

THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN ACTS

In the last twenty years elders, ministers and church growth leaders have been trying to figure out a way or method to duplicate the growth that the Lord's body enjoyed during the first century. Many of the church's publications are publishing article about the decline in membership, what the status of the church will be in the next generation; if there will even be a next generation and how to reverse this trend. What we often fail to realize is that we already have that information for us, recorded in the book of Acts. By studying the history of the church in Acts and applying its lessons, the church could, can and will once again "*..upset the world*" Acts 17:6 (1). This growth occurred because of four basic reasons: (1) it trusted in the one true God, (2) it trusted in the one true Son of God, (3) it grew as God would have it grow and (4) because the members of it lived lives of sincere dedication to Christ. (2).

In Acts 1:8 Jesus says "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (1) In looking at this verse one must notice that the power comes from God and not from ourselves; we must follow God's timing not our own; Jesus, and only Jesus, is whom we are to declare and we must start from where we are and expand outward. This is what the early church did.

The first words of instruction the apostles were given was to wait for what the Father had promised Acts 1:4 and that is what they did. However, during this time they did not sit idle, they "all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer" Acts 1:14. They were in harmony; "there were no schisms, no divided interest no discordant purposes" (3) giving constant attention to prayer. The number of men and women that were gathered numbered about one hundred twenty, a very small beginning.

As a side note 1st Corinthians 15:6 seems to indicate that there more believers scattered through out Jerusalem, upward of five hundred people. This small group, from which the church would multiply, began with complete obedience to Christ's words and prayer.

What an example to us today.

On the day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus ascended, the apostles prepared in prayer and obedient in action, were filled with the Holy Spirit, one can not help but think of Zechariah 4:6 "Not by might nor by power but by My Spirit says the Lord of host" (1) Through the power of the Spirit, "men are about to be told the gospel plan of salvation" (3). Christ had told Peter that he would be given the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 16:19, and "keys are for opening doors and the door of entrance into the church was opened by Peter at Pentecost. The keys had reference to the plan of salvation: faith, repentance, confession and baptism. (3) Peter declares Jesus to the Jews at Jerusalem; Jesus the Nazarene attested by God, that they nailed to the cross, that God raised and exalted to His right hand, God has made Him both Lord and Christ. The simple message of Christ was proclaimed or witnessed to the people of Jerusalem that first day and about three thousand souls were added that day to the church

Many Christians can quote Acts 2:41 about the three thousand souls being added to the church that first day. However, the key to church growth is found in verse 42 "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." What was the apostles' teaching? Christ. What was fellowship? Building up of one another in Christ. What was the breaking of bread? Communion with the Lord, remembrance of what Christ has done for each believer;

What was prayer? Talking to God. The action was continuous and in verse 47 “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Through the continuous action of the apostles, proclaiming Jesus in every circumstance the church continued to grow. They began with a hundred and twenty and added three thousand on the first day and in Act 4:4 “...the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”(1) The church grew, establishing its foundation in Jerusalem, not through gimmicks and man made methods but because they trusted God and His Son. It did not matter if they were suffering shame before the Sanhedrin, or healing the sick, or dealing with the daily issues within the body, the apostles had one task “and every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” Acts 5:42 (1); As a result of their being “My witness” “the word of God kept on spreading and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priest were becoming obedient to the faith” Acts 6:7(1). Therefore, the church was firmly established in Jerusalem, the foundation has been laid, and is now prepared to spread in Judea and Samaria.

In Acts chapters eight through twelve one finds the record of the church spreading in Judea and Samaria. Acts 8:1 says”... And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”(1) While one can debate why the apostles stayed and if all means all of the converts to Christ or if all means only the Hellenist, one thing can not be disputed, verse four “those who had been scattered went about preaching the word”(1). The people doing the teaching, evangelizing, “were not the elders, deacons and preachers. They were the disciples” (2); Those that were scattered were so sold on

the gospel that wherever they went, they proclaimed the Gospel. What an example for us today, the 'average' Christian proclaiming Christ wherever we are, wherever we go and in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, not limited to Sunday service; the love of Christ and the gospel of Christ filling our hearts.

The first preaching of the gospel outside of Jerusalem was done by Philip in the city of Samaria. The message was simple '...proclaiming Christ to all" Acts 8:5 (1). And in verse six "in modern language we would say that multitudes of the Samaritans were responding to the invitation offered in the gospel" (2). As a result of the gospel going forth, the apostles sent John and Peter to the Samaritans, but what is most interesting is that these two Jewish men on their way home, back to Jerusalem "...were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans." Acts 8:25 (1) In looking at the spread of the gospel caused by the dispersion of the Christians, is that it, the gospel was received with joy. This joy is particularly seen in the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, as recorded in Acts 8:39.

During this time, Saul of Tarsus was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" Acts 9:1, yet they kept preaching the good news of Christ. After Philip left the Eunuch, "he found himself at Azotes and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea." Acts 8:40 (1). The early disciples preached Christ wherever they were; the opportune moment was now.

With the church spreading to all of Judea and Samaria, it is time to start the preparation for going unto the "remotest part of the earth.". God's power and providence is amazing that his instrument in the spread of the gospel will be Saul of Tarsus, the chief persecutor of the early Christians. Saul on his way to Damascus, seeking to imprison

men and women of the Way, will meet the Lord Jesus and be converted to being a disciple of Christ. In Acts 9:15 Jesus says “he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” Upon his baptism, Saul does what characterized the early Christians “and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues...” Acts 9:20 (1) He not only proclaimed Jesus, but he “spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord” (Acts 9: 27, 28). Thus in Acts 9:31 we find that the church has been established throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria and that it is continuing to increase.

The church is now enjoying a time of peace but one more piece of preparation is needed to take the gospel to the remotest parts of the earth; the acceptance of gentiles as God people also. “The conversion of Cornelius opens the door of opportunity for salvation to the Gentiles, enabling the apostle Paul (Saul) to march across Europe with the gospel” (2) .God’s chosen instrument for the conversion of Cornelius is Peter, who has left Jerusalem and is traveling through out the regions proclaiming Christ, but once he gets back to Jerusalem Peter must defend his actions with the Gentiles. Upon completing his defense “...they quieted down and glorified God saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”” Acts 11:18 (1). The church is now ready to spread to the Gentile world and Christians in Antioch began preaching to the Greeks and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

The work in Antioch will be a preparing ground for going to the rest of the world. The church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to help, who will recruit Saul (Paul) to help and the Lord will bless the church with “considerable numbers” being taught. However, while this growth in Antioch is being accomplished, Herod Agrippa I begins a

persecution against the church. He kills the apostle James, tries to kill Peter in order to please the Jews. Yet in this political attack upon the church “the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” Acts 12:24 (1) The church is ready to go to “the remotest parts of the earth.”

The rest of the book of Acts from chapter 13 thru chapter 18 will describe the growth of the church to Europe, Asia Minor reaching all the way to Rome, as it focuses on the journey's of Paul who was also known as Saul of Tarsus.

Unlike the spread of the gospel unto Judea and Samaria, where the Christians saw a need and proclaimed Christ every where they went. The journey to the remotest parts of the earth, the messengers will be sent out by the church in Antioch, being guided by the Spirit of God. The two men to be sent out have prepared teaching together, working together for over a year, having success.

The rest of Paul's life will be spent proclaiming Christ unto the entire world. In Acts 20:15 he will say “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God”. He will proclaim Jesus in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Corinth even in Rome to the imperial guard even among Caesar's household. Paul will be described in Acts 24 as “a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world.” By the end of Acts Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 has been fulfilled; all within thirty years. Why, because the early Christians trusted God, they trusted in His Son Jesus, the church grew as God planned and the early Christians were dedicated to Christ with all of their heart, with all of their soul with all of their mind and with all of their strength.

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