

BECOMING A GROWING CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION:

A. Begin with an example of what making announcements for the church at Jerusalem would be like:

1. Good morning! Welcome to the assembly of the church of Jesus Christ which meets in this place:
 - a. We are here today in honor of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ, to worship Him & our Father in Heaven, and to partake in fellowship, teaching, prayer, and the Lord's Supper
 - b. Last week was great week for our members – All of you spent time visiting in one another's homes, sharing in fellowship, and strengthening each other in the Lord!
 - c. It was very encouraging to see some of you step forward and give financial aid to those of our number who were suffering physical need – You displayed the love of Christ well!
 - d. Please keep Peter and John in your prayers – They have been arrested for preaching Jesus – At this time a chance of release is not looking good... pray for God to intervene!
 - e. Last, but certainly not least, we have seen so many people turn to the Lord this week that we cannot announce all of their names! As you look around you will see thousands of new faces! Praise be to the Lord for the great work He is doing in this place!
2. Obviously, these are not the announcements for the church at Trussville for many reasons! As we think about these things, wouldn't it be wonderful to have these types of things happening?

B. I would hope that we all would like to see the kind of growth here that we read of taking place in the church at Jerusalem in the early part of the book of acts! Is such growth possible today?

1. The Jerusalem church experienced an explosion in numerical growth (**Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7**)
2. It was just about numbers though, it was also about gaining spiritual strength (**Acts 2:42-43**)
3. When we study that group of people we are amazed, and even envious of the growth they experienced, but we quickly write off the possibility of that occurring today:
 - a. We say, "They had apostles, spiritual gifts, and it was a brand new thing" – These certainly helped in their growth; however, these are not the only reasons why they grew!
 - b. What about the stories of growth 50-100 years ago? They didn't have those things! We say, "It was a different time, they weren't as busy, people's hearts were different"
4. Let's be real! This shows we're looking for excuses, not for opportunities! Yes, some things are different & times do change; but, there are common characteristics we can emulate!
 - a. I want see a show of hands today, "How many people want to see this church grow?" I expected this reaction... EVERYONE DOES! It's something we talk & pray about a lot!
 - b. If you are honest when you say you want to grow then that means you'll do what it takes!
 - c. Looking to the book of Acts we can learn what is they did & know what we must do too!

I. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROWING CHURCH IN ACTS:

A. The Members Were Eager To Teach The Gospel:

1. The church at Jerusalem, and in other places, grew so mightily because when they preached the gospel it was with Christ-centered preaching: (**Acts 3:17-19; 4:2, 10-12; 5:30-32; 8:5, 12, 35; etc!**)
 - a. The book of Acts in many ways is about the carrying out of The Great Commission by the apostles → Jesus' charge to "preach the gospel" to all the world! (**Mark 16:15**)
 - b. We know the gospel is the "good news" of Jesus Christ, "glad tidings" of our salvation... It tells us of His life, His death, His resurrection & what that means for our salvation

- c. Most of the time, when you find preaching in the book of Acts it doesn't take them long to get to the point – Jesus died for your sins and now you must repent & be baptized!
- 2. When persecution began to get intense, the Christians began to leave Jerusalem but took the message of Jesus Christ and the cross everywhere they went! **(Acts 8:1-4)**
 - a. The Jews steadily increased their opposition, trying to stomp it out; yet, the very thing meant to stomp it out caused it to spread rapidly! Why? They were more dedicated to the Lord, His gospel, & serving Him than their own interests & even their lives!
 - b. Who were the “preachers” at this time? It seems to be the apostles! They stayed in Jerusalem – These were simply Christians with a message that mattered to them!
 - c. What do you do with people that respond like this to persecution! Think about what their preaching under this circumstance said to others → (1) It showed others they were serious about it, dedicated to it, & they loved it (2) It said there must be something to this gospel! Who'd be willing to die for a false message or one that didn't matter?
- 3. When you think about it, the same gospel message we find in Acts is a message that any Christian should be able to teach to someone else:
 - a. You can't be a Christian without understanding who Jesus was, what Jesus did on the cross, the need for repentance, and baptism – What more do you have to tell someone for them to be saved? If you know these things, then you can teach it!
 - b. But we feel like others can teach it more effectively than we can... We focus on their ability & our perceived inability & we wind up feeling totally incapable! But you can teach it
 - c. Then we complicate it as well! Maybe we feel like we have to start out by attacking and defeating every erroneous doctrine & practice when the gospel is what needs taught
- 4. It's also important to see that the gospel was also spread by connecting people who needed it with those who were able to teach it: **(Acts 8:30-31)**
 - a. The Holy Spirit did this with Philip & the Eunuch; God did this with Peter and Cornelius; & the Jerusalem church did this by sending Barnabas to Antioch – Get the message out!
 - b. Think for a moment about Peter – He was one of the great preachers of the gospel and played a prominent role in what happened at Pentecost. But Peter had his beginning with a simple invitation from his brother, Andrew, to come see Jesus! **(John 1:37-42)**
 - c. Some feel like they aren't capable of effectively teaching someone the gospel... If this is you, you do know people who can get people in touch with those who can teach it!

B. They Had Godly Attitudes That Sparked Growth:

- 1. Following their obedience to the gospel they had a great attitude of devotion **(Acts 2:42; 11:23)**
 - a. The word devoted (continued steadfastly) is a repetition of the same Greek word meaning, “To be earnest towards, persevere, constantly diligent, attend diligently to all the exercises, to adhere closely to, attend continually” → Were steadfastly steadfast!
 - b. They understood becoming a Christian was the start of a life of service! It was something they didn't take halfheartedly but gave it their all! They continually sought to grow!
- 2. We read in Acts about Christians who were truly eager for spiritual growth **(Acts 17:11)**
 - a. We often read this passage to emphasize the need to prove what is taught by God's word and not just accept anything, but the lesson here is more than that! It's an attitude!
 - b. Luke says they were receiving the word “with all eagerness” (other versions say readiness of mind) → They prepared themselves to listen & were hungry to learn God's will!
 - c. And they didn't just accept it because Paul & Silas said it – but compared it to the

- scriptures to make sure it was accurate → They had a strong desire to get it right!
- d. These Christians were great Bible students! They studied God’s word not just to prove some doctrine wrong but because they had a strong desire for it! They no doubt loved the word of God, wanted to please Him, and wanted to grow more spiritually!
3. As they enjoyed their fellowship with one another on a more social basis, they did so with gladness, generosity, and praise **(Acts 2:46-47)**
 - a. Sometimes people see our “get-togethers” as not really important, another thing to take away your personal time, or an optional thing at best... But here we see it was a major reason why the church was growing! You did say you wanted to grow, right?
 - b. It appears they weren’t waiting for a monthly get together but were seeking out and creating opportunities to be together! Why? It goes back to their attitude! They shared a special bond, loved one another, wanted to be strengthened, & grow
 - c. Their demeanor was a contagious one! We see in these verses excitement & joy! This produced great unity! Without unity a church won’t just not grow, it’ll be torn apart!
 4. They saw their numbers multiply because they had a spirit of fear and comfort **(Acts 9:31)**
 5. The Christians in Jerusalem had an attitude of selflessness not selfishness **(Acts 4:32-34)**

C. They valued and cultivated fellowship among themselves:

1. Immediately upon its conception we find the Jerusalem church emphasizing fellowship **(Acts 2:42)**
 - a. Fellowship: Partnership, participation, communion – The bond of common purpose and devotion that binds Christians together & to Christ – Sharing in interest in each other
 - b. We talk about the early church’s persistence in the apostles’ doctrine, the observance of the Lord’s Supper, and prayer; but they also were persistent in this fellowship!
 - c. This was first vertical in nature, meaning they had fellowship with God, and because they had that in common they shared in fellowship with one another **(1 John 1:3)**
 - d. “Continued Steadfastly” – Shows fellowship was something that mattered to them, they appreciated it’s great value, and that they consistently worked at strengthening it!
2. They were steadfast in fellowship by being together & caring for each other daily: **(Acts 2:44-47)**
3. These Christians continued steadfastly in fellowship by worshipping together regularly: **(Acts 2:42)**
4. They continued steadfastly in fellowship by battling together in prayer: **(Acts 4:23-24, 31)**
5. Fellowship is a vital component of growth! So as we consider the fellowship they shared, there are some lessons to consider for ourselves if we want to share in the same: **(Phile 1:4-7)**
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.

D. It seems almost paradoxical, but the church also grew because discipline was there:

1. In today’s religious environment, many churches either have no desire to enforce purity among its members or they are to scared of what enforcing purity would do:
 - a. Many churches are so concerned about numbers they don’t really care if their members are actually trying to live godly lives or not! They see full pews as what matters!
 - b. Teaching is often watered down – They will talk about discipleship and living the Christian life but rarely are lines drawn condemning sinful living & showing the consequences!
 - c. The masses do come and the church grows in number, but not spiritually! Many wind up

- feeling like as long as they attend church they're fine! (church is a hospital mentality)
2. At the Jerusalem church God sent a clear message that righteous living is a must! **(Acts 5:1-11)**
 - a. There were Christians in physical need... So other Christians who had possessions they could sell sold them and brought the money to the apostles to distribute.
 - b. This wonderful display of generosity no doubt resulted in great thankfulness and praise! Evidently Ananias & Saphira saw wanted a bit of that recognition and praise as well!
 - c. They didn't have to sell their property, they could have given half without lying about it, and they were given an opportunity to confess... But they were too full of pride!
 - d. God made it clear holiness must be taken seriously & sin in the church be dealt with! In a sense this is the first case of church discipline & it was administered by the Lord!
 3. Human wisdom would expect such discipline to drive people away but it grew more **(Acts 5:12-14)**
 - a. We may think vs. 13 means people were scared to join the church due to what happened to Ananias & Saphira but this can't be the case since the church continued to grow!
 - b. "Joining them" likely refers to their joining the apostles who had gathered on Solomon's Porch → It caused people to respect the apostles & what they were doing
 - c. When the people saw the great emphasis on holiness and the punishment given to Ananias & Saphira, along with the signs & wonders performed, they listened with greater intensity, respect, reverence, and godly fear! Many people then turned to the Lord!
 4. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he commanded them to go ahead and use spiritual discipline in a situation where a man was leading an ungodly life: **(1 Cor 5:1-13)**
 - a. The situation is that a man was living with his father's wife like they were married. Instead of making the man repent the church is full of pride! Paul tells them that even those who are of the world don't do this type of thing! How did it make the church look?
 - b. They're to remove this person or to deliver him over to Satan → This doesn't mean to pick him up physically & remove him! It's a spiritual removal... Withdrawing fellowship
 - c. This is done in hopes that the person would be saved (motivates repentance); to keep sinfulness from influencing others; and to preserve the church's purity & influence
 - d. Notice now some specifics about how Paul says this was to be carried out:
 - 1) It was to take place when the people had gathered together (in the assembly)
 - 2) They were not to associate with that person anymore or even eat with them... The social ties are severed... They couldn't keep acting like everything was okay!
 5. Ideally a church won't have to go through this incredibly painful process, but if a church wants to grow spiritually and numerically discipline necessary! **(Matthew 18:15-17)**
 - a. Some say, "I just can't see Jesus practicing church discipline! I don't see Him withdrawing fellowship!" Have we forgotten Ananias & Saphira? But we see Jesus commanded it!
 - b. It's not to be something done hastily, but after a strong effort to get the person to repent!
 - c. The context shows what is removed is the social interaction that normally takes place between two people of like precious faith. Paul calls it withdrawing **(2 Thess 3:6)**
 - d. It's in this context Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered..." – This statement isn't about our worship, it's made about spiritual discipline! He's saying He's behind it!