion more than a reflection of true success. But none of that is apparent at this point in the story. The sense of success is palpable.

And yet, the tenth chapter of the Book of Acts is the story of how the church, led by Peter, began to mess with success. This story just completely overturns everything that has been working so well for the church up until this point. Instead of preaching out in public where everyone can listen, Peter finds himself preaching inside a private household. Instead of speaking to people who already have a knowledge of the Jewish tradition, he is addressing people who know nothing about it. But, most of all, he finds himself in a house surrounded by Gentiles. Based on everything that he has learned about how church growth works, this is a waste of time. There's no way that this is going to lead to anything.

Peter's Resistance

And that is why Peter has been absolutely resistant at every step of this story. Just to get Peter to go out of his door and accept an invitation from this man, Cornelius, to come to his house, has required an elaborate vision to be sent to Peter and repeated three times. Finally, after the third time through the vision, Peter gets the message and heads off to Cornelius' house, but he clearly doesn't expect anything to come from it because, when they do actually begin to respond and he even sees the sign that the Holy Spirit has come upon them, he is totally flabbergasted. At least it says, **"The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles."** And Peter is right there with them.

And I know that we know that Peter was all wrong about that – that what happened in Cornelius' house was but the smallest start of a greater success for the church than it had yet seen. But that was so hard to see in the moment because all of their eyes had been blinded by the spectacular success they had been experiencing. And who wants to mess with success? And I can't help but wonder what would have happened had they missed that opportunity to try something completely different.

We Wouldn't do that!

It might be tempting for us, sitting here with 20/20 hindsight, to look back at the church at that moment and feel smug. Surely we wouldn't do that. Surely we wouldn't be so wedded to our past successful methods that we would become entrapped by them. But, I wonder, wouldn't we?

Today is Christian Family Sunday. And every year at this time, I am reminded of just how much the church has been focused on maintaining and building up Christian families over the past several decades. That has been what church has been here for in the eyes of many people. It has all been

about moms and dads and children growing up in the church and continuing to pass that down through the generations.

Our Successful Strategy

The strategy, overall, was fairly simple. The church went out to the Christian parents in the community and said, give us your children. Send them to the church for an hour each week and we will educate them in our excellent Sunday School programs and socialize them in our special events and groups. We will make good Christians of them and then send them back to you so that they can go on and create their own Christian families. This was the strategy, and it was a new strategy that was very innovative at the time. It began in the post war era and hit its stride in the 60s and 70s in most of North America.

And was this strategy successful? Well, let me tell you, if you talk to anyone who was involved in that movement at the time, they will assure you that it was extraordinarily successful. Everywhere I've ever gone, every Church that I've ever visited has told me stories of this marvelous success. Sunday school classes were full to bursting with kids. Christian education facilities were often overwhelmed because there were so many kids. Churches had to borrow classrooms from nearby schools or meet in cloakrooms or bathrooms. And, make no mistake, this kind of success was heady and exciting. People felt truly blessed to be part of it.

Extrapolating Success

And if we were to pause right there, at some point in the mid 1980s and start to extrapolate about where the church was going to go from there, the outlook seemed very clear. The kids who passed through that very successful system would grow up to become the mainstay of the Christian Church. Why today, the church would be overwhelmed by all those people in their 30s 40s 50s and 60s who passed through those Sunday schools. Why, there would be so many young adults that we would scarcely know what to do with them.

Except, well, things didn't quite turn out that way, did they? In fact, I would say that that generation who passed through that system has actually proved to be the generation that has abandoned the church possibly more than any previous generation in its history. Which makes me ask the question, was at least some of that success merely an illusion?

Not a Failure

Now, I'm not trying to say that that approach was a failure because it wasn't. Obviously, very good things came out of it as people grew and were formed in Christ. The reason why more than a generation of young people largely abandoned the church is more complex than how they were put through Sunday School. There have been huge societal changes, economic changes and we've even come to understand the family itself in very different ways for some very good reasons.

No, it wasn't a failure, but it probably wasn't the pure unmitigated success that we thought it was either. But here's the problem: whether it was a success or not, we have come to see it that way. We have come to see it as one of the great successes in the history of the church and as the only way to minister to Christian families that could be successful. And that might be a problem, because people don't like to mess with success.

Our Resistance

The church has been very resistant to rethink how we approach ministry to families over the last several years because we thought we knew how to do it successfully. When the early church fell into that trap, God had to get their attention pretty powerfully by sending the same vision to Peter three times. I wonder, what might God be doing to encourage the church today to rethink our approach?

Well, isn't it kind of interesting that for the last year the church has been largely unable to minister to families according to its traditional approach? For the past year, we have been unable to say to families, "Give us your kids for an hour on Sunday and we'll turn them into Christians." And there is no denying that this past year has been a difficult time for families of every type and the church has often struggled to respond to what families are dealing with.

But there is also no denying that ministry and faith formation have not stopped in the past year. And, though we've had to be creative and think outside of the box that is the building of the church, I would say that some really good things have happened. I wonder, has this been God's way of saying to us that it might be time to rethink how we build up Christian families? Has God been saying that it's time to rethink how we define success in that?

What is the Spirit Saying to the Churches?

And so let me suggest what I think the Spirit might be saying to the churches today about how we build up Christian families. I put forward these thoughts humbly, not as a way of saying that this is what must be, but to provoke you into thinking about what could be.

I would suggest to you that maybe the best place to form the faith of families is not in the church but rather in the home. If we can give the resources to parents to raise up their children, I suspect that we might see faith formation that is more enduring in the long run.

Now, that doesn't mean that there isn't a place for forming a family's faith in the church when it meets and that can include Sunday School classes and similar things, but I suspect we may have to get past this notion we have of separating off the children from the other parts of the worshiping life of the church. The more we can integrate them into everything we do, the more we may be able to nourish a faith that will endure a lifetime.

The Families we Minister to

And one key thing is that we will have to think critically about the families we think we're ministering to because they are no longer the kinds of families the programs were originally designed for. Christian families come in all shapes and sizes today and include single parent, blended and other configurations. Also, of course, two working parents has become the norm. It would actually be very surprising if a way of building up Christian families that was designed with very different assumptions about how families were configured would serve them as well today.

Before the invitation to go to Cornelius' household came along, Peter did think he had it all worked out. He knew what successful ministry looked like. The story of how he came to go to that house is really an amazing story of everything that God had to do to get his attention. It makes me wonder what God might be doing to get our attention today.