

10. Healthy Churches Develop Sister Churches

In Acts 9:31, we read, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” Then, in Acts 16:5, we read, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.” In these two verses, we see that the number of churches increased rapidly in the book of Acts. Healthy churches are churches that are able to reproduce themselves by starting other churches in the surrounding areas. The focus of our topic today will be how we develop churches that are equipped to reproduce themselves by starting other churches.

In these two verses, we see that the churches first multiplied in the area of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and then, the churches began to increase daily as the churches spread to a wider and wider area. Paul and the teams that traveled with him planted churches in key cities, and then, encouraged those churches to spread to the surrounding towns and villages. In this way, as each church developed, it was able to develop sister churches throughout the surrounding area. This principle is illustrated in Acts 16:1-5. Paul and Silas came to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. They met Timothy who had a good report from the brethren in Lystra and Iconium. They spent time in the region strengthening the churches. Meanwhile the churches continued to increase daily. What made it possible for that to happen?

One of the things many people do is confuse a church service, a church building, or some other thing, with a church. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.” This verse makes it very clear that the church is the body of Christ. It also makes it clear that the church is made up of individual members. As a result, the church includes all those who have repented of their sin of unbelief (John 16:9) and placed their trust in the fact that Christ died for their sins (1 Corinthians 15:3-4), was buried, and the Father raised Christ from the dead to show that He was satisfied with the payment of Christ for sin (1 John 2:1-2). Christ is the One who builds His church (Matthew 16:18) and adds to His church (Acts 2:47).

This means that the people in each local church are those who have repented of their sin of unbelief and placed their trust in Christ. However, a local church is more than just a group of Christians in an area. Acts 14:23 says, “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Here, we see that a local church is led by a group of elders (spiritual leaders) who meet qualifications for spiritual leadership (Titus 1:5-9). This means that, for new churches to develop, teams of spiritual leaders are developed to lead a group of Christians in a local area. Acts 14:21-23 shows us that Paul and Barnabas did not appoint these spiritual leaders or organize these local churches until their return trip when men had become qualified to lead each local group of Christians. In fact, we have seen, in Titus 1:5, that the reason Paul left Titus in Crete was to develop the leaders needed to establish churches in each city.

We see a good picture of the development of sister churches in Acts 19:8-10, where we read: “And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe,

but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” In these verses, we see that those who were developing as spiritual leaders worked with Paul, and the team, to develop sister churches throughout the entire region. A key principle for developing sister churches is focusing on sharing the Gospel in the entire region.

While ministering in the city of Ephesus, Paul helped build a vision for the entire region. This is illustrated in Colossians 4:12-13, 16, where we read: “Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis... Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.” Paul helped Epaphras develop a vision for the cities in his region of the province of Asia. Epaphras helped churches develop in the cities of Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea, while Paul was ministering in the city of Ephesus.

In focusing on the needs of the surrounding area, we see that Paul was following the example of Christ and the early church. In Mark 1:38, we see that Christ focused on the next towns. “But He said to them, ‘Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.’” Christ helped the disciples expand their vision by sending the seventy to the cities where He was planning to go. Luke 10:1 says, “After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go.” Acts 10:23 tells us that Peter did the same thing, “Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.” We see that Peter took six brethren from Joppa when he went to Caesarea.

The verse that we mentioned as we started this topic, Acts 9:31, shows how people began to realize that it was their responsibility to help multiply churches. That verse says, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” Here, we see that as churches were being built up and edified, they realized that it was their responsibility to multiply churches. We also see that they walked in the fear of God and that this reverential fear of God produced obedience and reproduction. Finally, we see that those churches depended on the Holy Spirit for strength and the power to reproduce.

Another key thing that helps healthy churches desire to develop sister churches is reports of what Christ is doing in other areas. Acts 11:18 says, “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’” Here, we see that the church at Jerusalem was filled with joy when they heard what the Lord was doing among the Gentiles. Acts 14:27 says, “Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” Churches are encouraged when they hear what the Lord is doing in other places. 1 Thessalonians 1:7 says, “So that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who

believe.” This verse shows us that a report of what God is doing through a healthy church provides an example to other churches.

The key to the development of sister churches is the establishment of home Bible classes in nearby areas. Christ went to the home of Matthew, in Matthew 9:9-13, and it provided a great opportunity for evangelism among all of his friends and coworkers. It is likely that none of those people would have gone searching for Christ. Instead, Christ came to them and shared the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins with them in the home of a friend. They were eager to meet Christ when Christ was willing to come to them where they were comfortable.

In addition to providing opportunities for evangelism in nearby areas, home Bible classes also provide the opportunity to teach the Word of God and help people grow. Acts 2:42 and 2:46-47 say, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers...So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” In the process, the Christians in that nearby area are also building relationships with one another. This can begin to lay a foundation to establish a sister church in that area.

One of the important things that a home Bible study, in a nearby area, does is provide the ideal opportunity to begin to develop new spiritual leadership. When Paul first came to Corinth, he met Aquila and Priscilla who had recently come to Corinth, because they had been forced to leave Rome by the Roman government. Since Paul had just come from Athens, he stayed with them and worked with them. Acts 18:3 says, “So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.” They grew and developed as spiritual leaders as Paul spent time in their home and worked with them. Acts 18:26 says that they did the same thing and helped Apollos to develop as a spiritual leader in Ephesus. Romans 16:3-5 shows that later, they returned to Rome and started a church in their home in that city. Several home Bible studies, in a nearby area, can be greatly used by the Lord to develop the nucleus for a new church to be started in that nearby area.

A healthy church develops evangelistic outreaches to nearby areas, develops stable Christians, and then, develops spiritual leadership and qualifies that leadership to lead new healthy churches. This makes it possible for the church to reproduce itself. May the Lord richly bless you as you help churches become healthy reproducing churches.