

## “Growing Together”

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### Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 65:1-8 New Testament Lesson – Acts 2:39-46

Joseph Tkach Jr., in his article “Seeking a center for the church,”<sup>1</sup> acknowledges that “various authors have various ideas about what Christian churches ought to be doing, and (that) there is much validity in what they say. ... A healthy church will be doing things that help members and things that attract new members .... “Yet,” says Tkach, “it is possible to turn a perfectly valid list of ideas into legalism – or even into a program that works without Christ, simply because it hits smart, sociological buttons.” “We do not have to look far to find growing churches that have bad doctrine. In some cases they are growing because of their bad doctrine. ...”

Tkach continues by noting that the Book of Acts “describes the early church at its best: ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42). “This is a praiseworthy response to the forgiveness and new life that we have in Christ. We need to be attentive to doctrine,” says Tkach, “especially the gospel, and (we need to be attentive) to ... fellowship, worship, and prayer.”

Last week, we saw that our biggest opportunity for growth at First Presbyterian Church is in **equipping ourselves and each other for ministry**, and in **growing in the faith and in our knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior**. And I promised that this week, we would focus on how we can achieve this growth – how we can equip ourselves and others for ministry as we grow in our faith and knowledge of Christ.

And here in the Book of Acts, we find the answer: by upholding Christian doctrine (or beliefs) and being engaged with the gospel, church fellowship, worship, and prayer – that’s how we become equipped for ministry and help each other to grow in the faith.

First let’s look at Christian doctrine. Acts says that “those who welcomed (the gospel) message were baptized, and (on) that day, about 3,000 persons were added.” Baptism and the breaking of bread (or the Lord’s Supper) are at the heart of Christian doctrine

It’s hard to image anyone being equipped for ministry apart from these two sacraments, the sacrament of Baptism in which God claims us as his own, and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper through which we are spiritually strength and nourished.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.wcg.org/lit/church/index/tkach.htm>

But what about “the apostles’ teaching, and fellowship ... and prayer,” which Acts also upholds as critical to church growth and vitality? “All who believed,” says Acts, “were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

What kind of an example is that? I mean it sounds good on the surface (maybe that they ever engaged in some faith-based practices at home, like the breaking of bread in remembrance of the Lord), but really, selling their possessions and distributing the proceeds to anyone in need? Having all things in common? That sounds like socialism.

Chandler Stokes, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids, MI, has shed some light on where Christians come down between socialism and capitalism. He shares with us the following words from the head of the East German Church, which spent years struggling to survive behind the Iron Curtain, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall: “Almost every time I come to the West, I am asked by serious and well-meaning church people, ‘How are you able to be a Christian in a communist society, with so many pressures and impositions from the state?’ My usual response is to ask, ‘How are you able to be a Christian in a capitalist society? With every pressure to self-centered consumption and self-gratifying indulgence?’” “Capitalism, tempered by compassion, can accomplish great good,” says writer Christine Chakoian. “Capitalism can inspire creativity, encourage independence, and most importantly, raise people out of poverty.

But capitalism can’t teach us to care.....And it can’t teach us that greed is ultimately empty ... and it can’t teach us that, in the long run, sharing what we have brings us much more joy than owning things. Capitalism can’t teach us any of these things,” says Chakoian. “But the gospel ... the gospel can.”<sup>2</sup>

So I guess it’s fair to say there’s a fine balance to living life as a Christian. All Christians experience some form of push back from worldly forces, societal trends and obligations, whether they experience this outwardly because of the Christian practices and values they maintain, or inwardly when they fail to uphold Christian practices and to act on their faith-based values.

This was a concern when Peter was building up the church of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and it’s a concern today for those building up the church 20 centuries later. And yet, throughout all that time, the church has been nurtured and maintained and revitalized by following the essential practices of the Christian faith, by living out the gospel in fellowship, worship, and prayer, which is not always easy.

Marva J. Dawn tells of a single friend from Seattle who once went by himself to a potluck. Shortly after he arrived, the host asked as part of an ice-breaker: “Everyone please stand and tell who you are and with whom you came.”

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Chakoian, “With glad and generous hearts,” April 21, 2002, *Clarendon Hills Community Presbyterian Web Site*, [chcpc.org](http://chcpc.org).

When it was her friend's turn to stand and introduce himself, he stood and said..., Hi, "I'm Bob, and I came with the ice cream."<sup>3</sup>

One of the hardest things for any church to do is to meet the needs of all people – single, married; with children, empty-nesters and no-nesters; lifetime Christians, first-time visitors and everyone in between. How can any one church be all things to all people?

The answer depends on how you define church. If you define church as this building, the staff and its elected officers and committee members, then there is only so much we can do. But, if you define the church as those who God has called to live out the gospel in fellowship, worship, and prayer, well then heaven only knows how far we can go.

Randy Frazee of Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas, describes a hands-on approach to equipping people for ministry and growing in our faith and knowledge of Christ, an inspiring approach that goes beyond the walls of the church and reaches into the lives of the people who are the church.

"We moved into a neighborhood where several families from the church already lived," writes Frazee. "Our intent as we made this move was to stay home more and consolidate what it meant to be a follower of Jesus into this new circle of 90 houses...." "Shortly after we moved in we invited neighbors to a dessert get-together to explain our simple idea and ask them to consider partnering with us.... At the core we wanted to establish the presence of a Christian community in our neighborhood. ... Over the last six years we've seen lives transformed. People have come to faith in Christ...." "The powerful thing about this decentralized approach," says Frazee, "is that our church has given birth to more than a hundred groups all over the city doing the same things."

A hundred groups all over the city living out the gospel together in worship, fellowship, and prayer. There's no secret formula or magical touch for equipping ourselves and others for ministry as we grow in the faith. The trick is to take advantage of the opportunities you have in front of you, opportunities for growing together in faith. And where those opportunities are lacking, to create them ourselves – create them yourself, like one household did in one neighborhood in Fort Worth, Texas.

If we are not growing together in our faith – as families and friends, as communities, as churches – than what we are actually doing is growing apart, maybe not as a church, but clearly as families and communities these days. And that's just not the model that scripture gives us for a life of faith. Maybe we should be considering a decentralized approach like Frazee's, where church also happens in the other places where we gather, whether it's at home, or out in the community.

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<sup>3</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *The Hilarity of Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 161.

Many people in this church gather regularly between Sundays for fellowship, service, and prayer. Our church committees – each one of which opens and closes with prayer – are dedicated to providing you the support you need to grow spiritually and to share the faith.

If you have a need that is not being met in your own Christian walk, or in the lives of your friends and loved ones, let me or one of our church members know. And where that need arises from a lack of initiative – either on the part of the church or, more often, on the part of us as individuals – that’s where we are called to stretch ourselves as Christians.

By coming alongside one another to do church together, we have incredible opportunities for growth, incredible opportunities to equip ourselves and others for the work of ministry – both in and through this church, but also in and throughout your life. So let’s ask ourselves if that’s something we can each commit to doing and sharing in with others growing together in our faith, wherever that might take place, and with whomever God brings into our lives. Amen

### **Pastoral Prayer**

O God, our hearts break for those whose hearts are breaking. We grieve with those who are experiencing grief.

Bring them comfort as only you can. Let them know that they are not alone, that you are with them and that we stand beside them.

At the same time, Lord, we rejoice with those who are rejoicing; we celebrate the ways you are blessing and providing for those among us. We give you all the glory for the great things being done.

We know that you are God of the broken and the joyful – that in both you are good, that in both you are sovereign.

Thank you for knowing each person in this sanctuary and for meeting us wherever we are.

Thank you for Jesus, who came that we might know what a life of perfect love looks like, and who taught us the perfect prayer, saying::

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.