

Hey, this is interesting! Dave McClure has made a reputation over the past couple of decades as one of the top venture capitalists anywhere. He's invested in hundreds of startup companies and has had notable success participating in several dozen of what are called "unicorns" in the Silicon Valley world. McClure founded two venture capital firms, the first one named 500 Startups, and he's now currently operating another named Practical Venture Capital. He's lived out challenging business experiences, including being the Director of Marketing for PayPal in its early years. Suffice it to say, he's seen a lot! The point is, we can glean some key thinking from a seasoned business veteran like McClure who's been around a lot of startups that by definition struggle to gain traction...and then must continue to fight to sustain success.

Here's why I'm specifically using some of Dave McClure's thinking as a framework for this podcast episode: McClure developed what he calls the "pirate model," which is a five-step framework for marketing and customer engagement in a startup. McClure says that "the 'pirate' part comes from the five steps: Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Referral, & Revenue (AARRR!)" Get it? AARRR is the acronym for those five steps of Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Referral, and Revenue...yes, "AARRR" like a pirate!

Here's the deal: some other folks in the rough and tumble, inherently brutal world of tech startups have found McClure's pirate-model thinking to be useful for helping to drive companies to success.

But, of course, if we *as Christians* are going to delve into service offering issues and marketing for startups...well, that means we should take a strong look at the early church as perfectly documented in the New Testament. Why, you ask? Because there's been no startup in history that's been more powerful, sustainable, and successful than the enterprise we know as the early church! But this is also key: in this era of declining effectiveness of many churches, the current-era churches that do impact successfully for the Kingdom of God do so by clearly emulating the actions of the early church. So, let's take a look!

What we're going to do is a version of McClure's pirate framework in relation to early church, New Testament activities and results...and that first action is acquisition. And, boy, is this rich territory! Just think of the historical time of Christ—hardly an era of modern marketing that enticed people to accept free-will offers. No, this era was embedded in centuries of forced conquest...empires rising and falling one after another: Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome. And if the word "acquisition" meant anything on a large-scale level, it meant "acquiring" territory and peoples by the sword! That's right, acquisition by a king's prowess at war, like Alexander the Great for the Greeks and Augustus Caesar for the Romans.

But "when the fullness of time had come" (Galatians 4:4), God sent a different kind of king, a King who shed His power, offering Himself up on the Cross so that the Kingdom of God could flourish in an utterly unique way. That didn't happen with a sword in human conquest, it was designed to happen by the sword of the Spirit...the Word of God...with people offered the opportunity to *voluntarily* join up with King Jesus.

And, from the day of that first Pentecost after the Cross, thousands of people responded affirmatively to the offering made by Christ on the Cross! And how did they hear? Well, by the proclaiming of the gospel of the Kingdom of God! People simply, powerfully believed in Christ! It's this simple: this truly unique startup exemplified the ultimate enterprise model of a free-will-based acquisition of people responding to an amazing value proposition: pardon for their sins and eternal life with God! *That changed everything!*

Now, let's move to McClure's second "A" ...activation. In the business world, just getting someone signed up isn't the complete cycle, it's also about actual activation...engagement...usage of the offering. Here's an example: it's great for Mastercard to get you signed up for a credit card—but if you don't activate it by using it at a restaurant or the mall, Mastercard not only hasn't made money from "acquiring" you, they actually have lost valuable time and money working to just get "non-activated" folks like you "acquired."

Whatever else the early church did, their work in the decades following the Cross revealed that some very powerful activation took hold! Missionary trips were fruitful—many widely dispersed people in a sizeable area around the Mediterranean Sea were saved and sustaining churches were founded. Here's why: the

focus, intensity, and fruits of activation were designed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Yeah, that was promised by Jesus Himself in His last words spoken on Earth before His Ascension: “...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 ESV) Hey, no startup has fostered more profound and lasting results than the early church. Think of it, you yourself are the fruit of that activation activity!

But, wait, you might say, how about a startup’s relational-longevity embedded in McClure’s next step—*retention*? Well, as for the Kingdom of God’s early-church startup, Jesus instructed His disciples in His Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). After we listen to it, we’ll call for particular attention to several key words in this familiar passage: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Did you get that? This fresh Kingdom business led by Jesus wasn’t ever intended to be a “one and done” type of endeavor, getting people signed up for a gathering or two and then letting them drift—quite the opposite! Kingdom folks were to “make disciples”...“baptizing them”...“teaching them” to observe the whole shebang...and, yes, Jesus will be with them (and with us) “to the end of the age.” Wow, these are long-term sustaining actions...yeah, this is *retention*, real retention that the world had never before seen! And it’s still being honored in a chain of disciples centuries later. Awesome retention...*that’s crazy good!*

Then we go to McClure’s fourth step: *referral*. And, of course, in the Kingdom of God, referral is embedded in the very act of proclaiming the gospel and teaching new believers to be disciples! And testimonies are essentially referrals—so, let’s take a look at a couple of Jesus-events establishing that line of thinking.

So how about this one? After casting out demons from a man, Jesus said to him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” (Mark 5:19) And in another teaching, Jesus sweepingly said, “so everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven...” (Matthew 10:32) Frankly, the early church was forged with testimonies that were building on the foundation of Christ. That’s the Kingdom’s version of referral!

McClure’s fifth step is *revenue*, which of course, for a business, is the *reaping* of the first four in action! And so the early church has its own “R” with *reaping*...with Kingdom measurement of success: salvation-decisions, miracles, new churches, geographic expansion, and the expanded marketing to a massive new target of Gentiles! Wow, it’s hard to imagine more powerful reapings...just go read the book of Acts for a bracing refresher of all that! So then, when are Christians like pirates? ...AARRR! *All the way to reaping!*

But the era of the church’s unofficial startup phase is long past! Still, the truth is, McClure’s five-step approach for building an enterprise is powerful for the *continuous regeneration* of an enterprise, too! Yes, for the church *right now*, too: *acquisition, activation, retention, referral, reaping*. But a second truth is, the church in America, broadly speaking, is in a “time of troubles,” a period of increasing weakness. Not convinced? How strong is the *acquisition of new adherents* in the American church? How about the broad *powerful activation of the gospel* that is fostering new adherents? How about the *vital retention of young people*? How about the *effectiveness of referrals* in advancing the purposes of the Kingdom? Yeah, how about the *overall reaping by the church*? To be sure, your local church may indeed be thriving, and that’s great! But how about the American church at large? The sad reality is that the church is the primary author of its own troubles—it simply won’t do to blame the culture or politics or any other handy scapegoat. The modern church must reboot and recapture the outward-looking priorities of the early church. But the universal church is not unified, even on the basics. So, it must be done in each local church. Yours. Mine. And this same ongoing renewal should be done in each local church globally—no matter the geography!

Dave McClure was not speaking to churches—he was merely identifying some really core steps that foster success in all startups...just so happens the early church clearly applied key principles of startup success! And that mentality is exactly what can make churches reap true Kingdom success in every era! Go. Do.

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Dave McClure's "pirate steps" were designed for startups, but they are also very useful to consider beyond startups to the continuous regeneration of an enterprise. How is your workplace enterprise doing with the pirate model of acquisition, activation, retention, referral, and revenue/reaping? Be specific.
  
2. How well is your church doing with the pirate model of acquisition, activation, retention, referral, and reaping? Is your church experiencing continuous regeneration? Be specific.
  
3. How well are you doing in your leadership/stewardship roles at your workplace enterprise in helping to fulfill the pirate model of acquisition, activation, retention, referral, and revenue/reaping? Your church? Be specific on each.