

# The Three W's of a Successful Church!

Hespeler, May 17, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Seventh Sunday of Easter  
Acts 1:3-14, Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11

**T**he Christian church is one of the most successful organizations in the history of the world. From a handful of people – small enough that they could almost all be listed by name in our reading this morning from the Book of Acts – it grew over the next several centuries to become the dominant institution of the Western world and ultimately to dominate the globe.

And sure, in our own day, some of that dominance has fallen off. Apart from some significant exceptions, the church in North America is not experiencing overall growth these days. But it has been quite a run.

## Going Back to Where it Started

And if it has fallen off a bit, maybe it is time to go back to where it all started. In our reading this morning, the author of the Book of Acts is telling us that story. He is describing the events that were foundational for the church, that set it up to become all that it was meant to be.

Next week, on Pentecost, we will celebrate the birthday of the church and how, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it came into being. But today, let's look at the foundational advice that Jesus and others gave to the church to set them up so that they could hit the ground running.

I see three pieces of advice in this passage – advice that is just as relevant today as when this book was written. I call them the three W's. And I hope that you will leave with all three of them on your hearts as you meditate on what God is calling our church to do today.

## Finding Success

Our world has some very clear ideas about success and how it is supposed to be achieved. Endless books have been written about how to were up your organization for it. And these books focus on things like structure and strategy. It often comes down to having a clear mission and making sure that everything in your organization is built around reaching those goals.

So, I guess that is where we should start. Surely the first thing that Jesus gave to the church had to be an excellent strategy and a clear mission statement.

But is that what we see in our reading this morning? Not exactly. After spending 40 days with his followers and giving them all the proof that they needed that he was alive and had conquered death for them, he finally gathered them together to tell them what the next step in the plan was.

## Wait

So, this is it, right, the big strategy session. We're going to get the inside scoop on how the church is supposed to set itself up to gain power and influence people. That is how you succeed in this life, isn't it?

So, what does Jesus do? **“He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father.”**

Let me ask you, does that seem like the kind of winning strategy that brings you success in our world? Where are the instructions to set up committees and programs? Where are the organizing principles



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and the grand mission statements and visioning exercises? Most of all, where is the budget? We all know that you can't get anything done without a budget!

## Contrary to Worldly Wisdom

This goes against everything we are taught about how organizations thrive. We want to get ready, to plan and prepare. We assume that the only way to get ahead in this world is to get busy. What kind of plan starts with *wait*?

But that is exactly what Jesus says to do. And that, for the most part, is what the first Christians do. It says that they “**were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.**” Their main activity was wait.

What are we to take away from this as we seek to build a strong church? Should we just disband all of our committees, scrap our mission statements and hold endless prayer meetings?

Well, not exactly. I do believe that there is a place for all these things. Having the right kind of structures in place does help you to be ready when whatever you are waiting for actually shows up.

## Maintaining Structures

But it is also true that the church has a long history of pouring so much energy and time into setting up and maintaining our structures that we can miss hearing what God is telling us to do.

Every church has tendencies to do this in their own way. I have often seen how Presbyterians do it. Every year, for example, the Presbyterian Church gathers at a General Assembly with representatives coming from across the country.

The purpose of these assemblies, at its core, is to listen to what God is saying to the church. In the Reformed Church, we believe that when the church gathers in this way and when we pray, the Holy Spirit speaks to the church. And I know that that does happen; I have been there sometimes when the Spirit speaks to the church, and it is quite moving.

But when we do meet like that, there is also always a lot of business to do. There are budgets to be approved, committees to form and policies to put in place. And it is always a temptation to let all of that business absorb our attention. We become totally focused on it. And then, when we leave, we congratulate ourselves on having a good assembly if we have dealt with all the business efficiently.

And that is what we do at all levels in the church. We pour our attention and effort into organization, policies and meetings and congratulate ourselves for setting ourselves up for success. This first instruction of Jesus to wait on God's Spirit gives us an important corrective to that tendency.

## Trust in our Structures

Even more troubling, we tend to put our trust in those organizational efforts. Having proper policies and committee structures makes us feel confident that we are building a secure future. But Jesus doesn't want us to trust in our efforts, does he? He wants us to trust in God, and so Jesus teaches us to wait.

So, the first W is wait. Now let's turn to the next piece of advice that Jesus gives us. Surely the next thing that we need for success is a good marketing strategy. If we want our churches to grow as the early church grew from its humble beginnings, we obviously need to have some kind of plan to get the word out.

## Marketing the Message

And of course, our modern world stands ready with all kinds of expertise in that area. So much of the world around us is geared towards getting out exactly those kinds of messages. We are all surrounded

every single day with so much advertising and marketing that we often don't even realize that it is being fed to us.

And we certainly see churches jumping wholeheartedly into this effort, engaging in multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns such as, for example, the "He Gets Us" campaign that placed \$20 million ads in four of the most recent Super Bowls.

And even churches that have nowhere near that kind of money to throw around (like Canadian Presbyterian churches) still feel like they need to invest whatever effort and money they can into things like social media campaigns and even hire consultants to get their message out.

## Jesus' Communication Plan

So, what is the advice that Jesus gives us for this essential part of the plan? Well, here is what he says to the disciples: **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

This brings us to the second W for a successful church: witness. Witnessing is a communication strategy, but it is not one that we usually associate with big marketing campaigns, is it? It is more associated with trials and law courts.

## Based on Our Experiences

But here is the key thing about witnessing that I think that Jesus is pointing to. Witnesses can only speak about what they have experienced themselves. They have to speak authentically because that is the only thing that can give their message meaning.

That is, in many ways, the very opposite of a slick marketing campaign, which depends on form and style, not on people just being themselves.

What does that mean for the church as it spreads its message today? It doesn't mean that we can have no communication strategies or that we cannot think and plan about how we want to use things like social media.

## Honesty and Authenticity

But it is an important reminder that any message we put out to the world has to be honest and authentic. The church can't just take polls and give people the message that they want to hear. We need to speak from the heart about what we have experienced of Jesus. That is what Jesus calls the church to do, and it remains the foundation of our success to this day.

So, first we are to wait. Secondly, we are to witness. What is the third W? That is not something that Jesus himself says, but something that is said just after he leaves.

## Watching Heaven

Jesus ascends into heaven. The immediate presence of Jesus is being transformed into a more spiritual presence. But then something remarkable happens. **"While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them."**

What were the disciples doing at that moment? They were watching – gazing up toward heaven. And that is an attitude that the Christian church has often adopted throughout the centuries.

We fix all of our attention and energy on heaven and particularly on getting there someday when we die. For many people, that has become the entire point of the Christian faith – that it is only about getting a ticket to heaven.

## Why Watch?

Now, the promise of an afterlife is real; I do not mean to suggest in any way that it isn't. But I would say that when it becomes the sole focus of our faith, we have a problem. And so it is that two angels come to the disciples as they stand there and say, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"**

This is an important warning about the first W. The first W was a command to wait – to wait on God and on the action of the Holy Spirit. But this makes it quite clear that our waiting should not be focused on another world or on a life after death. We are to wait on God for this world – wait on God who will show us where to go and how to bear witness to our experience of Jesus in this world.

## In God's Hands

What comes after this life, we can simply trust that that is in God's hands. **"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority,"** Jesus says to the disciples. And the two angels agree when they say, **"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."**

The message is clear. God will take care of all of that and you can confidently leave that in God's loving hands. But you are here now and you all have some things to do.

And what have you got to do? If you leave today without knowing that, then I will have failed in my job today.

## Wait, Witness

You are called to wait on God. You are to be ready to respond to the opportunities to show God's love in this world that God places before you. You are to wait, expecting that God's Spirit will lead.

And you are called to witness. You are to be ready to share from your own heart what you have experienced of your Lord Jesus whenever the opportunity arises. And you are to do that in Jerusalem (that is, where you are). You are to do it in Judea and Samaria (that is, where you have some influence). And you are to do it to the ends of the earth (that is, wherever God might send you).

## Why Are You Watching?

And every so often, you need to check yourself and ask why you are wasting your time watching heaven. Your heavenly destiny is in the hands of your heavenly Father, and you can trust God for it.

So, will you remember them? Will you ponder them this week? Wait, witness and why are you watching heaven?