

Where Have We Come From?

by Todd Atkinson

Todd Atkinson's sermon explores the connection between the church's past and its future, emphasizing the importance of community and God's role in growth.

Duration: 38:15

Scripture: Genesis 16:8, Acts 2:42-47

Topics: "Direction"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of maintaining a sense of community as a church grows larger. They emphasize the need to communicate in a more formal manner to ensure that everyone is included and engaged. The speaker also mentions various conversations and articles that have been helpful in understanding their journey as a church. They acknowledge the challenges that come with growth and the need for change, particularly in managing announcements and worship time. Overall, the speaker expresses their love for evangelism and their realization of the importance of nurturing the church community.

Transcript

I'd like to begin this morning with a reading from the book of Acts. Acts chapter 2. I know you're surprised. That doesn't sound like it's from John.

It's very close. And a really important and beloved passage of scripture. I think one worth getting very acquainted with because it's a summary of what life in the early church was like.

Acts chapter 2 beginning at verse 42. And is it coming up on the screen? I'll, uh, there we go. Here's the life of the early church.

Says they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. They devoted themselves to fellowship and to the breaking of bread. And they devoted themselves to prayer.

And everyone was filled with awe. And many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. And all the believers, they were together.

And they had everything in common, selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as they had need. And each day they continued to meet together. They couldn't get away from each other.

In the temple courts, they broke bread in their homes. And they ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

May God add his blessing to this wonderful passage from his word and to the things that we want to take a look at this morning. In Jesus' name, amen. I want to do something this morning, um, probably in the next few weeks that probably look a little bit like family talks.

And, um, just feeling from the Lord a lot of things, uh, on the horizon, a lot of good things. And, uh, asking my own self what kind of preparations, um, need there be for those things. But there's a verse from the Old Testament that I've, um, made reference to a lot.

I know certainly staff know it's one of my favorite. It's when God says to Hagar, where have you come from? And where have you going? Because it seems like those two questions in our lives are very closely related. Where have we come from? And where are we going? You know that that's true of your family, the kind of family you were raised in, the kind of upbringing you had.

It bears upon the kind of family you'll have. Where you've come from affects where you're going. And part of it is to get the best from where we've come from and leave behind the rest so that we can assure ourselves of a good future.

But, but it's also true of us, not just individually and not just of our families, but it's true of us as a church family. Where we've come from and where we're going are very intimately connected. I'd like to speak a little bit this morning about where we've come from.

Um, of course, my story begins here about the age of 13. I won't go back that far, but my first coming to River of Life, I wasn't a Christian. I, I remember, um, it was the first time I'd ever been to church in my life, was, was this church when we were a different name.

I remember asking my mom and dad on the way to church, um, uh, what kind of, what, what a religion are we? Because we, no one had ever raised this question growing up. I didn't know anything about God and I didn't know what happened in church. So I was afraid I was going to get into church and it was going to be a little bit like a classroom setting and someone was going to ask me a question and it's going to be apparent that I'm the guy that doesn't know anything.

So at least I should know what religion I am. So I asked my dad, what religion are we? And he thought about it. Uh, we're, uh, we're Protestant.

And I was like, I tried to, I didn't know what that word meant, but I tried to memorize it. I'm a Protestant. I'm a Protestant.

And I asked him, what is a Protestant? Um, everything but Catholic. So I tried to memorize that. Now, of course, we've got many, many precious Catholic people in our church.

And, um, so I tried to memorize those two things. So at least if I was asked that, I could give a reasonable answer. But, um, at that day we entered the church that began my experience of church.

And it's been going ever since. And of course, 20 years and mostly overseas. And, and, and I came back here six and a half years ago, it'll be seven in September.

And these last six and a half years have been one of the most rewarding and educational periods of my, of my whole life. And out of 25 years of Christian ministry, I'd say before coming here, uh, I had a zeal for many things. Um, I had a zeal for God's word, a zeal for the gospel, a zeal for God's mission to the lost, absolutely love of angelism, a zeal for God's power to see his power displayed.

But unfortunately, one of the things that I didn't have a zeal for was for God's people, for the church. I saw what the church was, but I didn't see what it was to become. And I had no idea how to help it become that.

And I know that the Lord saw that deficiency in my heart and wanted to teach me. And so he sent me to ROL. And when I arrived in the autumn of 2003, there's no doubt I arrived to a church where God was on the move.

And that was loads of fun. I could hardly believe my eyes because it was far from boring. A lot of really exciting things were happening.

God was sending people, a lot of people. And before long, you may remember, we were standing room only because we met in what's now the gym. And, um, we were standing room only.

It was, um, a lot of, a lot of excitement. Um, people were getting touched, uh, blessed, restored, saved. We had some amazing baptisms, um, that, um, still stand out in my memory.

And I remember one university student leaving, they'd finished their degree and, um, it was time for them to go home. And so they had one last conversation with me and they said, my only fear in going home is I'm not sure where to find another church like this. They said, being part of this congregation has restored my faith that church could be meaningful.

And I realized that one of the reasons I came was to learn that God has so much more in mind when he uses the word church, when he initiated this thing called church than, than we've ever grasped. And so to realize that we're only in the early stages, the tiny, most minuscule ways we were beginning to touch that was, was so wondrous to me and to hear the words of that university student. And that the congregation was, was just so receptive and positive to what was happening, willing to give up their seat, willing to make space, willing to make adjustments.

And what was interesting to me looking back is that not once as a leadership team, did we ever sit down before that to discuss how to make growth happen? Not once did we sit down and say, we should really have a plan for how to make God grow the church. It was just happening. Um, Acts chapter two, verse 47, part of what we read says the Lord added daily to their number as well.

He wasn't adding daily, but certainly weekly and monthly. And it was the Lord doing it. Uh, so I, I couldn't write a book on afterwards, how we grew, because I actually don't know how it happened.

We were just trying to stay on top of things. We were, um, you'll remember doing an outreach at the time. And, um, so Bill proposed that we use the purpose-driven life, which was a popular book at the time.

And, and it seemed to be able to have, um, the ability to communicate to Christians and non-Christians alike. And, uh, so working with that book, the purpose-driven life made me a little bit interested in its prequel, which was like sold like a half a million copies, which was the purpose-driven church. I think I even had a book on my shelf, but I'd never read it because in truth, I think I was a little suspicious of books like this.

Because I wasn't sure if it was a kind of a how to grow the church. And I had a kind of an innate suspicion toward things like that, like to think that just human methodologies, if you just did it and you just hold your mouth the right way, it's going to happen. And, and I was just a big believer.

If you just have God's presence and God's power amongst you, and only God can do those things. And so I just never wanted to read a book. And the truth is I misjudged it.

Um, my, my suspicion was, were not helpful. And I misjudged that book and had to repent later for, well, for misjudging Rick Warren. Because I never did read the whole book, but I read the preface.

And, um, the preface begins surfing spiritual waves. And I realized I'm not on a different page from this guy. It's interesting.

Let me, let me read the, a couple paragraphs. It says, Rick Warren says, if you take a class on surfing, you know, surfing in the ocean, not web surfing, you'll be taught everything you need to know about surfing, how to choose the right equipment, how to use it properly, how to recognize a surfable wave, how to catch a wave and ride it as long as possible. And most important of all, how to get off a wave without wiping out.

But you'll never find a course that teaches how to build a wave. Surfing is the art of riding waves that God builds. God makes the waves.

Surfers just ride them. No surfer tries to create waves. If the waves aren't there, you just don't surf that day.

On the other hand, when surfers see a good wave, they make the most of it. Even if it means surfing in the middle of a storm, a lot of books and conferences on church growth fall into the how to build the wave category. They try to manufacture the wave of God's spirit using gimmicks, programs, or marketing techniques to create growth.

That's the very thing I was worried about. It's a very path that I never wanted to go down. But Rick Warren says, but growth cannot be produced by man.

Only God makes the church grow. Only God can breathe new life into a valley of dry bones. And only God can create waves, waves of revival.

I never thought Rick Warren was a revivalist. I was impressed. Waves of growth and waves of spiritual receptivity.

As Paul pointed out about the church of Corinth, I planted the seed, Apollos then watered it, but God made it grow. Notice the partnership. Paul and Apollos did their part, but God caused the growth.

The sovereignty of God is a factor overlooked in almost all current church growth literature. I love this guy. Our job as church leaders is not to make waves, but simply to recognize how God is working in the world and to join him in the endeavor.

First thing I had to do when I put down the book was repent, because I had made a judgment about someone whose heart I did not understand. I made a judgment about a book I never even read. And after that, it made me, because that's what we were in.

There was just a wave of God that was happening, and we weren't creating it. To be honest, we were doing our absolute best to stay on top of it without getting swallowed by this wave. We're trying to learn to do the best in Rick Warren's language, simply to know how to ride that wave out, or we could say how to manage the growth that we were experiencing.

There's a few things I can say about that time. Even though we were considerably out of our depth, none of us had ever experienced growth, probably, at that kind of scale, or a few of us. Maybe Grant and Lois from an experience they'd had on the West Coast.

But probably most of us hadn't, and it made us a little bit out of our depth. And so when you're out of your depth, at least you've got to find gut things that you're going to stick to. There's some fundamental core beliefs that you think that amidst the many things you don't know, here's a few things we're going to really try to do.

And we really did try to do those, even though we didn't really know how to do them at that scale. For instance, we were committed to the notion of building a community and not a crowd, even though the crowd was coming. And so that was almost like a little slogan.

We are here to build a community, not a crowd. And actually, we believed it at the deepest level, but we're not altogether sure how to keep this from becoming a crowd. And we're not sure how to become a community when you've doubled overnight.

How do you keep a sense of community? But I have no doubt whatsoever that was in our hearts. And that we made many, many efforts to try to preserve that. I've actually got these from looking back through some of our own literature at the time.

We knew that how we had to balance two things, but to know how to do them well, that the balance between making new people feeling that they are warmly welcomed and included and assimilated into our body, but yet without making older people feel like they're being neglected and overlooked, and that somehow they're not significant anymore. And so we absolutely were committed to valuing the people God is sending and to valuing the people that he sent long ago and holding those two. But there's a little bit of a tension in those two things.

So how to do that well? But I don't doubt our hearts. Everything in us knew that that was right, and that we must do that. It was just trying to learn how to do it at that scale.

We placed a premium on good pastoral care. We had these sayings. We still have them, to ensure that our growth is healthy growth.

And so we upped the scales a lot on pastoral care. Just at the nine o'clock service alone, Marsha created visitation teams, numbers of them. Rick Swihart and Cecil Di Prado created a visitation to elderly and shut-ins.

Marsha created teams. Marsha actually lifted the whole bar for pastoral care, just to make sure that as we were growing that there were people that weren't being neglected. We never had a pastor just for this service.

We do now. Again, just to make sure pastoral care was not waning. The coffee time that we have at the end of every nine o'clock service, not just because of our undone love for coffee.

All of those were ways to say, how do we make sure that we're not neglecting people in the midst of the growth, and that we have contact with people, and that we're building community, and newcomers lunches, and new members initiatives, and pastoral support team is a way of making use of--we have about 16 pastors in our church, retired pastors, and how do we make good use of them? And Alan Mills creating a mission team just for this service. The list just goes on and on and on. Virtually every staff meeting, a new idea would come up to try to cover those bases the best that we knew how.

I also, as a young leader, understand the importance of trying to preserve continuity. Which is why Pastor Bill, who's not here today, I mean, he's still as active as ever. I understand the importance of continuity.

Our worship, I've given the same speech to everybody that has ever led worship at the nine o'clock. Do you remember when we were on the other side, remember we used to hand out pieces of paper, and write out your advice, and put them in a file folder, and what kind of service do you want, and what do you want your worship to be like? And well, I've never forgot those things. That the nine o'clock is not just one demographic, but we try to hear everybody in there, and we realized, well, people probably like about half hymns, and about half modern songs.

They like more hymns than the 1030 service. And that even in the modern songs, they want modern songs with good content, and not modern songs with four words, over and over again. So I, just to show you, I heard well.

I have told that to every person that has ever led worship at the nine o'clock service. They don't even mind the new ones, but have good content, good words to those. I've also said to them, and I got these right from slips of paper that you gave me, even on the hymns, make sure that they're lively and not sleepy ones.

And I've had people in the nine o'clock services, just because I'm old, I'm not dying. They've told me this. And so do you remember what the favorite hymn was for years? And it was, I'll fly away.

And in fact, we used to do it at our funerals. I'll fly away. And so I used to call when people, this our I'll fly away service, because it kind of that one hymn just said so much.

And every, I gave the speech to every person that has ever led worship here, said, I'll fly away, says it all. They like hymns, but they don't want dead ones. These people like an intro, they want to worship, and they want to pour out their hearts to worship.

And I've always said they like special numbers. Giving the same talk to everyone who has ever led worship at the nine o'clock service. So that's why the length and style of this service is much the same, because I know that in the nine o'clock service, there's only one swear word, and it's the word change.

Okay? And so I have tried, tried to keep that as best as I know how. And of course, there's people that know better than I. But despite these many efforts, and there is a lot of efforts, I can honestly say I love our elders. I have never worked in 25 years of ministry with an eldership that were this mature, this full of God's heart, and this full of love for his church, and selfless, and others focused.

I mean, true servant leaders, and in such unity. In 25 years of ministry, I've never seen the likes of this. So yes, we're a little out of our depth, but I'll tell you what, every effort was so genuine.

And I respect our elders so deeply, and I'm accountable to them in all things. And our staff. You know, yeah, definitely the growth has taken us by surprise, and sometimes we're not sure how to meet all the needs, but their hearts.

I love our staff. And they work so hard, and give themselves so fully. And I want my respect for them to be noted.

And so, but despite the many, many genuine people, and many, many genuine efforts, I'd say that accelerated growth still has an effect on our hearts. So I've even coined this phrase called the emotional and psychological toll of growth. That it does affect us.

My little boy Aidan, who's nearly two now, what a joy to have my family grow, and have him added to my family. But do you know that for 14 months, not one night did my wife get a full night of sleep. All right? And when mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

As happy as it was to see my family grow, is some seriously hard work. And we tried everything we know. And he's a lovely personality, and actually a really kind of easy kid.

But do you think we could get him to sleep through the night? Which means so that we could sleep through the night, growth on my family had a toll. And so does it in a church family. And I want to respect you for the toll that it's had on your heart at times.

The way it's affected you. But for taking that in stride, and showing a lot of grace, and a lot of understanding, and a lot of faithfulness. But I do want you to know that I kind of appreciate that it does take a toll.

I've heard people say, you know, it doesn't feel like it used to. It's true. I've heard people say, I feel like a stranger here now.

It kind of messes up our world a little. When 70 to 80 percent of the congregation weren't here three years ago. That's a different world.

And it's just changed. Changed, changed, changed. Not the kind of change that comes from leadership, where we say we're going to change everything.

It's the kind of change that just growth itself produces. And to be honest, we've tried to manage and moderate it. Not in anybody here, but in people that have left.

When people, a few people have said they only care about the numbers. To be honest, that hurts. Because you think they probably don't know us that well.

If they knew how many nights I couldn't sleep, and elders couldn't sleep, and staff couldn't sleep. Because we are desperately care about every single person. So I can understand it though.

It affects people's hearts. And that change is often more than we can cope with. But to be real honest, that kind of hurts.

They only care about the numbers. It couldn't be further than from the truth. And growth also necessitates change in the way we do things.

And sometimes those changes are necessary, but it doesn't make that easy. When we were 250 people, I kind of like, I did, I like the informality of it. I like that people just, there's just announcements all over, and we didn't really have to have announcements on a screen.

We just came up to the front and gave our announcements, and fantastic. Until we grew so much with new people, new programs, new ministries, that one Sunday we had 40 minutes of announcements. And we had no time for worship.

So you have to go back to the drawing board. We didn't try to produce change or change the culture of our church. Growth itself was putting pressure on things.

Because do we ever want to, do any of us want to come to a church where you have far more announcements than worship? But I understand that when you tell people, sorry, you've got to send your announcements into us, they think, well, that's an awful formal group you are now. That feels like a different place. Well, I used to just be able to stand up and tell everybody.

And if we kept up at the rate, that was 40 minutes in, we would be well over an hour of announcements now. And so I understand. I actually like that informality.

I thought it was a wonderful thing. I just, we just didn't know how to do it. When you've got four times as many people, and programs, and ministries, and special interests, it wasn't that apparent how to do it that way anymore.

One of the things I really loved when I first come here is there was lots of margin. If someone wanted to start a new initiative, absolutely, sure, let's go do that. Because there was lots of space for growth, lots of initiative.

Many years later, everybody's so maxed out that the idea of starting a new initiative, I know everybody thinks it's really easy to start a new initiative, but it's not. There's a lot of meetings, and you've got to do it in a healthy way. You've got to oversee it later, etc., etc.

And so when people feel maxed out, a whole lot of new initiatives don't seem as easy. One of the things I loved when I first come here is that anybody could just drop by and take me for coffee. I really like that.

And to be honest, I really miss that. And when I kept someone's eye, and still I see disappointment in their eye, because I can't drop things at the drop of a hat and go for coffee, it hurts. Because to be honest, I'd like to be back there.

There's part of me, I'd like to just be able to go for coffee every time I want. It was wonderful. And so growth has produced changes that aren't always so easy.

And yet again, my thanks. People who have taken stuff in stride, been gracious, understanding, chosen according to 1 Corinthians 13 to believe the best. I want to thank you and appreciate it.

And sometimes this elusive thing that we have called community, sometimes real community is built in the fire. It's built in believing the best. It's built in making adjustments.

As we go along, my thanks, sincere thanks to every one of you. Still right up till Christmas, I have to say the growth and trying to learn how to do things in a different climate has been somewhat mystifying to me. And around Christmas, I was like, Lord, you got to give me some insight on this.

To be really honest, I said, Lord, if you don't give me revelation about this, then on the way forward, then I will submit my resignation. And I'll ask you bring in someone that does have revelation on the matter. I said, because I just can't lead on good ideas, human method.

I need to have understanding from God. And when I feel like I've got that, my life feels better. And so it's not like I was wanting to resign.

But my love for this church is too great to stay in a position longer than I ought to. That's for sure. And for me positions to be honest, I just love Jesus.

And I love serving Jesus. And I can do that in any way. I position stuff, not really that important to me.

But I was saying, Lord, you got to help us. You got to show us the way forward. We need a church where God is speaking to and where God is the helm.

And where God's giving us revelation and ideas and insights. And that we know that we're following his lead. Well, I must say, since Christmas, I feel like he has supremely answered my heart's cry.

And I've never been more full of vision for the church than I am now. As I said, if I wasn't, my letter of resignation would have been offered. I will never lead something if I do not have God-given vision for it.

Several things happened. Do you remember, I don't know if you remember, Mike Pilavachi was here from England. And he's an old friend.

And so again, it was just part of God's grace. All of a sudden he starts talking, Todd, you wouldn't believe our church has been growing. And boy, it's put some of these pressures on us.

And he said, some of the things that we used to do, which were our greatest strengths, are now working against us. They're liabilities. We've had to change those.

And he was expounding that. I was like, he's telling my story. Wait, I could hear echoes of our heart in that.

Their church has grown to 1400 people. And I know Mike, I know his incredible value on every person. He runs summer events in England, 10,000 kids a week.

And I know why God has given him that. Because every single one of those kids matters to him. I know that.

And so when he was telling me his story, it was like, wow, Lord, you sent him not just to preach or run a, we were running a young leaders weekend. You sent him. And so he ended up speaking to our elders and spending some time and very, very helpful.

The next little very helpful thing we had is the Lord put us in contact with Center Street Church in Calgary. Now you talk about a growth climate. They've grown to 4,000 people and are one of the flagship churches, probably in Canada.

That church has kind of taken us under their wing a little bit and given us advice and talking to us. And when he explains, well, Todd, here's what we've went through. Here's some of the stages that we've went through.

Here's some of the things you don't want to be oblivious to. He's telling our story. I couldn't believe it.

It was a God sent conversation. He said, we reached these things that are very real. They're abstract, but very real called a growth barrier.

And you don't realize your church has grown from a small church to a larger church, but you still do things like you did when they're a smaller church. And now it starts to work against you. You know, when you're a small church, everything is informal.

You know, you don't want to be formal. That's part of the beauty of being a small church. The problem is when you get to be a larger church, you can't communicate only in formal ways, because if you communicate only in informal ways, half the people never hear it.

And they feel like they've been left out. And so when you're a young, small church, communicating informally produces community. When you get to be a larger church, communicating too informally will detract from community with only half the people even here.

And on he went. I mean, it was just the most interesting conversation. And again, God was in it.

When we asked for God to speak to us, well, don't forget God comes to us in human form and human packages. And there were many other such conversations, things that we read that all seem to be just very verifying and encouraging. One of these things is an article I've put in every one of your file folders, which was really helpful, a multiple page article.

And it was actually Mike Pulavacci from England that gave it to us. So this has been really helpful for us to understand our journey. So we read it.

It was equally very helpful, very understanding. And so I just give each one of you a copy. Now, if you're here and don't have a file folder, you're not a member, we have put a ton of these on that back desk.

You'll see there's flowers and the ushers desk back there. So when you go out, if you go past there, see Gary Stevenson in his all his handsomeness at the back of your turn, look around. Okay, look at him.

He's if you're here and I'm not a member, um, please pick one of those up. And just take a browser, take a read of it. Okay.

See if it has the same effect on you as it did on us. See if you go, oh, that makes sense. And I'll probably have some more for you coming up.

Let me end with a question. I think if we're going to ask questions, we probably need to know what's most chief to ask. What's most important to ask.

And I'm not totally sure what the most important question to ask, but this seems like an important one. And that's this. What is the unique mission that Jesus has for us as a church? I hope every church asks that, but my business is not to ask about another church.

What is the unique mission that Jesus has for us as a church? How do we best posture ourselves for that? Okay. Remember when you're a young guy playing sports and your dad says, you can't hit a baseball like that. Get bent over.

Okay. Stand this way, bend your knees, put it up, posture yourself. You're not going to hit the ball, stand like this.

Okay. And every sport they'll tell you, basketball, get on your toes. If you're going to play, get your bum down.

I mean, every coach is going to say these things, posture yourself for the game, like get ready for it. Like, so how do we posture ourselves for what Jesus has for us? What kind of culture do we need to make that possible? You know, culture is that kind of intangible thing, but everybody picks it up. For example, there's a reason why we need to walk through the past a little bit.

We need to understand growth. We need to understand the effect that growth has on it is because there's more to come. And if in our hearts, we feel a level of resentment when God sends a new person, we will communicate that to people with our body language.

We'll communicate it with our innuendos. We'll communicate it with our absence, our lack of a hand. We'll communicate it some way.

If we do not think when God sends someone that they're a gift, we will end up communicating that. So things become part of your culture. They're kind of intangible, but they're very much there.

When we go to England, everybody will say, oh yeah, talk about the culture there. When we go to Africa, the African culture. Now you can't just put that down to one thing, but it's very real.

What's our culture going to be? Starbucks only made the world crazy for quality coffee because they were crazy for quality coffee. If they were happy with mediocre coffee, do you think they'd ever become what they were become? No. And so I think we've got some just key questions to ask.

What does Jesus have ahead for us? How do we posture ourselves for that? What kind of culture do we need to have in a place to make that possible? What part do every one of us play in that? And how do we help get ourselves ready?

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