

# THE ANATOMY OF A STRONG CHURCH

## A CASE STUDY OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

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May 17, 2009

### Introduction: (Acts 4:32-37)

- A. There have been countless books, videos, sermons, and seminars dedicated to teaching churches and their leadership about what it takes to make a church strong and growing:**
1. Many of these “how to” guides start out the same – They boldly tout the effectiveness of their plans... If you will just work the plan then they guarantee your church will get strong & grow.
  2. They put their ideas in flashy packages, put high recommendations from men on them, and come up with really catchy titles. Every so often someone comes out with one of these plans and before you know it, the frenzy is caught, & you see many ads showing churches following it
  3. Sometimes these “how to” projects and guides contain some good ideas but often they don’t
    - a. It seems many times there is one of two problems: Either the focus is too carnal or it violates God’s authority in the scriptures. Both options are equally disastrous!
    - b. Doing this you do achieve larger numbers, but you have spiritually weaker members or a church who is no longer following God’s word for its organization, work, or worship
  4. Of course there’s another option which can be just as a destructive – doing nothing at all! I’m afraid this is where many local churches of God’s people find themselves.
    - a. It’s not because they don’t want to be stronger and grow but perhaps they have done things trying to grow & get stronger in the past and failed or they don’t know how
    - b. Sometimes we fall into a state of slumber as a church. We grow accustomed to the way things are and complacency sets in. There’s still a desire, but not enough to motivate us to action. This is dangerous because some churches stay asleep so long they die!
- B. We could subscribe to the latest ploys of the various religious circles which are about as effective as get rich quick scheme or we could turn to God’s word & see what His plan for strength & growth is...**

### LET’S CONSIDER SOME THINGS THAT MADE THE JERUSALEM CHURCH STRONG AND GROWING

- A. First of all, we need to understand that it wasn’t strong and growing because it was free from problems:**
1. Too often we get the idea that a strong and growing church is a church that has no problems:
    - a. From the outside looking in we may know of a local church and think everything is going great there – The members seem to be all mature and spiritually minded, there’s no doctrinal issues, there’s no morality problems, and it seems like the perfect church
    - b. Well, we all know there is no perfect church because all people have problems! It just seems that such a church is “perfect” because we have a limited knowledge of it
    - c. Often the more familiar we become with various local churches the more we see their problems. If a church doesn’t seem like it has any problems it is because it has a much more major problem... IT’S DEAD or it’s on a fast track to dying off.
    - d. If you just read Acts 4:32-37 it seems like this church had no issues, but this is not the case!
  2. One problem the Jerusalem church was facing during this time was intense persecution:
    - a. Just look at the immediate context of the passage we’re looking at tonight → Peter and John had been arrested for preaching the gospel (**vs. 1-3**), they’d been forbidden to

- preach anymore & threatened if they did (vs. 18-21), and after Peter and John were released the disciples gathered to pray for strength during this time (vs. 29-30)
- b. Not long after this Peter & John are arrested again, put on trial, beaten for preaching Christ, threatened, and released again. But they kept preaching! (Acts 5:17-42)
  - c. Then Stephen gets arrested, he preaches that great sermon, & is stoned to death (Acts 6-7)
  - d. After this, the persecution seems to grow more extreme. Things become so intense many Christians scatter, but they continue to preach wherever they went (Acts 8:1-4)
3. Ananias & Sapphira show us the Jerusalem church wasn't free from morality issues (Acts 5:1-11)
    - a. Experience & scripture tell us this would happen – With so many new Christians & so many people in general as part of that church, there were going to be some problems
    - b. Ananias and Sapphira, likely motivated by Barnabas' example, decide to sell some property and donate money to the church... The only problem was they lied about the amount
    - c. This is just one example recorded by Luke for a reason. Certainly there were other issues
  4. Finally they had a physical need arise among members that was getting neglected (Acts 6:1)
    - a. Here's a problem that could have been devastating – It appears to be emotionally charged, it involved two different groups within the church, & it was a complaint of partiality
    - b. There have been too many churches that have split over issues far more trivial than this!
    - c. While we see unity in the church at Jerusalem, this issue could have easily destroyed that
  5. What this reminds us is that the presence of struggles within a local church is not necessarily an indicator of a lack of strength or a problem with growth (Passage)
    - a. **Illustration:** Imagine what would happen if over a short period of time we are able to reach 10 people with the gospel. People who have been living immorally... This would be great right? Not if we don't want there to be any "problems" here!
    - b. Babies are messy & so are babes in Christ! This isn't necessarily bad ... it just means they've got some growing to do. Even more "mature" Christians can get messy!
    - c. A local church is a family and families have problems. Personalities can conflict, people will say things that hurt feelings, & decisions will be made that won't please everyone
    - d. Other difficulties arise: Members may move away, numbers of various age groups go up & down, financial hardship arises, doctrinal struggles, and countless other things

## **B. The church at Jerusalem was strong and growing because they had unity of heart and teaching:**

1. As Luke speaks of their relationships he describes them as having complete unity (Acts 4:32)
  - a. We noticed some issues the church at Jerusalem had to face & these could have destroyed their unity – Persecution, morality issues, a certain group of them being overlooked
  - b. Think about a family – What issues cause the most division in a family? Stress from money problem & physical struggles. This church was a family that was facing both of these!
  - c. Despite the obstacles they maintained such a strong unity that they are said to have one heart and one soul → It wasn't a superficial unity, but was unity down to their very core... Down to their motives, their love, their devotion, their faith, and their hope.
  - d. They moved with such complete unison that it was as if they were one (Like an orchestra)
  - e. The great depth of their unity was evidenced by the extreme measures they would take to meet the needs of their brethren – They had the "what's mine is yours" mentality
2. How did the church at Jerusalem come to attain such strength in their unity? (Acts 2:42-47)
  - a. They had devoted themselves to the apostles teaching – There first of all gave them a common ground to establish unity & their devotion to it made it a like precious faith

- b. They had unity because they worshipped together – They met together to glorify God and encouraged one another to stir up love and good works... Their unity strengthened
  - c. They had unity because they deeply cared for each other, they cared so much they made sacrifices to make sure one another's needs were being met. Unity grew even more!
  - d. They had unity because they were involved in one another's daily lives. They opened their homes to one another, ate together, & built up their fellowship. Their unity excelled!
3. If we want to have a strong and growing church, we must strive to excel in unity **(Eph 4:1-3)**
- a. Our unity begins because of having a common faith, but the more devoted we get to the faith more precious it becomes to us and the more it draws us together
  - b.
  - c.
4. When everyone is committed to building and maintaining unity an atmosphere is created that is both evangelistic and edifying in which spiritual strength & growth can flourish! **(I Peter 3:18)**

**D. There was an obvious emphasis upon and a display of the grace of the Lord:**

1. We see this first of all in the fact that they had powerful preaching about Jesus **(Acts 4:31, 33)**
- a. The phrase "with great power" probably refers the spiritual gifts that accompanied the apostles preaching and that they were able to pass down to others, but that was certainly not the only way their preaching was powerful... It was a powerful message!
  - b. As Peter, John, & the rest spoke of Jesus they spoke in a powerful way... Their preaching and teaching was such that people could see they had been with Jesus **(Acts 4:12-13)**
  - c. When you look at the sermons in Acts & the epistles, it didn't take long for them to get on the subject of Jesus. They preached the truth, they condemned false doctrine, they addressed issues about immorality, but Jesus was the reason behind all of it!
  - d. By focusing on Jesus, regardless whether they were teaching idol worshippers in Athens or Judaizing teachers in Colossae, they were focusing on the great message of grace!
2. Later on, Barnabas travels a little north to the church at Antioch to work with them for a time and upon arrival it says that he "saw the grace of God and was glad" **(Acts 11:20-23)**
- a. When we think of grace we think of something that is real but something you cannot actually see. Grace is like love and mercy – Though real, they are abstract nouns.
  - b. How then was Barnabas able to "SEE" the grace of God? It must mean that he saw the effects of the grace of God in the lives of the Christians there. He saw grace at work!
  - c. Barnabas saw the gospel of grace being preached and taught, he saw people responding in faith & receiving God's grace for salvation, saw lives being changed & righteousness displayed by God's grace, and surely he saw grace being shown to one another
3. Strong and growing churches are places where the grace of God is emphasized and manifested:
- a. We should seek for Paul's prayer about the church at Colossae to be true of us **(Col 1:3-6)**
  - b. We all know we have a tendency in running from religious error that we run away from focusing on God's grace. As we've noted before, this lack of balance is devastating!
  - c. What happens when churches are not places where God's grace is obvious by example and by speech?
  - d. Do people hear us saying things like, "By the grace of God I am what I am" **(I Cor 15:10)**
  - e.
4. Churches that are strong and growing have members who exhibit the grace of God through their relationships and service to one another **(I Peter 4:7-10)**

**E. It was a church at which the members inspired one another to further greatness:**

1. The text ends with a wonderful example of generosity from the life of Joseph (**Acts 4:34-37**)
  - a. From what we can tell there is no command given requiring them to sell any property and donate it to the needy saints among them... was a matter of love & a servant's heart
  - b. Notice that it's not one or two who are doing this, but it says, "as many as were owners of lands or houses" – Everyone who was financially stable was getting involved in this
  - c. Why single out Joseph? Perhaps since he was a foreigner (from Cyprus not Jerusalem), or he sacrificed more than others, or maybe because of the vital work he'd later do
  - d. What we do know is the selfless sacrifice of Joseph and the others was infectious! Why? The very next verse begins the account of Ananias and Sapphira... They must have been wanting to get in on some of the activity, but didn't want to make the sacrifice
2. Joseph continued spurring others on to further greatness in their own personal spiritual lives:
  - a. We know it was this Joseph who took Paul as his friend shortly after Paul's conversion giving him support, encouragement, and vouching for his sincerity (**Acts 9:27**)
  - b. It was this man who also stood up for John Mark and chose to split off from Paul when the contention arose over whether John Mark should've continued on (**Acts 15:36-41**)
  - c. There must have been many more... For when others thought about Joseph they equated him so much with encouragement they nicknamed him that... Barnabas (**Acts 4:36**)
3. Strong and growing churches have members who are dedicated to this kind of activity. In fact, this touches on one of the main purposes of the church – To equip the saints (**Ephesians 4:11-16**)
  - a. If I were to ask you what the work of the church is, what would you say? Most of us would say, "edification, evangelism, & benevolence" and you'd likely turn here to show it. Now those are works the church is to do, but let's look closer at what this text says
  - b. What's the focus of this text? Is it evangelism? Benevolence? Or is it the spiritual growth of every member of the local church? By noting the phrases we see it is the latter.
  - c. Ask a simple question: Why did the Lord give some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists & teachers? To equip saints for the work of ministry, to edify the body
  - d. Ministry is a simple concept – Minister means to serve! One of, if not the, main goal of this local church ought to be to arm the individual members with the tools they need to serve, to encourage them to serve, to hold one another accountable in serving
  - e. We minister by teaching the gospel to a lost world, by doing good deeds for others, by encouraging others, by correcting others – Any way we can serve God & others!
  - f. At times we create an institutional view of the church – We form a local church, organize it, attend it's services, & support it financially. Then we expect it to do the ministering... What's the problem? It's goal is to equip each one of us to do the ministering!
  - g. When a church has members who are focused on "equipping the saints for the work of ministry" the other things happen. Churches that I know of that are known for being strong and growing are doing this... as a result they see much success in evangelism!
4. If we want to be strong and growing we all need to be looking for various ways in which we can encourage one another to strive to excel in spiritual things (**I Thess 5:11-14**)