

Lessons for Finishing the Task from the Birth of the Church at Pentecost

By Rick Warren

A  finishing
the task White Paper

The best model for fulfilling the Great Commission and the Great Commandment in the 21st century is actually found in the Church of the first century. One of the deep convictions that drives our Finishing the Task coalition is this: We believe the Church at its birth is the Church at its best.

Some people want to go back to the 1950s. They think that's the golden age of Christianity. Other people want to go back to the Reformation. They think that's the golden age of Christianity. I say, no, you're not going back far enough. We need to go back to the first century. The strategy for 21st century Finishing the Task comes from the first century.

We need to go back to the way they did it in the New Testament in the first century, and we'll have the same kinds of results they saw in the Book of Acts, and even in the first three centuries. You see, Jesus intended for his Church to operate in the world the way it's described on the first day of Christianity, which is the birth of the Church, on the day of Pentecost.

I call the day of Pentecost the charter of the Church because all the things they did on the day of Pentecost were what set them up for success in the first century. The way they did it at Pentecost is God's design. It's God's method for us in the 21st century. We believe the more we can return to the ways and patterns laid out in the New Testament, the more likely we're going to return to the level of explosive growth and expansion that they saw in the book of Acts and the first century.

In the 2,000 years of Christian history—2,000 years of the Church—the fastest percentage of growth happened in the first 300 years of the church. If we could grow at that rate today, we would win the world quickly.

How fast did they grow? The Church grew from 120 people meeting in the upper room after the resurrection, to becoming the religion of the Roman Empire in less than 300 years. During that time, Christianity grew by almost 50 percent each decade. Wow. That rate has never been matched.

The spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire happened so completely that on Roman coins, the depictions of Roman gods and Caesars were soon replaced with Christian symbols like the cross and the Chi Rho, which are the first two letters of Christ's name. In my library, I own two ancient Roman coins from the Roman Empire days. And the first is a denarius from the year AD 10 with the face of Caesar Augustus on it. It's the coin Jesus looks at and says, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21 NCV). The second coin I own is a denarius from the reign of Emperor Theodosius, who was a Christian and outlawed pagan worship. It has a cross over his head on one side, and on the backside of the coin, it's a larger cross. That's how much culture had changed so quickly.

How Rapidly the First Church Grew

First let's look at how rapidly the first church grew. This ought to encourage you. Acts 1:15 says this: "In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)" (NIV).

On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is given to everyone it changes everything. In the Old Testament, not everybody got the Holy Spirit. He only came upon people for special occasions and then left. But Pentecost changes everything, and it's the birth of the Christian Church. Acts 2:41 tells us that on the day of Pentecost, everyone who believed and accepted Peter's message was baptized.

About 3,000 were added to the church on the first day. Look again at that phrase "added to the church"—growth starts with addition. I want you to notice that on the very first day of the church at Pentecost, the church in Jerusalem became a megachurch. On day one, it has 3,000 people baptized. Megachurches aren't a new phenomenon. They started in Jerusalem on the first day of Pentecost. We're going to see it move to multiplication as we move through the book of Acts.

Then Acts 2:47 says, "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (NIV). Look again at the phrase "added daily." That means that, at a minimum, at least one person a day was being saved, though it probably was many more than that.

How many converts would be added in one year if you added one daily? Three hundred sixty-five in a year. Can you imagine if every Christian church today added 365 new converts every year? That would be revival in the 21st century. That was the Church of the first century! The church added daily. Whatever they did, we need to do—so the Church will add daily.

Next, in Acts 4:3-4, it says, "They seized Peter and John and . . . put them in jail . . . But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand" (NIV).

This report says that the church in Jerusalem had grown to 5,000 men. Question: Whenever you have 5,000 men, how many women are you going to have? At least 5,000. How many kids you're going to have? Maybe 10,000. So at this point in Acts 4, the church has likely grown to at least 20,000 members.

Now we go to Acts 5:14, which tells us this: "Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (NIV). The phrase "more and more" is the Greek word *pletho*. It's where we get our word "plethora," which means an excess or overflowing abundance—having more than you can imagine and manage. Several Bible translations translate "more and more" as "multitudes" of both men and women. The church had grown so big, it's now too big to count. Multiple multitudes are coming to worship. Can you imagine a church growing like this? It's why they had to meet outside in the temple courts—because there's no building that's going to hold multiple multitudes.

Now, look at Acts 5:28. The angry high priest accused the apostles: "We gave you strict orders not to teach in [Jesus'] name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching" (NIV). That's no exaggeration or hyperbole. It's a fact. Nobody in Jerusalem could ignore this church's explosive growth. By this point the church may have had 50,000 people. It's obviously a plethora, more than leaders like the high priest could manage.

Now go to Acts 6:1 and we see an example of this: "In those days, the number of disciples was rapidly multiplying." Look at the phrase "rapidly multiplying." We've gone from addition to multiplication, which is an exponential factor. And it says, "In those days, the number of disciples was rapidly multiplying. Widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."

Explosive growth always brings management problems. It's hard to play catchup with the Holy Spirit, which is the whole book of Acts. One of the versions of Scripture says the Church was growing "by leaps and bounds" (The Message). What an exciting report!

Now, next in our progress report, look at Acts 6:7 because this is what happened after they solved the problem of caring for the poor widows in a rapidly growing church. Verse 7 says this: "The word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests came to obedient faith" (ESV). Again, we now see exponential growth by multiplication rather than just by adding new congregants.

By now you have a taste of the kind of rapid expansion the Church experienced in the first century. Could that happen again? Oh, yeah—if we will return to the New Testament ways that they spread the Gospel in the first three centuries.

Let's look at one last verse in this Church growth report that Luke gives us. This is given just twenty-five years after the church had been birthed at Pentecost, and it's found in Acts 21. After all of his missionary journeys, Paul returns to Jerusalem to find not a megachurch—because that was the first day—but a massive church that cannot even be numbered anymore.

Acts 21:19-20 says this: "Paul reported in detail all that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when the church leaders of Jerusalem heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul, 'You can see here, brother, how many multitudes of Jews have believed here.'"

That word "multitude" is a very rare Greek word. This word "multitude" is translated "thousands" in a few Bible versions, but it's far bigger than just thousands. The Greek word used here is *myrioi*, which literally means tens of tens of thousands. It was a word to express a number so large it couldn't be counted.

This word *myrioi* is the same word as the English word "myriad." What is a myriad? A myriad means an extremely great number. It's innumerable. It's so large you can't possibly count it. Greek astronomers would say there's a *myrioi* of stars in the sky. You can't count. That's how large the church at Jerusalem had grown, and that was just one church in one place in the first century.

So you may ask, how big was the church in Jerusalem after twenty-five years? Well, most Bible scholars believe it had grown to be about 100,000 members. You say, "Well, how big was Jerusalem?" Jerusalem was a city of about 200,000 people. So that means half the city were members of the first Christian church of Jerusalem. Now you know why the high priest said they had filled Jerusalem with their doctrine!

We naturally asked the question, "Where did the Church meet?" The answer is the one we're going to have to use in the 21st century if we're going to grow that fast. They used homes. We know from history that the fastest growing period of Christianity was during the first 300 years, and—get this—in those first 300 years, not a single church building was built.

I've been in one of the oldest buildings in Maaloula, Syria, which was built in about 312 and it's not that big, but there must be some kind of correlation here that in the fastest period of growth, they didn't build any buildings. The rapid expansion of our faith around the world doesn't require buildings. In fact, constructing buildings can slow exponential growth down because we can't build fast enough in multiplication.

For the first fifteen years of Saddleback Church, we used 79 different rented facilities, including banks, schools, warehouses, football stadiums, and even a giant tent for our last three years before we finally built a building in year fifteen. We grew Saddleback Church to over 10,000 in weekend attendance in a tent and in homes without ever owning a building. I wanted to prove you don't need a building to grow a church.

Where did we get that idea? I got that idea from the model of the very first church. Acts 5:42 says this: "They met every day in the temple courts and from house to house. They never stopped proclaiming the news that Jesus is the Christ."

The book of Acts gives us all the secrets we need to finish the task. It's one principle, and it's a two-part strategy. First, it says they met for large group worship in the temple courts and, second, they met for small group fellowship in the homes. That strategy still works today: large group worship, small group fellowship.

Here's the big idea I want you to get: In AD 33 there was just a handful of Christian believers, but within 300 years they dominated the Roman Empire. When we study all the barriers those Christians were up against, and when we realize they had none of the resources we have,, it just makes their growth even more impressive. So, we need to humbly let the first-century Christians teach us in the 21st century.

What we can learn from the very first day of the Church, on the day of Pentecost, the birthday of Christianity? The more I have studied Acts 2, the more I admire it as the original charter of the Church. If we'll just follow the model of how the Holy Spirit birthed the church in Acts 2, we will have a pattern for finishing the task by AD 2033, the 2,000th birthday of Christianity.

Seven Elements of the Charter of the Church

From Acts chapter 2, we get seven elements of the charter of the church.

First, we must wait and pray continually for God's power. Prayer is mentioned multiple times in the first two chapters of Acts. We're never going to have the power and the results of Acts until we pray like Acts. Acts 1:14 says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (NIV). Acts 1:24 says again, "Then they prayed" (NIV). Acts 2:42 says, "They devoted themselves . . . to prayer" (NIV).

When I was selected to lead the Finishing the Task coalition, the first thing I did was start enlisting and meeting with prayer network leaders all around the world because unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it. God's work must be done God's way, and we move forward on our knees. Much prayer brings much power; little prayer produces little power; no prayer produces no power.

The original effort for the Great Commission started with praying for power. We need to do the same. Acts 1:3-4 says, "For 40 days after crucifixion, Jesus met with his followers many times and proved in many ways that he was truly alive, and he talked to them about the Kingdom of God. One time while he was eating a meal with them, Jesus told them, 'Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the Spirit he has promised.'"

In other words, Jesus is saying, "Don't try to do anything until I send my Spirit to empower you. You're not going to be able to do this on your own." I don't know about you, but I have a profound sense of my own inadequacy when we talk about taking the Gospel to the whole world in the next decade.

But with his Great Commission, Jesus gave us a great promise. It's in Acts 1:8: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem [your hometown], and in all Judea [the nearby county] and Samaria [people who are different from you culturally, but live in the same area], and to the ends of the earth"* (NIV).

The Holy Spirit would give them all the power they needed to do what Jesus commissioned them to do. So, for ten days all they did was wait and pray, wait and pray, wait and pray. There is a direct connection between prayer and power. After ten days of prayer, the arrival of God's Spirit was accompanied by three powerful signs on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:1-4 says, *"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them"* (NIV).

What do we have here? These three miraculous signs: noise that sounds like a hurricane inside a building, bright flame that looks like a fire, and everybody speaking in a foreign language. Imagine that.

What's the significance of these three symbols? God doesn't do anything by accident; he doesn't do anything to show off. Jesus is demonstrating three truths. He's saying, "First, my Church is to be powerful. Second, my Church is to be on fire. Third, my Church is to be a multicultural, all-nation congregation. My Church is going to be something you've never seen before."

Acts 2:43, *"Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles"* (NIV). There were miracles—signs and wonders—happening on the first day of the Church. Let's just be honest—today that power is missing in many, if not most, churches. Why? We don't pray like they did. They prayed for ten days; we talk more to each other than we talk to God.

And yet, 1 Corinthians 4:20 says this: *"The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power"* (NIV). The Message paraphrase says, *"God's Way is not a matter of mere talk; it's an empowered life."* To finish the task, we're going to need a lot of power from God. Prayer is going to be a priority for Finishing the Task.

Here's what they do. They pray ten days, preach ten minutes, and have 3,000 saved. We do the opposite. We prepare and plan for ten days, pray for five minutes, and have five saved. When we pray like Acts, we'll have the power and the results like Acts.

The second thing we learn from the charter of the church is this: We must speak all languages to reach all people. I'm talking about more than just national languages here. I'm saying we can't expect unbelievers to learn our religious language, our lingo. We say things like, "Oh, I'm blessed. I was grieved in my spirit. Praise God. I have a burden in my soul." That's language that people don't understand.

If you're missionary, you must learn the language of the people. It doesn't matter how good your message is. If you don't learn their language, they're not going to get it. We have the best message in the world, but we often try to share it in our language instead of learning the language of a culture.

As a missionary, when you move to a foreign country, you must learn the foreign language. Today there are cultures all around you. You don't know the language of hip hop, you don't know the language of the mothers of preschoolers, you don't know the language of single adults, you don't know the language of military jargon. We must share the Good News in ways they understand, using channels that communicate to them.

This is why a standard evangelistic presentation will never work everywhere. Jesus didn't have a standard presentation; he adapted his message to the people he was talking to. He never used the same approach twice. We must teach our people how to do that, rather than using a canned approach where you say the same thing to everybody.

Acts 2:4 says, "They all began to speak in different languages as the Spirit gave each of them the power to express themselves." These tongues are different from the tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. Why? Because the tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 require an interpretation, but on the day of Pentecost, they didn't need any interpretation because the miracle was that everybody heard in their own language.

There are tongues for personal growth, but these were tongues for evangelism. Unbelievers understood what they were saying instantly. There's a deeper principle here. Why was this miracle given for the charter of the Church? Acts 2:5 tells us there were religious Jews staying in Jerusalem who had come from every country in the world.

The Bible continues, "*When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because all of them heard the believers talking in their own languages. In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, 'These people who are talking like this are Galileans! How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages?'*" (Acts 2:6-8 GNT).

Acts 2:11 says something similar: “All of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done” (GNT).

This is the necessity of multi-channel and multicultural communication. What was God doing? He was reversing Genesis 11, the confusion of Babel.

Today, the church does speak almost every language because the 2.6 billion believers are found in every nation. Even in a single congregation, Saddleback Church, we speak sixty-seven languages. Let me apply this to your own life. You may not realize this, but you are already multilingual, because in addition to your national language that you speak from your nation, you speak a number of personal languages, personal dialects, depending on your age, your career, your culture or your interest, your hobbies, your favorite sport, or dozens of other ways you can speak to people like yourself in ways that other people can't.

If you like a particular sport, you can talk to people who like that sport. If you have children of a certain age, you can talk to people who have children of that certain age. If you are a single adult who likes to do a certain thing, then you could talk to other single adults who like to do that certain thing.

During Finishing the Task, we're going to need to help every Christian identify the different types of people with similar interests that they can reach because they have similar interests. Soldiers can reach soldiers; retired people can reach retirees. You can reach people who have the same interests as you.

Not only will we need to use every kind of language, but we're going to need to use every kind of communication channel. Today the Internet and digital technology have given every Christian access to speak to thousands of people, right out of their home and right off their phone.

Here's the third thing that they did in Acts 2, that we learn from the charter of the church: We must engage everyone's spiritual gift. We'll never be able to finish the task unless we engage everybody's spiritual gift. In the body of Christ, everybody gets to participate. This is what Pentecost did. It changed participation from the Old Testament, where only the ordained priest got to go into the temple, and one man only got to go on the Holy of Holies one day a year.

There was not a lot of group participation in that style. The paid professional, the ordained clergy, did it all. But in the body of Christ, everybody gets to play, and Jesus makes sure of that by giving everybody different gifts so that we need each other. There are no spectators. There's 100 percent participation. Every member is a minister. The church is not an audience; it's an army—of all ages, both genders, and all cultures.

Acts 2 continues: “Peter stood up . . . and . . . began to speak to the crowd: ‘ . . . These people are not drunk, as you suppose; it is only nine o’clock in the morning’ . . . God says: I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. [Everyone gets the Holy Spirit now.] Your sons and your daughters will proclaim my message [Both male and female will preach.]; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women [That’s both men and women, there’s no distinction anymore.], I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will proclaim my message” (Acts 2:14-18 GNT).

Then here’s the result: “And then, whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved” (Acts 2:21 GNT).

In those verses, you see “everyone,” “your sons and your daughters,” “your young men . . . and your old men,” “both men and women.” Who does that exclude? Nobody. In the first century, everybody shared the responsibility of communicating the Good News. Preaching wasn’t limited to ordained professionals. Everybody did it. In the church, there are no unimportant gifts, no unimportant people. Everyone is needed. Everyone must be mobilized for the Finishing the Task—100 percent participation.

We are going to need to apply these principles - the principle of prayer, the principle of power, and the principle of multicultural, multilingual, multi-generational, multi-gender participation - no matter what country we come from or what denomination we belong to. If we’re going to have the power and the results of the New Testament church—the first century—in the 21st century, we must do it God’s way.

Father, may we have the power of Acts when we pray like Acts and when we practice these principles that you laid out in the foundation of your church. It’s your church and you designed it, and if we’ll do it your way, we’ll see your support and we’ll see you working in great ways. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

ARE YOU IN?

Join a coalition of thousands of believers, churches, denominations, and organizations coming together to fulfill the Great Commission. Finishing the Task is a call to mobilize all of Christ’s Church, to do all Christ commands, with all people, in all places, using all of God’s gifts, all for God’s glory by 2033, the 2000th anniversary of the instructions given to us by Jesus.

Learn more and get started at FinishingtheTask.com.