Transforming a Crowd into a Congregation

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Introduction: Jesus promised that He would build His church... I briefly considered simply reading Matthew 16:18 and sitting down—Enough said; Jesus promised to do it; He will take care of the details. I realize, however, that implied in Christ’s promise is His purpose to use means to build His church. He planned to use Peter, the other apostles, and countless other people and circumstances whose stories unfold in the NT, throughout history, into our day, and will unfold until our Savior returns.

As an expositor, however, I am hesitant to simply regale you with stories and anecdotes of “how we did it.” Personal testimony can be instructive, but the Word of God brings true impact in life and ministry. So, Jesus promised that He would build His church in Mat 16:18, and I have personally witnessed His promise fulfilled twice—once at Life Point Baptist Church, and the other in the Acts of the Apostles. This morning I’d like to share my observations of both, specifically in relation to a major milestone of church planting: Transforming a Crowd into a Congregation.

On our first Sunday ever at Life Point 134 people showed up, and just over 100 of them were people we had never met from the community! By most accounts we started with a crowd of strangers. But if you think those numbers are good—or daunting, depending on your perspective—what about the numbers on the first day of the Jerusalem church?

• Acts 2:41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

I imagine for the three thousand people this was exciting, but for the leadership—I don’t have to imagine, I know—it was terrifying! It was terrifying, and it was exhilarating; it was formidable, and it was faith-building all at the same time.

The Christ appointed leadership had many tasks ahead of them, not the least of which was helping three thousand strangers grow into a loving, connected body reflecting the perfect union of Father and Son.

• John 17:20–21 “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

I believe this is the mission of the church, and a major task of the spiritual leadership that Christ has set over His local assembly. Now that we’ve established the biblical significance of our theme, I want to take the rest of the time and flesh it out by unpacking principles behind the narrative of the internal cohesion of the church in Acts.

This morning I want to show you three primary NT principles for Transforming a Crowd into a Congregation...
I. You need to begin the work before you begin “the work.”

Acts 1:12–16 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphæus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. 15 At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, 16 “Brethren…”

A. The leadership was recognized (v.13, cf. 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:20).

B. Harmony was prioritized.

v. 14 These all with one mind... along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

*Note:* the church was not built by the leaders alone, but by all the believers gathering together. From this group of “nobodies,” however, came James, the future elder of the Jerusalem church!

C. Faith through fervent prayer was emphasized.

v. 14a These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer...

D. The vision was crystallized (v. 15).

- What’s the plan? ...for the next weeks, months, years, and long term?
- Establish core doctrine, constitution, values.
- Talk through necessary details, organization, programs, etc.

*How do you think this crowd of 120 was impacted by this pre-work?*

*What are the dangers of having a close-knit core group before the church begins?*

*What impact did this unity before the launch have on the unity of the new church that would soon be established?*

So the first principle for Transforming a Crowd into a Congregation is that you need to begin the work before you begin “the work.” Secondly we see that...
II. You need to let Christ build His church through obedience to the NT pattern.

Acts 2:37–42 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” 38 Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

A. Evangelism

Evangelism isn’t just calling people heaven; it is calling them to something bigger than themselves in this life!

v. 38 Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- Cf. Eph 4:3 …the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

vv. 39-40 “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” “…Be saved from this perverse generation!”

B. Baptism

Baptism pictures new life and a new identity in Christ. It is a powerful picture and a continual reminder for the church of their ongoing relationship with Christ and His body.

C. Faithful church membership

There was a time when local church membership was an understood obligation of every believer. Perhaps there are still places where it is still in vogue, but a growing number of churches are moving away from membership, and I believe they are moving away from a NT model that leads to congregational unity and a true sense of community.

There are nine clear biblical arguments for church membership...

1. The pattern of Acts

Acts 2:41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.
2. The meaning of the word “added” (Acts 2:41, 47).

   Acts 2:47 … the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

   “Added” is the Greek word προστίθεμαι (prostithemi) which means “to put to, to add, join to, or gather together.” The word is a combination of two Greek words (pros – to, toward, together and tithemi – to put or place), so literally prostithemi means “to place together.”

3. The required unity in a body

   1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

4. The joint responsibility to of the church choose officers, etc.

   Acts 6:3 “Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

5. The joint responsibility of the church to guard doctrine.

   1 Timothy 3:15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

   Consider what Paul wrote to the Philippian Church…

   Philippians 1:27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;

6. The requirement for every believer to be in submission to specific leaders.

   Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

   Who is the “them” and “they” in your life? (Rhetorical questions)

   Illustration: It’s kind of like Ephesians 6:1, “Children, obey your parents.” What does Eph 6:1 indicate about the family? That there is a family; that children are a part of the family; that there are also parents that are a part of the family; and that there is a clear relationship of submission.

   It is not enough to respect a pastor, to listen to preaching, to get some guidance… Hebrews says, “Obey your leaders … submit yourselves… they watch for your souls.”
7. The seriousness (clarity) of leaving a local assembly.

   1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

   - It could be argued that active church membership in good standing was one of the best NT tests of genuine Christianity (more so than a profession of faith, or baptism).

8. The demand for local church discipline.

   1 Corinthians 5:7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

   1 Corinthians 5:13 But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

   The command to “clean out” and “remove” the disobedient from the “lump (of dough)” and “from among yourselves” indicates the removal from the local assembly for the purpose of purity.

9. The body metaphor makes it obvious that there is to be a clear connection of believers to each other in the assembly.

   1 Corinthians 12:14–20 For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body.

   Note: This was written to the Corinthians, this picture cannot be taken of the universal church, but is the picture of a local assembly—the Corinthian church.

 So, evangelism, baptism, and church membership are included in the NT pattern, but we also see...

D. Preaching and teaching (v. 42 …the apostles’ teaching…)

   There are two ways that preaching and teaching promote unity within the body:

   1. People recognize that their fellow worshipers are also committed to Scripture, sound doctrine, and biblical exposition.

      1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.
2. People are drawn to the preacher/pastor as their leader in a healthy and edifying way.
   v. 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching…

   • Our message is Christ, but the messenger is marked a slave of Christ, worthy to be biblically followed.
   2 Corinthians 4:5 For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake.
   1 Corinthians 11:1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

E. Fellowship

   The Greek word is, κοινωνία (koinōnia). And it means “to share, to participate… it is an association involving close mutual relationships and involvement… to join together.”

   Illustration: Perhaps you’ve heard of the English author, J.R.R. Tolkien who wrote a book in the 1930s called The Fellowship of the Ring. It is the story about 9 very different people who all agreed to travel together to destroy a dangerous ring. Why was the book called “The Fellowship of the Ring?” Because the ring was their quest, they talked about it, planned for it, labored because of it, and every step was to advance its purpose. Literally, everything centered around the ring.

F. The Lord’s Supper

   v. 42 They were continually devoting themselves… to the breaking of bread…

G. Hospitality

   Acts 2:46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

   Hospitality is so important for forming personal relationships! We asked God to give us a home that we could open up to the church, and it is our goal to have every person who comes to Life Point in our home… and to continue that pattern as the Lord allows.

H. Prayer

   Prayer is a primary means to develop spiritual relationships. It is a time of sincerity and vulnerability that connects hearts in the Lord, and it is a primary way that we can bear one another’s burdens.
   Galatians 6:2 Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

So the principles for Transforming a Crowd into a Congregation are that you need to begin the work before you begin “the work.” You need to let Christ build His church through obedience to the NT pattern, and finally...
III. **You need to benefit from God’s unifying work through crisis.**

A. God uses needs to draw the church together.

1. Believers seeing and sacrificially meeting the needs of their fellow church members brings unity and relationship to the body.
   
   **Acts 2:44–45** And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

2. There is, I believe, potential danger in individuals distributing money to individuals. Rather, the pattern is that individuals gave to the church and the church distributed. This protected the body from partiality while promoting community.
   
   **Acts 4:34–35** For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

B. God uses chastening to draw the church together.

   **Acts 5:9–11** Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” 10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

   **Note:** This is the first occurrence of the term *church* (ἐκκλησία, ekklēsia) in Acts. Could it be that this severe time of chastening and purification was part of what God intended to turn a group of believers into a church?

   **Illustration:** God used church discipline in the early stages of our church to tremendously coalesce the crowd into a congregation.

C. God uses difficulty, tragedy, and persecution to draw the church together.

   **Acts 12** is just one example of persecution drawing the church together:

   **Acts 12:5, 12** So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God…. 12 And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

   **Conclusion:** The principles for Transforming a Crowd into a Congregation are that you need to begin the work before you begin “the work;” you need to let Christ build His church through obedience to the NT pattern; and you need to benefit from God’s unifying work through crisis.