

June 10, 2017 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church  
Acts 2:42-47 God Grows His Church by Andy McDonald

Last week we looked at Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to establish the church in the context of change. The Holy Spirit comes transform people to bring about change in our lives, to change the course of lives, to change interests, to change where we invest our energies. The Holy Spirit is the divine agent of change and we concluded last week by inviting us to be open to letting the Spirit transform us to change us that we might change the world.

Often those today who are around church and church structures, and church organization today will pick up their Bibles and read Acts 2 about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of what we call the “Early Church”, and the response is disappointment about the church of today.

It is easy to read the story in Acts 2, (to mention the rest of the book) and find the story sufficient evidence to create sense of disappointment with the church today when compared to the Early Church.

Throughout my ministry I’ve heard those who observe the discrepancy between the then and the now between the Pentecost group who formed the original early church and our churches today, and there have been proposed plans to fix the problem.

The primary plan I’ve heard over and over again is that we must become like the early church. The thinking follows this strategy. “If we will do what they did we will become what they were!”

I’ve heard it said many times that we need to return to the early church. This thinking proposes that what they did caused the Holy Spirit to come. They put in their time. They read scripture. They all met together and were of one accord. They prayed. They had everything in common. They cared or anyone in need and the result was the Holy Spirit showed up and the church became this incredible history altering

organization. All we have to do is behave the same as the early church and that can all happen again!

This thinking is right and wrong. Certainly there are some principles we can glean from the early church that will serve any church well at any point in history. This is the part that has some rightness to it.

But there is a wrong-headed side to this strategy. First is the ego side that assumes we can replicate the spirit and attitude and action and gain the inspiration that was the unique experience of those who had just spent several years walking and talking and working and playing and laughing and crying and learning directly from Jesus.

But maybe more critical is this principle of biblical interpretation where a person can come to believe that the Bible is like God's prescription pad. He inspires a prophet or historian or poet and they write about that inspiration, and rather than a description of what happened, or what they were shown, or how they reflected on God, some don't see it as descriptive but prescriptive.

Acts 2 is one of those cases. There are some who believe that this incredible chapter of the Bible isn't so much a description of the formation of the Early Church as it is a prescription of how every Christian Church is to be established. The story is turned from story of the formation of the church is turned into a set of rules for the formation of any church.

There are, undoubtedly some prescriptive portions of scripture. We can see both descriptive and prescriptive examples within Jesus' famous sermon on the mount. That sermon opens with the Beatitudes which are demonstratively descriptive as they describe who is blest. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. And so on.

Jesus isn't prescribing so much as describing who is happy and blest.

Sure we can make applications but Jesus isn't saying be poor in spirit, mourn, be meek, hunger and thirst after righteousness. All these things we might imply or not.

But when we come to the part of his sermon where he says "Let your light shine," we are reading much more prescriptive instruction. We have a hard time wiggling around the direct prescriptive and direct words, "But I tell you, Love your enemies." He's not describing his followers here, no he is prescribing.

So there are obvious biblical texts that are prescriptive but prescriptions are pretty clear and not so subtle. But much more, much much more of scripture, maybe the vast majority is of a descriptive nature. It tells a story. We are able to read the story. We can research what the meaning of the story might have been to the original listener. We think about time in history, the culture, the climate of the day, and we can discern principles and teachings which can then be applied to us in our day. In looking at scripture so much is not directly prescriptive.

If we allow ourselves to process it sort of comes naturally to see it as descriptive. Just because God prescribed for Noah to build an ark doesn't compel us to imagine that to be God's prescription for us. Just because God prescribed for Abraham to offer Isaac doesn't leap over to become our prescription to follow suite.

When people campaign for us to become like the early church so we might grow and change the world they often focus in on our scripture for today.

Peter has just finished his sermon. Must have been a great one delivered with passion and filled with the Holy Spirit because at the end there was a huge response and about 3000 were baptized and added to their number that day.

What did they do? Here's the description from Acts 2:42- through the first part of vs 47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

Prescriptive thinking says we should therefore:

1. Devote ourselves to the apostles teaching.
2. Devote ourselves to fellowship
3. Devote ourselves to eating together
4. Devote ourselves to prayer
5. Be together
6. Have everything in common
7. Sell our possessions and goods
8. Give to anyone who has need
9. Meet together every day
10. Eat in one another's homes
11. Praise God

And then we too will enjoy the favor of all the people and the church will be healthy and grow and change the world as the early church did.

While it is clear that this passage, like most of scripture, is descriptive of a great happening a wonderful event, and while it is not prescriptive, there is the reality that from the story, from the experience, we can learn some great principles about church and church life and growing the church.

One of the principles that might be gleaned and applied to our church today is a devotion to the apostle's teaching which we might adopt and adapt as devotion to scripture, OT and NT. There's no doubt that there is room for us to improve in our devotion to scripture. We may own a

number of Bibles but according to one statistic, over half of those who claim to be Christian can't name five of the ten commandments. A principle of devotion to knowing and nourishing our souls from scripture might be a principle we could apply.

From the story of people caring for the needs of others by giving is simply descriptive but when we combine that story with Jesus prescriptive teaching, "Don't store up treasures here on earth . . . store up treasures in heaven." Might combine to call us to more generous living. To holding our possessions more lightly. To recognizing ourselves as manager's of God's gifts for the blessing of others.

In the description of life in the early church there was breaking of bread in one another's homes and eating together. Fellowship and we might want to adopt the principle of gathering in small gatherings to enjoy the strength and life that comes with fellowship, being in one another's homes, and eating together.

But I'm even more intrigued by how the early church capitalized on social change occurring in the first century. The rise of the Roman cities, especially in the eastern Roman empire, became the incubator for the Early Church and its mission to spread the good news, and the kingdom values.

Paul's letters are to churches in these Roman cities. The developing cities represented hope to new generations who were seeking to escape the social, economic, political hold of their ancestors.

Meeks points out, "...at the leading edge of the great political and social changes that occurred during the six and half centuries from Alexander to Constantine...where the new civilization could be experience, where novelties would first be encountered...where, if anywhere, change could be met and even sought out. It was where the Roman empire was, and where the future began."

And the early church adopted a strategy to ride the wave of these developments that were changing the world.

Gordon Middleton points out four social hubs within the cities which the early church used for its own purposes in propagating the Good News about Jesus.

We see Paul arrive at a new city to work. Where did he immediately go? To the synagogue. Acts refers to the synagogue 3 times more often than do the gospels. This was critical to the early church flourishing. The Diaspora had resulted in a significant Jewish population in nearly every town along the eastern Mediterranean and Paul and other missionaries used these religious centers in the cities.

We see the capitalizing on the extended family. Family was more than our 21<sup>st</sup> century word captures. It was the blood related group, but also slaves, and former slaves, clients, hired laborers, tenants, a much larger and diverse group. All through Acts we find Paul and the others working with these family groups. When Paul and Silas sin in prison and the earthquake frees them, and the Philippian jailer and all his household are converted. Paul would in his letters say hello or give a blessing to the church that meets at so and so's home that extended family unit.

Paul took advantage of using his trade association of tent makers as an opportunity to share the gospel. Maybe other trade associations, and business groups in the cities were tools for sharing the gospel.

History reveals that early Christian groups were likened to the ancient schools. Paul taught for extended periods of time in some type of organized school in Antioch and in Ephesus.

A principle we can adopt from these practices of the early church is to once again find an take advantage of where the wind is blowing in social changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As the church today we must wake up and ask what are the dominant factors driving social, political and economic change in our moment in history?

Friedman has suggested that the proliferation of rapid, global, inexpensive communications has created a “flat world” in which previous geographic and cultural boundaries must be understood in an entirely new context.

Think of what this means for the missionary work of our Christian faith. In 1874 when J.N. Andrews was the first missionary from our denomination it took 8-9 days just to cross the Atlantic ocean.

Missionaries had to learn the language of the new country. Books and teaching material had to be translated. Today we can keyboard a letter in our native language, hit a translate button to some other language, and send the immediate letter around the world.

How do we the church adapt and find advantage for the gospel as the very landscape is reshaped? How do we look into the future and discern trends not so we can just make money, or wise investments, or keep up with the Joneses but so we can exploit these changes for the sake of the gospel?

Just like the early church capitalized on the social hubs of the day which ones should we be doing the same today? Where’s the leverage point”.

How can we as a church piggy back for church growth the hub of global business, the whole media and entertainment world, and education?

It remains to be seen if we will live bravely in this new world and leave our comfort zone and innovate and be creative as was the early church?

What will be the equivalent of coming to Athens and noting the people to be very religious and using their honor to the unknown God to make known Jesus Christ?

Today all we have time for is to raise some questions. Our God is as sovereign today as on the day of Pentecost. The times are different. The opportunities are unique to our day. But God calls us to capitalize on the opportunities of our day not the day's gone by.

The last part of vs 47 in Acts 2 says "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Today as we of this generation discover how to piggy-back on global business, media and entertainment and education, as we allow God's Holy Spirit to inspire us, not just to be tag along's but to innovate and lead and once again find our voice to point people to the savior, then not trying to make the description of the early church be a prescription for us, but free us to find today's wind of the spirit, then once again the one who builds his church will continue and the Lord will add to the number daily those being saved.



What's the best prescription you've ever been given?

Do you prefer getting the answer of journeying to find it?

Why do you think there is the need among many to read the Bible as prescriptive even when it is apparently a descriptive portion?

Prescriptive seems more concrete while descriptive less so. How do we get prescriptions legitimately from descriptive passages?

How do you see the early church capitalizing on social hubs of its day?

What practices for our church life can we get from Acts 2?

What are some of the social hubs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

How comfortable are you with using these hubs for propagating the gospel?

How innovative and engaged with the culture should the church be today for the sake of the gospel going to the world?

Where might God be calling you to excellence in secular culture for kingdom benefit?



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