

What We Repent INTO

5 Things
Every New
Believer
Must Do

by John Teter

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What We Repent Into: 5 Things Every New Believer Must Do
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Credits

Cover and Interior Design: Karen Pheasant and Story.GS
Editor: Lindy Lowry

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Thank you to the outstanding Exponential team, especially Todd, Lindy, Terri and Karen. Thank you, Lindy, for your fine editorial work.

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Thank you for being a beautiful church that repents and believes in the gospel!

AND FINALLY...

Becky Teter, thank you for making what we repent into so joyful.



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Chapter 1

Disciples Are Greater Than Decisions (Disciples > Decisions)

The Father sends.

The Son trains.

The Spirit empowers.

And the church is the body of Jesus, healing those in our cities and declaring that God's kingdom has come near. In fact, it is so near that Jesus declares His kingdom is "at hand" (Mark 1:15). Into this kingdom, Jesus seeks and saves lost people today, through the Holy Spirit, and through us.

Yet, in our world today, evangelism is challenging, complicated and for many, rather discouraging. Missiologist David T. Olson describes our context as "postmodern, post-Christian and multiethnic."¹ Those we work with, those we live next to, and those we reach out to in our neighborhoods are often different from us. Their experiences are not our experiences; their language is not our language. Their foods are not our foods.

I wonder how many of us identify with the butterflies, the tension, the fear and the walls of hostility that the original 72 experienced as Jesus sent them for local evangelism and mission in Luke 10. How many of us wish we could have participated in Jesus' training seminar as He taught His 72 what to eat, what to wear, what to carry, what to say, what not to say, what to pray and how to deal with rejection? Knowing our call is much the same as that which Jesus called His original disciples to do is comforting. May we look back to the Master and His methods so that we might be strengthened for the mission that lies ahead.

We all long to be faithful to befriend, encourage and ultimately help our lost friends become disciples. To do this more effectively, join me in exploring four key areas:

1. Disciples are greater than decisions.
2. Begin with the end in mind.
3. Facing adversity: Why Peter Stood Twice
4. How the church began—and why it matters today.

As we focus on and live out these four areas of training and ministry methods, may we do so with a strong learning posture towards contextualization. Living out these ideas will look very different depending on the congregational context, larger secular culture and age and size of your ministry. Like the first apostles, I pray that we commune with the Spirit in such a way that those around us might testify, "They have been with Jesus!"

Who Are the Right People?

Leaders of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association have said that it isn't hard to fill a stadium, but it is very difficult to fill a stadium with the *right people*. As we consider seeking and saving the lost in our communities, we need to understand who these right people are. In our own context at Fountain of Life Covenant Church in Long Beach, Calif., where I pastor, we define the right people as those who don't follow Jesus, yet are learning the Scripture, asking their most meaningful questions, and growing in a trusting and warm relationship with mature Christians. When those people are the ones who hear the call to faith, amazing fruit results.

On the other hand, when the pews are filled with those who consider the faith entirely foreign, are not familiar with Scripture, and have not processed any of their most meaningful questions, the exhortation to "repent and believe" is far less compelling or effective. In fact, in some cases, we could argue that a call to faith at this point could result in a spiritual setback.

Our church in Long Beach hosts several evangelistic services throughout the calendar year to clarify expectations and focus a proactive and sacrificial effort towards evangelism on specific weeks. We call our members to live as "sent" people who reach out to friends and family, neighbors, co-workers and associates every day, but we know that having three services a year focused on evangelism anchors our evangelistic efforts. The seven weeks preceding each service help us to prepare with diligence and spiritual energy to do "the work of the 72."

About four years ago during one of those evangelistic services, the Holy Spirit was moving and the Word was alive among us. I remember that Sunday morning four years ago as though it were yesterday. People of all ages and backgrounds were encouraged by the presence of Jesus and the massive implications of future good in His promises. Many were convicted about their sin, distrust of God, and need for real change that they might live by faith. As the music team ministered to people's souls, the congregation had a moment to reflect on their lives. In the congregation that morning were more than a few non-believers. On this day, because God had been faithful to give an experience of His kingdom, people responded to the invitation to come and check out church for themselves. Those who embraced the exhortation to believe and follow Jesus stood up, and asked God for more supernatural power to live by His promises.

That morning two men, James and William (not his real name), made commitments to become disciples of Jesus. If you were to ask me then about the fruit that would come from their conversions, I might have reeled off some great dreams of the kingdom for each of them. At that stage, however, there isn't really any way to know. Fruit takes time—sometimes plenty of time—and only when we are working with evidence do we better understand the impact of a commitment to Christ.

Four years later, it's amazing to consider what God has done in James. The Lord literally rescued him from a most destructive path. After making his commitment to faith, James began attending weekly Life Groups, serving with the music team, and praying regularly with another man he trusted at church. One year after deciding to follow Jesus, he moved into an apartment with like-minded men who were dedicated to create a place for ministry to occur. Today, James is one of the most important and fruitful leaders in our church and is highly respected for his commitment to generosity and his profound love for God's Word. From his apartment, located in one of the roughest parts of town, James disciples at-risk men from the neighborhood. The Life Group he leads is the largest and most fruitful group in our church. James recently said that he believes it is God's will for him to pursue vocational ministry. In four years, he has gone from making a decision to becoming an amazingly fruitful disciple of Jesus.

I wish the same could be said of William after four years. While the Lord rescued William from a very destructive path, his faith was not fed. Jesus teaches that the only security a disciple has to make sure his faith is growing is to give a measure and then that measure and more will be given back to you. But, paraphrasing Luke 19:16, to the one who does not give a measure, even what we have been given will be taken away. Sadly, this has played true in William's life. After his public commitment to faith, he did not attend Bible studies, join the community of faith, or serve to develop his spiritual gifts. He never sought out a partner with whom he could pray and fight sin. He stayed isolated and did not engage in the mission of the church. Today, William is not a part of our church, and most of his life centers on trying to pay the bills and negotiating visitation times to see his child. In four years, William's decision did not materialize into discipleship.

As a senior pastor of a seven year-old church plant, I would much rather have 10 disciples than 100 "decisions." What can we learn from "The parable of James and William" in our evangelism leadership?

Chapter 2

Begin With the End in Mind

I believe we are to have heroes of the faith, but these heroes are not dependent on making the game winning shot, scoring a touchdown, or avoiding injury or scandal. No, the author of Hebrews teaches us to “remember our leaders,” consider how they lived out their faith, and then exhorts us to imitate their lives that we might also bear fruit (Heb. 13:7).

One of my heroes is Charles Simeon. He was born in 1759 and ministered for 54 years until he passed away in 1836. He was the senior pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England, and was incredibly fruitful as a personal mentor and developer of Christian leaders. He also had a great passion to see the kingdom grow outside of his local church. Simeon renewed hundreds of pulpits and congregations throughout England, and was among the founders of the Christian Missionary Society that greatly affected the future of Christianity in India and Australia.

With the example of Simeon in mind, I have asked God to give me a dual role where I might serve a local church and also be part of church planting in a broader context. On my 40th birthday, while serving as the pastor of Fountain of Life Covenant Church, I received an invitation to provide leadership in evangelism and church planting within my denomination. The culmination of months of processing and the invitation occurring on such a significant birthday encouraged me deeply that this was not only from the Lord, but a larger theme of the “second half of my life.” I’m convinced this opportunity would not have come to me if I hadn’t prayed, served and considered ministry goals with the end in mind.

I fear that many church efforts, especially evangelism, focus on the mode of delivery and an immediate response rather than a long-term goal. The average church puts out great effort during the Christmas and Easter seasons to engage evangelistically with their local communities. Social media, fliers, print ads, and even raffles for big-ticket items like cars are aimed at getting people into the seats so they will hear the gospel message. But are they the *right people*? On those special days, many of us will pour our energy out into the recruiting efforts, the message and the designed response of the new people in the auditorium. It seems we often think that the job is done after the hands go up or the cards are signed, when in fact, the hard work has only begun.

As part of my job of leading church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, I travel regularly from Los Angeles to Chicago. On one of my recent winter trips, my flight was scheduled to leave in the afternoon. I was packed and ready to go, enjoying a wonderful morning with my family, watching two of our children create their own version of the Food Network TV show “Chopped” as they tried to master unique versions of bacon and waffles. After breakfast, we went to the park and hit tennis balls, enjoying our sunny southern California climate. Suddenly, moving into my glorious morning like a rapidly forming thundercloud, I received a text message that my flight had been canceled.

All of the evidence of my experience with that perfect morning in Long Beach suggested that a flight cancellation was impossible. But, because of a massive storm that had dumped six inches of snow in two hours, the weather in Chicago was an entirely different matter.

That day reminded me of an important travel lesson: It doesn't matter if you're packed, and prepared on the front end of your travel. The destination must be ready to receive the incoming flight. The same concept holds true for evangelism. You can have strong recruiting and response, but you must be ready to receive these new believers; otherwise, "decisions" will never become disciples. We have to begin with the end in mind.

Chapter 3

Why Peter Stood Twice

As the Lord Jesus ascended into the heavens, escorted by holy angels, He spoke a most amazing promise to His band of 120 disciples. They were to wait for the Holy Spirit. They were to stay in the city—not flee for the safety of the hills—because they were to receive power that would utterly transform their lives. Not only were they witnesses to heaven receiving the Lamb of God, they would soon receive a special spiritual power from God so that they could tell the world all that they had seen. This power would be the difference in their lives to help them fulfill the call to plant churches around the world. Before the ascension and the coming of the Spirit, they were in hiding, running scared for their lives. But after the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit, they were bold and full of conviction. They gave unwavering testimony to the very people who murdered Jesus of Nazareth.

Let's consider the original team and how great the odds were against this vision becoming reality. Two of the most notable leaders were cut from entirely different cloths. Peter was ruthlessly pragmatic, the type of person who would run into a situation shouting, "Ready, fire, aim!" On the other hand, John, the son of Zebedee was a poet and a dreamer. He painted the world in robust colors, exploring themes and symbols, through the lens of his personal experience. It's no wonder that large sections of John's Gospel highlight his competition with Peter, and simultaneously validate both men as pillars of the early church.

We know that Nathanael was a guileless patriot of Israel. When the kingdom of God approached him, his vision of Jesus as the political savior of the nation proved most compelling. When meeting Jesus face to face for the first time, he is the only one of the first followers to declare Jesus as "King." Meanwhile, in direct opposition to Nathanael is Matthew, the tax collector, who sold his allegiance to Rome for some extra zeroes in his bank account. I wonder how thick the conflict and friction was between these political adversaries.

It's amazing that as different as these first disciples were, somehow Jesus formed them together into a team. Jesus causes everyone to put the mission of the "in-breaking" of God's Kingdom first and foremost in his or her lives. Their friendships were a by-product of their commitment to mission. Today, we try and motivate friends to become missional, when in fact it is the mission that births the deepest friendships. NBA coaching legend Phil Jackson used to say that coaching in the NBA was easy, and that he earned his money managing personalities. I wonder if Phil picked up a few team leadership tips from Jesus.

The Judas Issue

Peter stands up twice in the first two chapters of Acts. The first time, he addresses the company of 120 in the upper room. From the very first chapter in the history of the church, we see a profound commitment to deal honestly with problems. I find it interesting that the first chapter of a book that captures the amazing work of church planting and evangelism begins with an internal disaster. Like the early church, we must be congregations that stand up when everything falls apart. We must be leaders with a great commitment to ensure that there is health and life in the church where these converts will one day land. Peter stood up so that the church could face its own problems head on.

If you were part of the 120 original followers, how traumatized would you have been from those recent events? You would've likely known Judas for multiple years. You probably would've had your run-of-the-mill personality conflicts with him, but he was one of the 12, handpicked by Jesus. Would you have predicted that Judas would betray that Lord, buy a field with the blood money, and then commit suicide? How many new questions would've been bubbling up in your mind and soul? How heavy was the grief when the community gathered together and Judas' chair was empty? How much discord in the ranks was there as blame reared its ugly head and pain turned into finger pointing?

My friend, Dr. Mary Glenn, gives us some insight. As the senior chaplain for her local police department, she is a first responder for many suicide cases and over the years has seen how feelings of guilt and responsibility are common for those who have lost a friend or relative. In an article she wrote, *The Aftermath of Suicide*, she quotes a schoolteacher who lost a student to suicide: "There is nothing you can say that will convince me that I did not miss the signs," the teacher said. "I could have stopped it."²

When loss struck the original disciples, grief delivered a profound and devastating blow. Not only did they lose their ministry partner, they also lost their friend. In the middle of this crisis, Peter stood up. He identified everyone's pain, quoted the Psalms and led them into interpreting the current events through the lens of the biblical narrative. The early church taught through its problems. We would do well to lead our people into genuine biblical framework at the most painful moments in life.

As we end the first chapter of Acts, I believe Luke wants us to ask, "Why would Luke begin the book that details the victorious ministry of the church on such a downer?" Why not just sweep the little Judas issue under the rug? Why not begin on a positive note and build up literary momentum? The answer provides a clear and sober warning to every disciple then and for today: One of the first 12 fell away. One of the original 12 chose money over God. We are no stronger than Judas. We didn't see what Judas saw. We didn't partner daily with the living God as He ministered in human form. And yet Judas fell away. He didn't pick up his cross and carry it daily. Instead, He hardened his heart and gave it to the devil. His fall came in the form of greed. We can never be too careful.

The accounts of evangelism in Acts begin with a betrayal and defection of the highest order, reminding us that God does not *need* ministry. The work of evangelism is for our good. We are but sick patients, and He is the doctor prescribing the hard work of winning

the lost world to Jesus. He invites us into evangelism ministry so that we might prove our loyalty to Christ and be healed in the process. Ministry must flow from our being. Just trying to “do ministry” and yet not have the life of Christ dealing with us on a personal, moral and ethical dimension is a frightening concept. Look at Judas. He did ministry until the temptations were too great, and then was swept away like a house in a terrible storm built on an unstable foundation.

Peter’s First Sermon

In Acts chapter two, Peter stands up a second time. I wonder what Peter’s day was like that day he preached his first sermon. He likely left home like any other morning. He was still on the run and trying to keep a low profile, so maybe he ducked into Starbucks and took the back streets before arriving at the upper room for the early prayer meeting. We don’t know much about Peter’s morning, but I can assure you he did not have “preach first public sermon” and “exhort 3,000 new Christian converts” on his daily tasks list.

Generations earlier, the Living God had promised through the Prophet Joel that He would pour out His Holy Spirit on the daughters and sons of Israel (Joel 2:28). The same Spirit that hovered over the formless void in the first verses of Genesis *would be sent*. The same Spirit that led Israel through the desert as a cloud by day and a burning lamp by night *would be sent*. The same Spirit that was so robust in young David as he fought back against Goliath *would be sent*. The same Spirit that anointed Jesus to preach good news to the poor *would be sent*. But no one dared to imagine it would be this good.

The best is worth the wait.

At the Pentecost feast, the Spirit was poured out, fulfilling prophecy, and thousands of international pilgrims responded to Peter as he stood up and preached his first sermon. Through the Spirit of God, a coward became courageous. Luke tells us that the first hearers were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). The Word of God came alive and transformed their understanding of reality. The sword of truth pierced their souls, causing pain and demanding action. The fisherman who had become a herald spoke, and the crowd realized then that the long-awaited Messiah had been murdered. The people of Israel had destroyed their only hope of salvation. With deep remorse and anguish they cried out, “What shall we do?”

The first sermon saw 3,000 converts. And so the church began with 3,000 devoted followers. Aside from the sheer magnitude and meaning of this historic event, I believe Luke wants us to ask the question, “So, what did they do?” This is a recurring theme from Luke to Acts, first introduced in Luke 3:10 after a particularly fiery sermon from John the Baptist. What should the people “do” after they have decided in their hearts and publicly committed to follow Jesus?

As the team leader of church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, this question burns deep in my soul. We are committed to planting churches that start strong. We call, train and send disciples into the world to start new churches. It’s critical that as church

leaders we understand not only the life and ministry of the Son of God, but how—through the Holy Spirit—the Father and Son began the church. Acts 2:42-47 is a very famous, popular and underutilized passage. I believe the Holy Spirit is at work to begin new churches today, just as he did 2,000 years ago.

Peter, the man who had abandoned Jesus to his fate on the cross and disowned Him three times, was empowered by the Holy Spirit to stand. In the upper room, he stood to minister to his fellow disciples in the midst of adversity. He helped to prepare their hearts to receive new believers by dealing with the pain caused by Judas' betrayal and leading them into the selection of a new apostle. Like Peter, we must help our congregations to deal directly with internal problems, and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to bring unity and healing. Luke's pattern of leadership is healing the internal before focusing on the external. At Pentecost, Peter stood with the 11 apostles and called thousands to repent and believe. Three thousand people made decisions to follow Jesus, but what did they repent *into*? The answer is found in the life of the early church.

Chapter 4

How the Church Began—and Why That Matters Today

As we consider what the first converts devoted themselves to, the vivid account of their life together offers us a handbook of sorts for planting churches and making disciples.

More than 3,000 people made public commitments to follow Jesus. Who were these converts? They were 3,000 pilgrims from all over the world, descending upon Jerusalem for the annual festival of Pentecost. These men, women and children were amazingly diverse and devout Jews from every nation under heaven. The gospel had not yet reached the Gentile circle of outreach and mission. Church planting among gentile cities did not begin in earnest until Acts 13. The audience of Peter's first sermon consisted of "Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia" (Acts 2:9). They traveled as far as Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, Crete and Arabia. And as an allusion to the final ministry frontier for Paul and Luke, the author informs us of the special visitors from Rome.

If this text were to take place today in my home city of Long Beach, Calif., the roll call would include Cambodians, Thais, Japanese and residents of Mexico, Belize and South Korea. Brazilians, Chinese and Salvadorans. Taiwanese and Guatemalans, African Americans, and visitors from Samoa, Puerto Rico and the Netherlands.

More than 16 countries and regions were represented in this amazingly diverse crowd of Jewish pilgrims who crossed land and sea to experience the great feast. Peter's first sermon cut them to the heart, causing them to publicly confess their need for Christ and their need to turn from the sins of their generation. Luke writes that the 3,000 were baptized and added to the church *that day*. The logistics of baptizing 3,000 people are dizzying, but Luke would have us know that baptism was just the beginning.

God had so much more ahead for those who experienced the new birth.

Repent Is a Great Word

Over the years, I've observed many churches today that don't like to use the word "repent." For some, it seems like an archaic term, irrelevant to our current generation. Others fear that it will induce great guilt. The last thing pastors want to be accused of is "guilting" anyone into a commitment. But despite these thoughts, "repent" is a great word. It is the heart of Jesus' first sermon: "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In his first sermon, Peter exhorts the crowd, "Repent and be baptized," Paul teaches the church at Rome that God's kindness leads to repentance. In its original language, the word does not carry emotion. To repent is not equivalent to feeling guilty. The word literally means, "to turn the other way."

Maybe this example will help. Imagine yourself thinking you should put down an article to go get a glass of water. Yet halfway to the kitchen, you decide, *I must finish this*

article. So you return to your chair and finish reading. You just “repented” from drinking a glass of water.

In the same way, the church repented from the wicked and perverse generation of their day. Peter’s fiery words urged them to save themselves. I remember a small corner church near my home when I lived in South Los Angeles. The Spanish-speaking congregation was named *Escapa Por Tu Vida*, (“Escape for Your Life” in English). Repentance is clearly a turning away from one direction and going in another.

When using the word “repent,” the great challenge stems from a lack of clarity for what the other side of repentance looks like. If we truly believed that we were repenting from a situation that would assure certain doom—into a new situation that promised amazing joy and blessing—we would be bold and passionate to encourage everyone we knew and loved to repent. For too long we have focused on what we must repent *out of*. When we follow Luke’s description of the Jerusalem church, we start to help people understand the joy and blessing they repent *into*.

New Life, New Lifestyles

When God’s Spirit moved at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared as tongues of fire. The enormous crowd from all over the world heard the disciples of Jesus declare the good news of God’s power and love in their native tongue. That is truly astonishing. Peter’s sermon brought conviction and commitment to more than 3,000 people. That is incredible. But might I be so bold as to argue that this list of spiritual encounters does not include the most miraculous development of all?

The 3,000 people who experienced God and responded to the gospel did not return home. In our context today, that would be akin to the Holy Spirit moving so powerfully at a national conference that all of the attendees have such an amazing experience they call their spouses and families and tell them they’re not coming home. Instead, they encourage their loved ones to come and be a part of God’s great outpouring. The church began with pilgrims who stayed in Jerusalem. What could possibly cause them to make such a dramatic life change?

I believe the answer is that we all do amazing things when we fall in love. When we fall in love, time flies by. When we fall in love, a 10-minute phone conversation turns into a multi-hour mobile date. When we fall in love, food tastes better, movies are funnier, and the sky is bluer. When we fall in love, all we want to do is be with that person. So it was at Pentecost. The first converts fell in love with God and with each other. They found what they had been searching for all of their lives. And after finding this treasure in the field, they were not about to get back on a plane and go back to their old lives. Truth always brings transformation. The new life of Jesus always demands a new lifestyle. And this new lifestyle centered on five areas of life the church repented into: The apostles’ teaching; fellowship; breaking of bread; prayer and giving. Let’s look at each one up close.

1. The Apostles' Teaching

The new life brings about a hunger for God's Word. New disciples must be taught how to listen to, study and live out God's Word. John Owen, a Puritan pastor, taught that we must fill our souls with the Holy Scripture so that the Holy Spirit has choices between which word He will choose to activate in our lives. When the new converts entered into the daily life of the Jerusalem church, they knew very little Scripture. Consider that none of Jesus' ministry had been written down. The new converts had little to no understanding of Jesus and His divine understanding of the Kingdom of God. Can you imagine how the hearts of those in the early church burned within when they went to their regular teaching times and Peter began speaking?

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, I was casting my nets in the sea when I saw Jesus and He told me to drop my nets and follow Him ...

And then a leper came up to Him beseeching Jesus, asking Him if He was willing to make Him clean. Jesus said to the leper, "I will, be clean."

And we woke Jesus up who was asleep in the boat. The raging winds did not affect Him, but He got up, put out His hand, and said to the wind and the seas, "Peace!" And the sky cleared and the sea became like glass.

I wonder if one of the disciples might have interrupted and said, "Peter, tell everyone about the time Jesus called you 'Satan.'" Peter probably blushed a little and continued exhorting the congregation to grow in grace.

Can you imagine how the mind of the early church would have been blown to have Matthew, the former tax collector, take the pulpit:

I was sitting in my tax collection office counting my money. I was feeling especially lonely at the time since I didn't have any friends. But Jesus walked right in and told me to leave the money behind and follow Him. I began following Him that day. My life was never the same.

Do you know that those who are poor in spirit are blessed in the kingdom of God?

Do you know that blessed are you when you are reviled and they persecute you.

One of us asked Jesus to teach us to pray. He taught us, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by thy name."

Do you know people who are on the fence about Jesus and the promise of His kingdom? We must tell them the story about a man who returned for his bride and 10 bridesmaids were there to meet him. Five were wise and were ready for his arrival. But five were fools and were not ready.

Imagine hearing the prologue of John, the story of the woman at the well, about the resurrection of Lazarus and the account of the first female witnesses leaving the grave? Imagine the theology and the testimony of Thomas, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, James and the rest of the apostles.

In our churches today, those who repent know very little about the Bible. Most convert through experiences that do not set them up for a lifetime of discipleship. I wonder if the apostles would recognize the gospel message we share today as the same one they preached—about what it was like to live with Jesus, listen to Him and communicate all He promised to those who put their faith in Him.

Like the first converts at Pentecost, our new Christians must be taught God's Word. They need to learn to drink the good milk so that their spiritual appetites will long for healthy, strengthening food. And they must not only learn, but also apply and practically live out God's Word—tasting and seeing that the Lord is good, so that their faith will be strong and their lives will bear fruit.

In our church, we live out devotion to God's Word by focusing on four levels of Bible understanding:

- Devotional — Learning to personally commune with God through prayer.
- Familiar — Reading through the Bible in a period of time to become familiar with it.
- Topical — Deep study of a topic or an area of personal discipleship.
- Core book — Mastering a book or large section of Scripture

The church began with devotion to God's Word.

2. Fellowship

The church was devoted to fellowship. Some 3,000 new brothers and sisters in Christ began to get to know one another. As the Holy Spirit poured love into their hearts, I imagine that they found each other endlessly fascinating. New friendships formed. Each day brought new and interesting questions and conversations. Learning to live a new life together brought daily joy. The church began with a group of people who truly enjoyed being together. They learned each other's cultures and asked each other, "Why do you do things that way?" They made time for relationships and prioritized their new life together.

My friend and mentor, Darrell Johnson, likes to say, "At the center of the universe is a relationship." God is three people—a Trinity—and they have always been in a profoundly loving relationship with one another. While each has a unique form and function, they are three separate people who are 100 percent God. Why are we relational people? Because God is wildly relational, and we are made in His image. Why is loneliness one of the greatest threats to happiness in the last half century? Because God is wildly relational, and we are made in His image. Why does it hurt so much when we're betrayed, and our relationships end in conflict or divorce? Because God is wildly relational, and we are made in His image. And why is it so devastating when we lose those we love to death? Because God is wildly relational, and we are made in His image.

In John 17, the apostle captures one of the stunning theological moments in the entire Bible. We are given front-row seats to a whole chapter of Jesus the Son, praying in the Holy Spirit, to the Father who sits on the throne. This intimate, devil-destroying and mountain-moving prayer hits an incredible relational note in verse 24:

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory that you have given Me because you loved me before the foundation of the world (John 17:24).

The Son of God prays that the disciples the Father gives Him will experience all of the love, all of the community, all of the intimacy, all of the life and all of the goodness that He and the Holy Spirit experienced with the Father before the world was created. We can find no greater example of community vision in the Word than this circle of family before creation, now being filled with redeemed sinners like you and me. Who is like our wildly relational God?

What does this look like in the life of the church today? We must invite people into these relationships and welcome them. Our church in Long Beach centers on having Life Groups that welcome new people into fellowship and teach how to study Scripture. I remember the first year of planting Fountain of Life. My wife and I hosted a weekly Life Group Bible study. We would begin with dinner at 6:30 p.m. followed by Bible study at 7:30. Our group of 20 people bonded deeply. After study, we spent time getting to know each other. We talked, joked and watched funny YouTube videos. Time flew by. A few of us still recall laughing in my driveway, when the *Los Angeles Times* driver delivered the paper early in the morning. People do amazing things when they fall in love with God and each other.

Today, many of those in that original study now lead their own Life Groups. Together, we learned to make good decisions that please the Lord and learned to fight sin and keep our faith alive. Together, we learned to rejoice with each other when circumstances were joyous and suffer with one another when circumstances were painful. Together, we learned to listen to each other and love each other.

The church began by repenting into meaningful and life-giving relationships.

3. Breaking of Bread

The early church was devoted to the breaking of bread. How could it be any other way? What culture does not have food at the center of relationships, family and celebration? Over a meal you really get to know someone. Through the sharing of food, we give and receive. Deep bonds of love form with those around the table. While the sheer size of the early church was overwhelming, somehow they created a system for sharing meals together. I wonder who the Jerusalem church's cooks were and how much honor the apostles bestowed upon them?

Often over meals, barriers are crossed and multicultural skills are learned. I recall participating in one such meal of love, learning and forgiveness. Over the course of a

dinner together, Saemina, a Korean woman from South Los Angeles, and Vince, an African-American man from the Crenshaw district, began to talk about race relations. The conversation led to how the 1992 Los Angeles riots affected their families. Vince shared about the frustration and personal loss of his family. Saemina then shared about how her parents owned a liquor store that was looted and burned by young African Americans. In one afternoon, her family lost everything. In high school, they could no longer afford their home and had to move into an apartment. Vince was deeply moved by Saemina's testimony and asked if there was anything he could do for her family. When he choked up and communicated his profound sadness, God brought comfort, healing and release for Saemina—a beautiful moment of good in the kingdom of God.

Vince and Saemina went on to eat many more meals together. Vince asked Saemina questions about why Asians studied so hard in high school, not understanding the pressures of pleasing immigrant parents. Saemina asked questions about African-American family dynamics, especially the challenge of fatherlessness and mothers who are present and underappreciated. And I will *never* forget the first time Saemina convinced Vince to try wasabi. It was a truly cross-cultural moment.

Luke shares that in the early church there was much joy in the sharing of meals. There is another component, however, to Luke's description of life at the table. With glad and generous hearts, they ate The Meal together. Two months earlier, Jesus had established the holy sacrament of communion. They remembered the Lord's Table. They embraced their own depravity as they considered His body broken for them. They rejoiced beyond measure when they considered the new contract that Jesus had signed in His own blood for and with repentant sinners. They shared this meal living in the great reality that Christ could return at any moment. I wonder how many times the early church took communion and then left the assembly pondering if that would be the last time they would take communion together.

The Lord's Table has an especially powerful place in the hearts and mind of Fountain of Life Covenant Church. In the first year of our plant, we suffered a horrendous loss. Dear friends of mine from college—the fourth family to commit to the church plant—were driving home from a New Year's Day family party when a drunk driver barreled through an intersection and struck their van. Midi, age 35, wife of Mark and mother to twin boys, died instantly. One of the twins, Nathan, survived through the night on a breathing machine, only to die in the early morning hours. As a pastor, I knew that I would perform funerals, but I never imagined it would be for my college friend and her 4-year-old son. I didn't know that I would be called to walk with Mark and his surviving son through intense suffering and loss.

For that first year after the accident, the Lord ministered to all of us through communion. Every time we served communion, we employed the "missing man formation," placing two empty chairs at the table. It was a visual reminder of our sorrow and loss, but it directed us upwards rejoicing that they were in the presence of the King.

God met us every time we approached the table and allowed us to be broken as He fed us the bread. He allowed us to be weak as we drank His wine. And He gave us hope that we would see our friends again who used to sit in those chairs. That was His promise. One day, on that amazing day, He will make all things new.

The church began by repenting into sharing the table together.

4. Prayer

The early church was devoted to prayer. I'm always intrigued that this is the only area of discipleship or ministry the disciples asked to "learn." They do not ask Jesus, "Please teach us to preach." They don't ask Him, "Please teach us to cast demons out of people" or "Please teach us to win the lost through personal evangelism." They don't ask, "Please teach us to fundraise." They don't even ask, "Please teach us to worship the Father in a more authentic and powerful way." No, they ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Praise God that Jesus said yes.

Three parables in Luke fill out Jesus' answer to their request: the parable of "The Friend at Midnight" (Luke 11:5-13); "The Persistent Widow" (Luke 18:1-8); and "The Tax Collector and the Pharisee" (Luke 18:9-14). They are the only three that teach the disciples how to pray. And the prayer parables are only found in Luke.

As Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, notice that each of the prayer parables deals with God's character. In the first story, the Father is the one who will get up at midnight, not because we who ask are His friends, but because His name is on the line and He wants His amazing reputation spread throughout the land.

In the second story, the Father is the one who is far more just, kind, patient and understanding than the corrupt judge. The judge finally gives the widow justice because she nags him to death and he just wants her to go away. How much more quickly and joyfully will the Father answer those who He loves?

And in the third parable, the Father has a special place for brutally honest and needy sinners because He knows we are but dust. He is not impressed with religious veneers, but He cannot turn away from those who beat their breasts in self-recrimination because they cannot escape the disease called sin. When we ask for God to have mercy on us because we are sinners, His justification is immediate and effective.

Again, in each of the parables, the problem didn't address the technical aspects of prayer. The disciples don't ask Jesus, "Teach us *how* to pray." They knew how to pray. The problem lies more squarely with proper motivation. The problem comes into play when we don't have a clear picture of God. It lies with our losing heart and the Son of Man finding no faith when He returns. Jesus taught the disciples that the Father is so much better than they could ever comprehend or imagine. And He invites us into what Blaise Pascal calls the "dignity of causality," that with God we might affect the course of history and usher in the coming of the kingdom through our lives of prayer.

We can only imagine the vitality, joy, signs and wonders, and growing faith that filled the houses of the Jerusalem church when they prayed together. Imagine the power and the boldness of their requests to the Father. Imagine the shock when the congregation was in the midst of praying for Peter's release, and he showed up at the door declaring how God had used their prayers to bring his freedom. Imagine the reminders of encouragement and conviction of those who with their own eyes saw the Lord Jesus ascend into heaven. The church prayed for the kingdom of God to come. They prayed for one another and all of the needs of the day. And they prayed for boldness, that they might not wither against the hand of their enemy but declare all the more that Jesus was the most important person in the universe. And He is coming again!

While we might not have the same passion, personal testimony or unique circumstances of the Jerusalem church today, we do know that God sits on His throne and joyfully answers our prayers. We, too, must gather and bring our ministry needs before God. We, too, must pray the Scripture and remember His promises. The Father is so much better than we can comprehend or hope for.

The church began by repenting into prayer.

5. Giving

The church was devoted to giving. I believe this happened for at least three reasons: *Generosity is a by-product of love.* When you're in love, you always want to pick up the tab and consider it an honor and a joy to use hard-earned resources to bless the other person. As the Holy Spirit was poured out on the people at Pentecost, a wave of love transformed their hearts. One of the significant fruits of that manifestation was a great release on the tight grip of wallets, purses and bank accounts.

The apostles must have taught all that they had learned from Jesus about worldly wealth. Imagine hearing this thread of theology, which would eventually find its way into Luke's Gospel:

3:10: The tax collectors are commanded to be content and give away their money.

6:20: Jesus declares that the kingdom belongs to the poor.

6:24: Jesus declares that the rich have received their comfort in full, using the same word "paraclete" that is used for the Holy Spirit. How many times do we seek material comfort instead of comfort intending to be provided by God Himself?

8:14: The riches of the world and the pleasures of life choke out God's Word.

12:20: We are not to build barns to store our wealth, thinking that our future is somehow secure because we have more stuff.

12:33: We are to store up treasures in heaven, where God Himself faithfully protects our investment.

14:12: We are to give our money to people who can't pay us back.

14:33: We must renounce possessions if we are truly to be His disciples.

16:9: We are to make friends, affecting their eternal destinies, with our worldly wealth.

16:13: A disciple of Jesus cannot serve God and mammon.

16:24: The unrepentant rich, who do not follow all of Jesus' teaching on money, are in eternal anguish in hell. And yet, even while suffering, the rich do not repent. The rich man asks for a special privilege, somehow thinking his worldly status should afford his family a personal visit from one of God's prophets.

18:23: The rich man walked away very sad for he could not part with his possessions.

The first church members had a clear theology of wealth and resources. They knew they couldn't take their money with them, so they passed it on ahead. They knew the currency of the world had a very limited shelf life, so they gave it away. And they knew that God's great plan was to turn the world upside down, lifting up the poor and causing the rich to crash down. They were disciples of Jesus. They were not loyal to money.

They had fallen in love with people of great need. Remember that the church in Jerusalem was an immigrant church. Those who came from the 15 countries listed in the Pentecostal roll call never returned home. They started their lives over with only what they had as they set out to attend the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Where does the family from Medes stay? How can we feed the couple from Crete? We need to find income for the young man from Cappadocia. Because the needs they encountered were very real, they sold their possessions and belongings, distributing the proceeds. Those who were stable and comfortable sacrificed for those who had nothing. People sold their cars so that the church could have \$5,000 worth of bus passes. Another sold their iPad so a family from Egypt could make rent. Barnabas sold his house so that 40 families could have long-term housing.

Those benefitting from this unparalleled act of communal generosity were the same people who were cut to the heart by Peter's first sermon. They were those who had chosen to follow Jesus, get baptized and publicly proclaim their faith by staying and growing in Christ. They weren't looking for an upgrade to their lifestyles; they wanted to be in a position to grow their faith.

After preaching on this passage, I remember receiving a text message from someone asking, “How long did their generosity last?” I believe this was a season of proactive and focused training initiated by God. In Acts 7, 5,000 are sent out from Jerusalem because of the persecution of Stephen. The vision never changed. Once the power was given, the first disciples were to be planting and building up the church in Jerusalem and Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jerusalem was always intended to be a base camp, an immigrant discipleship-training center, and those with means and resources within that community funded it.

How long did this generosity last? Until the immigrant disciples were vital and God said, “Go!”

What might this look like today? Are there those in your church who are poor and unstable? Rather than view them as “the needy,” could they be the ones who need support for a season of training? Could they be whom God is calling to be witnesses to different parts of your city? The church began as a multiethnic and multi-class body of believers that God called together for mission. The new life demanded new lifestyles.

Look at the Word and ask, “What must I do?” We cannot look at our lives and say, “I am sure I’m already doing it.” Remember that the worst advice someone can give you is, “Trust *yourself*.” We must seek out opportunities to do good. Where are the current models of financially stable Christians sacrificing on behalf of immigrants and urban poor Christians that God will use for His kingdom? Why do we have so many bi-vocational Latino pastors who work full-time jobs and pastor their churches full time while wealthy Christians pile up luxury after luxury? The New Testament must be the final word on our money.

The church began by repenting into giving.

Being the Church

The church began when 3,000 people repented away from the world and what they knew to be true.

The church grew when 3,000 people repented into being the church.

Will we be devoted to the teaching of the apostles? Will we be devoted to the fellowship of the believers? Will we be devoted to the meals and the Lord’s Table? Will we be devoted to prayer and seeing God move in our churches and cities?

Repenting out of the world is never enough. We must repent into that which gives life.

Disciples > Decisions.

End Notes

¹ David T. Olson, *The Church in Crisis*, (Zondervan, 2008), p. 186

² Mary Glenn, "In the Aftermath of Suicide Helping Communities Heal,"
<http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/in-the-aftermath-of-suicide>, February 26, 2014