

A JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

GROWTH OF N.T. CHURCH



Lesson 14: Growth of the New Testament Church

Welcome

Choose one of the following to answer:

- If you could teleport to any city in the world right now for dinner, where would you go and what would you eat?
- What's the most spontaneous thing you've ever done?

These questions connect modern experiences with the growth of the first-century church by highlighting how movement, risk, and openness to new places shaped the spread of the gospel. The early Christians often traveled far from home (sometimes by choice, sometimes because persecution scattered them) and God used their willingness to step into unfamiliar environments to expand the church's reach. Much like spontaneous decisions take people into unexpected opportunities, the early Christians followed the Spirit into new cities, cultures, and relationships, trusting that God was already at work ahead of them. These icebreaker questions remind us that the church grew not through comfort or predictability but through people who were willing to go, adapt, and respond when God opened a door.

Worship

Have someone in the group read *Psalm 67* out loud and have a moment for everyone to silently reflect on what they heard. Afterward, ask someone in the group to close out this time with a prayer.

Psalm 67 is a powerful reminder that God's blessing is never meant to stop with His people but to flow through them to the world. The psalm begins with the familiar prayer, "may God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us." This verse echoes the priestly blessing in Numbers 6, but Psalm 67 expands the vision by adding so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. In other words, God blesses His people not just for their comfort or prosperity but so His character, His truth, and His salvation can be displayed to every corner of the earth. The psalmist sees Israel as a conduit of God's grace, reflecting God's original promise to Abraham that all nations on earth would be blessed through his descendants.

The rest of the psalm highlights God's heart for the nations and His desire for all peoples to praise Him. It celebrates God as the righteous judge who guides the nations and brings joy to the world through His leadership. Psalm 67 offers a global, missionary vision long before the Great Commission. It teaches that worship and mission are inseparable: when people experience God's goodness, they are meant to share it. For believers today, Psalm 67 serves as a call to live generously, pray globally, and participate in God's mission wherever they are. It reminds the church that God's blessing is both a gift and a responsibility, designed to draw others to the goodness of the Lord.

Budget about 5-10 minutes for the WORSHIP part of the lesson.

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There are 10 questions/prompts in the WORD section. Your Life Group doesn't have to cover every question below. Life Group Leaders may select the ones that best fit your group. You can also use the remaining questions as personal reflection throughout the week.

Word

Please watch the video lesson before your group meets.

The growth of the early church in the Book of Acts is nothing short of extraordinary. Beginning with a small group of disciples in Jerusalem, the movement quickly expanded into a global mission that turned the world upside down. As we learned in the previous lesson, Christians were empowered by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and Peter began to boldly preach about Jesus' death and resurrection. Thousands responded in faith, were baptized, and joined a new kind of community—one marked by deep fellowship, radical generosity, constant prayer, and devotion to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42–47). This Spirit-filled life attracted outsiders and led to daily conversions as “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

As the church grew, so did the challenges—but persecution didn't slow the movement; it accelerated it. When believers were scattered due to opposition (Acts 8), they carried the Gospel with them into Judea, Samaria, and beyond. The church broke cultural and ethnic barriers through moments like Peter's interaction with Cornelius (Acts 10) and Paul's missionary journeys into the Gentile world. Ordinary men and women, led by an extraordinary God, planted churches, trained leaders, and lived with bold faith.

Throughout Acts, we see that church growth wasn't driven by strategy, buildings, or programs—it was the result of obedience to Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit transforming hearts and lives across the known world.

1. Read [Acts 2:47](#); [4:4](#); [5:14](#); [6:7](#); [9:31](#); [16:5](#). What patterns or themes do you notice in how the early church grew? What were some of the key ingredients that led to this daily growth?

In these verses, we see how the church grows when Christians faithfully live out the mission of God. Each verse highlights both God and human faithfulness working together. Acts 2:47 says, “The believers were praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people, and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Instead of being manufactured, the church's growth was something God did as believers lived out the gospel with joy, unity, and integrity.

The way early Christians lived made Jesus' message believable

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Acts 4:4 and 5:14 show a pattern that might surprise people today: ***the church grew even in the midst of resistance and persecution***. Acts 4:4 notes that many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5,000. Then, Acts 5:14 adds that more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. In the ancient world, public allegiance to Jesus often came with social risks, yet the message continued to spread. This reminds modern readers that hardship does not stop God from moving. In fact, historically, pressure sometimes purifies and strengthens the witness of the church.

Acts 6:7 and 9:31 emphasize ***spiritual maturity and healthy leadership***. Acts 6:7 says the Word of God spread and the number of disciples increased rapidly when the apostles appointed Spirit-filled leaders to help care for the people. The church's growth accelerated when its structure supported Jesus' mission.

Acts 9:31 describes how ***the church, strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, was living in peace and growing in numbers***. A community grounded in the fear of the Lord and empowered by the Spirit naturally becomes a place of stability and hope. Healthy churches grow because they foster environments where faith can thrive

Finally, Acts 16:5 adds another layer: ***ongoing discipleship***. It says the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. In other words,

Daily growth was tied to daily formation

The early Christians didn't treat spiritual growth as optional. They built rhythms of studying, enjoying community, volunteering, and focusing on Jesus' mission into their lives. Their consistency made their witness compelling. Even people outside the church could see their devotion, courage, and compassion.

Several common themes appear in these verses:

- God is the one who brings the growth
- The gospel is proclaimed clearly
- Discipleship is taken seriously
- Leadership is Spirit-led
- The church maintains unity despite obstacles

Unbelievers are drawn to Jesus when Christians live faithfully, care well for one another, speak the gospel with clarity, and rely on the Spirit.

2. What is the church's role and what is your role in making disciples, not just converts (**Matthew 28:19-20**)?

As you probably already know, Matthew 28:19-20 is called the Great Commission as it gives the clearest picture of the church's role in making disciples. Jesus commands us to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..."

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Jesus wasn't asking for mere converts but for lifelong followers.

- The key verb in the passage is "make disciples," translated from the Greek word, *mathetosate* (μαθητεύσατε), which means "to train, apprentice, or shape someone into a learner."

Such was common language in the first century, because...

- Discipleship meant connecting one's life to a teacher with the goal of becoming like that teacher.

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus promises, "Surely I am with you always," which communicates that disciple-making is empowered by *His* ongoing presence... and the church plays a central role in this process. Baptizing new believers brings them into the community of faith. It solidifies their identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

- The Old Testament background of this imagery is tied to the idea of "covenant identity," represented in Hebrew words like, *berit* (בְּרִית), which refers to "a binding relationship established by God."

Teaching believers to obey everything Jesus commanded requires a community where Scripture is taught faithfully, relationships are nurtured, and spiritual habits are modeled. We know the early church took this seriously because they built a culture where Christians grew through worship, fellowship, shared meals, prayer, and obedience.

Individual Christians have a role as well. Every follower of Jesus is invited to participate in helping others grow spiritually. Discipleship often happens through ordinary moments:

- Conversations
- Shared experiences
- Helping others
- Prayer
- Study
- Encouragement
- Consistent example

Jesus' call to make disciples includes *intentionality*—by how we invest in others, obey God, trust the Spirit's work through each believer, etc.

The promise of Jesus' presence means that no one makes disciples alone

It might be helpful for Life Group members to share times when God was faithful (moments when His guidance shaped them, when someone helped them grow spiritually, when they saw God use their influence to encourage another person, etc.). Their stories help remind the other Life Group members that disciple-making is both a shared responsibility and a Spirit-empowered journey.

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3. In the video lesson, Dale Penn said, “The church grows when ordinary people trust an extraordinary God.” What does that look like in practical terms? Share a moment in your life when your trust in God resulted in spiritual growth.

A good way to get Life Group members to give a more focused answer might be to reframe the question like, “Share about the last time you trusted God and He grew you spiritually.

4. What can [Acts 6:1-7](#) teach us about Spirit-led problem-solving? How did the disciples balance practical leadership with spiritual discernment?

Acts 6:1-7 gives a helpful picture of Spirit-led problem-solving in the early church. The passage begins with a real and practical challenge: the Hellenistic (Greek) Jewish widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. This was more than an administrative oversight. In the ancient world, widows had almost no social safety net, so this concern touched on justice, compassion, and unity within the church. The disciples did not ignore the issue. Instead, they gathered the believers and acknowledged the need openly. Their response shows that Spirit-led leadership begins with humility, honest evaluation, and a willingness to address problems rather than minimize them.

The apostles guided the church toward a solution that honored both spiritual priorities and practical needs. They said it would not be right to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables, but this was not a dismissal of serving. Instead, they recognized different callings within the body.

- The word used for “wait on tables” comes from the Greek verb, *diakoneō* (διακονέω), meaning “to serve or minister.” This is the same root behind the word, “deacon.”

The apostles demonstrated discernment by keeping their focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word while also elevating the importance of tangible care. The church was encouraged to choose seven men known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, showing that practical ministry required spiritual maturity, not just administrative skill.

The church selected seven men, many with Greek names, which likely helped bridge the cultural tension between Hebraic and Hellenistic (Greek) believers. This decision shows sensitivity to the historical and cultural dynamics of the early Christian community.

- It also reflects the Hebrew understanding of “wisdom,” connected to the word, *chokmah* (חכמה), meaning “skillful living shaped by godly insight.”

The apostles laid their hands on these men, affirming their calling and entrusting them with real authority. This act modeled a balance between organizational structure and dependence on the Spirit’s leading.

The result was striking. Acts 6:7 says the Word of God spread, the number of disciples increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. When the church handled conflict with wisdom, humility, and Spirit-led collaboration, its witness grew more compelling.

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5. What barriers did the early Christians need to overcome to obey God's call in [Acts 8:1-8; 10:34-48](#)?

The first Christians faced significant barriers as they stepped into God's expanding mission. Acts 8 begins with **persecution** breaking out after Stephen's death, and believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This scattering broke down the barrier of comfort. For years, the church had remained largely centered in Jerusalem, even though Jesus had already said that the gospel would go to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Samaria was a difficult place for Jewish believers because of long-standing hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Yet Acts 8:4-5 shows that those who had been scattered preached the Word wherever they went, and Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. Their obedience opened the door for cross-cultural ministry, reminding readers that God often uses difficulty to push His people toward His purposes.

Another barrier in Acts 8 was **spiritual and cultural suspicion**. Philip encountered people who practiced sorcery, including Simon, whose reputation was well known in the city.

- This context helps explain the word, proclaim, used in Acts 8:5, which is translated from the Greek word, *kēryssō* (κηρύσσω), meaning "to announce as a herald."

In the ancient world, a herald spoke on behalf of a king. Philip entered a spiritually confused region and boldly announced the authority of Jesus in a place filled with competing beliefs. The result was joy in the city, showing that the gospel brings renewal even in places that once resisted God.

Acts 10:34-48 tells us about another barrier: **deep ethnic and religious division between Jews and Gentiles**. Peter entered the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, which would have been unthinkable for many Jewish believers. Acts 10:28 makes this tension clear when Peter says that it is against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, yet God had shown him not to call anyone impure or unclean.

- Peter's statement in Acts 10:34-35, that God does not show favoritism, translates the Greek word, *prosōpolēptēs* (προσωπολήμπτης), meaning "one who shows partiality or judges by external status."

The idea behind Peter's statement was radical in the first-century world because ethnic, religious, and social barriers were strong. When the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and his household, the early church had to confront its own assumptions and embrace God's larger vision.

Again, these passages show that God often leads His people beyond familiar boundaries, whether cultural, relational, or personal.

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6. How have you seen God grow churches today? Think about examples at Shepherd Church, in your Life Group, or in global missions. What do these examples teach you about God's heart for the world?

Don't share the following examples unless necessary (because you want Life Group members to come up with their own answers), but here are several different ways Life Group members could answer that question:

- Some might talk about their baptism or seeing others get baptized at Shepherd Church and how that reminds them that God is still drawing people to Himself in powerful ways.
- A Life Group member could share how they've watched their Life Group grow deeper in prayer, vulnerability, or community and how that shows that God grows churches not just in numbers but in spiritual maturity.
- Someone might mention the movement they've seen in Shepherd Youth or Shepherd Kids.
- A person could share stories about short-term mission trips, going on trips to Israel or other Bible lands, or hearing testimonies from believers around the world. These examples highlight that God's heart includes every culture and nation.
- Perhaps digital ministry impacted some individuals—how people have joined online services, Life Groups, care groups, short-term studies (and how God uses technology to reach individuals who might never step inside a church building).
- People could reflect on seasons when Shepherd Church planted churches or started a new campus.
- An individual might share about serving with Shepherd Go (local outreach), food distribution, or local community ministry and seeing how acts of kindness opened doors for gospel conversations. This demonstrates that God's heart is compassionate and outward-focused.
- Maybe it would be helpful for some to share about how small steps—inviting a neighbor, praying for coworkers, or mentoring someone younger in faith—have led to growth because of simple obedience.
- Regular ministries like Vintage, CPR, or others might have influenced several people.

These examples help Life Group members see that church growth is broader than attendance—it includes unity, spiritual formation, dedication to mission, generosity, life-change, etc.

7. Instead of closing with resolution, Acts ends with Paul in prison and preaching Jesus "without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). How might this unfinished ending invite us to step into this story and continue it today?

The Book of Acts ends in a surprising way: instead of wrapping up Paul's story or giving closure to his ministry, Acts 28:31 says that he proclaimed the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. Paul was under house arrest in Rome, yet the gospel continued to move forward.

- The Greek word translated "without hindrance" is *akōlytōs* (ἀκωλύτως), meaning "freely, openly, or without being stopped."

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Luke ends his narrative this way to show that the true focus of Acts is not Paul, Peter, or any single leader. The main character of Acts is the unstoppable mission of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the first century world, Rome represented the center of political, military, and cultural power... and the gospel finally reached the heart of the empire. Yet, even while Paul was confined in this strategic location, no prison, no government, and no circumstance could stop the advancement of God's Kingdom. Paul's situation also reflects the pattern seen throughout Acts:

**Whenever Christians faced obstacles,
the Word of God continued to spread**

Luke wants us to understand that the advancement of Jesus' message does not depend on ideal conditions but on God's faithfulness and the Spirit's leading. The unfinished ending of Acts is like an open door. Instead of concluding the story, Luke leaves the narrative moving forward, inviting future generations of believers to see themselves as part of the same mission. Even though the book ends with Paul preaching, the implication is the work continues through every Christian.

In our modern times, churches still preach the same message, are guided by the same Spirit, and face the same challenges (in different ways) but also carry the *same hope*. We Christians in 2025 continue the story that began in Jerusalem and stretched to Rome.

This open-ended conclusion encourages Life Group members to see their own lives as chapters in God's ongoing work. They can share moments when God was faithful—times when He opened a door, gave boldness, removed a barrier, or used a difficult situation to advance the gospel. These stories help remind us that Acts is not just ancient history. It's an invitation to participate in what God is still doing today.

8. Throughout the New Testament, we are encouraged to live like Jesus (caring for others, praying, forgiving, welcoming outsiders, etc.). Which of these areas do you feel strongest in and which might God be inviting you to grow in this week?

This is a very subjective question, so budget some time for Life Group members to answer (no matter how short their answers might be).

9. Instead of the latest trends or catchy slogans, the early church's growth was rooted in Spirit-filled obedience. What are some practical ways we can become more Spirit-led in our daily lives?

Here are some ways that Life Group members could answer (again, don't share these examples except when necessary because you want them doing a bit of self-reflection):

- **Regularly ask God for guidance.** Simple, honest prayers throughout the day open the heart to the Spirit's leading.
- **Spend time in Scripture**, not just reading but asking what the Spirit might be highlighting or inviting someone to obey.

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- **Invite accountability** from trusted believers who can help discern God's direction, speak truth, and offer wisdom.
- **Practice quick obedience:** When the Spirit prompts an encouraging word, an act of generosity, or a step of faith, responding quickly strengthens spiritual sensitivity.
- **Look for where God is already at work**—in conversations, relationships, opportunities, or interruptions—and choose to join Him.
- **Cultivate gratitude:** Thankfulness trains the heart to recognize God's presence and activity.
- **Examine your motives and attitudes:** The Spirit shapes character from the inside out, so noticing pride, impatience, or fear can be a pathway to growth.
- **End each day with spiritual reflection:** Where was God faithful today? Where did the Spirit guide? Where is more surrender needed tomorrow?
- **Letting go of the need to win every argument.** Sometimes being Spirit-led means intentionally choosing peace over being right so the relationship can remain open to future gospel influence.
- **Practicing the discipline of not rushing.** Walking slower, speaking slower, and listening longer can create spiritual sensitivity and prevent missing what God is doing.
- **Ask the Spirit to reshape your daily routines.** Even mundane tasks—commuting, errands, chores—can become moments of worship or intercession.
- **Practicing simplicity for a season.** Temporarily limiting media, purchases, or noise can heighten spiritual awareness and dependence on God.
- **Responding gently when criticized or misunderstood.** A soft answer in a hard moment is often a direct work of the Spirit producing Christlike character.
- **Following small nudges instead of waiting for big signs.** The Spirit often leads through small, quiet impressions: text someone, apologize, give something away, take an interest in someone's pain.

10. Answer one or both of the following questions:

- **Who someone in your life right now whom you're intentionally investing in spiritually? How are you helping that person grow?**
- **Who is someone God has placed in your life for you to invest in spiritually? How can you lean into that opportunity?**

This is another subjective question that is designed to wrap up the previous nine questions/prompts... so this might be a question that you don't want to skip over. Also, if you need to save time on this question, encourage Life Group members to just answer one and not both.

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Witness

Growth isn't just about us—it's about others encountering Jesus. As a group, take a few moments to silently pray for your neighbors, classmates, co-workers, or family members who don't yet know Jesus. Then, discuss one bold, Spirit-led action you could take this week to share Jesus. Maybe it's starting a conversation, sending a text, or extending an invitation.

Also, find out if anyone in your Life Group needs help this Thanksgiving or knows someone who needs help this Thanksgiving. Then, as a Life Group, try to do your best to provide a good Thanksgiving meal for that person or invite them over to one of your houses for Thanksgiving.

Budget about 7-10 minutes to discuss and answer this prompt.