

INTRODUCTION

A perennial problem the church of Jesus Christ faces is a lack of focus on its mission. Widespread confusion exists today over what the primary mission of the church should be. Some argue our goal is to eradicate social injustice or on a more biblical note our goal is to mature the saints enjoy fellowship and worship God.

Now it is true that we are to do all those things yet all of those biblical things could be better done in heaven. Surely the church's primary goal is to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). Our primary goal must be evangelism for that is the only duty that cannot be better accomplished in heaven.

Throughout the book of Acts that emphasis is clear as the church begins to move into the world with its message of the gospel. This evangelistic zeal resulted in explosive growth. But we want to ask and try to answer a question today about this early church growth. What did the church do to contribute to this remarkable growth? How did the church expand so rapidly when opposition to it was great?

The obvious answer is the Holy Spirit worked and that is true. Ultimately all church growth is Holy Spirit led. But were there things about the church that enabled the Holy Spirit to work so powerfully.

1. THE CHURCH WAS PURE (vs. 12-14)

We know from Scripture that to be useful to the Lord a believer must be pure (2 Timothy 2:19-21). What is true of believers individually is surely true of the church collectively. A church that is going to reach its community for Christ must be a church that deals with sin. God has just demonstrated to the early church the importance of purity with his dramatic judgement upon Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11).

While there may be times when God deals directly with individual sinning believers his main way of dealing with sin in believers is through the discipline of the church. Sadly church discipline is practically ignored in many churches today instead it has been replaced with the unbiblical notion that loving people means tolerating their sin.

But if you notice God dealt with the sin in the church in verses 1-11 and the result was that the church was once again meeting together and the idea is that they were of one accord again (v 12). But notice that the unbelievers (v 13) did not dare to join them even though they held the believers in high regard. They respected the believers for their devotion to Jesus and for their beliefs but they also respected the fact that God's power was manifest among them.

They might have been attracted to the church by their sincerity and devotion but because sin was dealt with and exposed they dare not join this group. You see the principle of dealing with sin within the church, maintains a pure church and puts off those who are not believers from joining for they know that sin is not brushed under the carpet.

Sadly in many so-called churches today unbelievers are in membership because sin is not preached or exposed and therefore it does not have to be dealt with.

I want to relate this to evangelism for that is the proper context of this section and it is important to understand that church discipline has an important part to play in our evangelism. If unbelievers know that sin is preached and exposed and dealt with appropriately then they will know that to

belong to this church they must deal with their sin, they must repent of it and believe in Jesus Christ. Whatever might attract them to us they will not be able to ever feel one of us or at home with us without having to deal with the one issue that keeps them out of the church the issue of sin.

Many Pastors in churches fear that the proper exercising of church discipline will drive people from the church and because we are all so influenced by numbers we therefore feel the pressure to overlook public sin. In truth church discipline will drive away those who love their sin but it will attract those who hate their sin and want to repent of it and find peace from the guilt that their sin brings.

This is exactly what happened to this early church for despite the strict discipline imposed by God and in spite of the fact that the unbelievers were afraid to join the church nevertheless more and more people believed and were added to the church (v 14).

Let us be clear, uncompromising commitment to holiness characterised these believers and this kept those who loved their sin away and those who wanted forgiveness and freedom from their sin joined the church. That sadly is very different from many churches today that have numerous unbelievers that feel comfortable in the church, some even have responsibilities and hold office. Let us be a church that is serious about holiness and when necessary expose and deal with sin within our church.

2. THE CHURCH WAS POWERFUL (vs. 12 & 15-16)

Verse 15 resumes the thought begun in the first half of verse 12. As we have already said in previous sermons on this book signs and wonders were designed to point men and women to spiritual truth. They also confirmed the apostles' claim to be God's messengers. With the passing of the apostles from the scene and the completion of the canon of Scripture the need for this type of confirmatory signs has vanished.

They were never intended to be an on going part of church life but a unique ministry associated with the apostles whose teaching is the foundation on which the church is built. In fact it was these signs and wonders that were the marks of a true apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12). Well in keeping with this unique ministry our attention is drawn to the fact that many people were attracted to the apostles because they needed a miracle performed. Now as we have said before the early church was not a miracle working church but it was a church with miracle working apostles in it. In fact the outpouring of miracles in this chapter was in fact an answer to the apostles' prayer in 4:29-30 who longed for their ministry to be authenticated by God through miracles.

Their public healing ministry was such that people brought the sick to them hoping that Peter's shadow might fall on them and thereby be healed. I think that was mere superstition, which reflected a belief that he had divine power and his shadow might also carry that divine power. The passage does not actually tell us that Peter's shadow actually healed anyone but simply that the people believed it might.

This healing ministry attracted people from towns around Jerusalem as well as from Jerusalem itself. Many who were sick and demon possessed came and were healed.

Now although God's power is not demonstrated in the same way today as it was through the apostles nevertheless when God's power is evident through godly preaching and godly lives then it will attract people to the church and will attract people to ask questions about our faith. God's power at work through His church is a tool for evangelism and therefore we must pray that God will work powerfully in our church.

3. THE CHURCH WAS PERSECUTED (vs. 17-28).

A church that is pure and powerful will ultimately provoke a hostile reaction from the world. Churches that God is working among will make waves within their community, which often leads to hostility by a world that detests the church. That is what happens next in our story about the early church?

Concerned with the success that the church knew and its increasing popularity and power the religious leaders become jealous (v 17). They also as we have seen before were committed to maintaining that status quo for they avoided at all cost provoking a reaction from the Romans for that would have cost them their privileged leadership position.

So because the Sadducees were jealous they arrested the apostles and put them in prison (v 18). But such an action only provided God with an opportunity to display his great power and so during the night an angel of the Lord came and opened the prison doors (v 19). After releasing them the angel commanded the apostles to go to the temple courts and tell the people God's message of life (v 20). God freed them not so they could go and hide but so that they could continue to proclaim the gospel, a gospel that clearly gives life to sinners. Although the angels command may well have seemed incredible and even reckless, the apostles did not argue but they immediately entered the temple courts and began to teach the people.

They simply obeyed God and left the consequences in his hands. They displayed remarkable courage for the Lord, they knew that by their actions they were putting their own lives at risk but they also knew that their God was sovereign and in control even of this apparently dangerous situation.

This all happened without the knowledge of the Jewish leaders for when the Sanhedrin met to decide what to do with the apostles and sent for the prisoners, they of course could not be found. When this was reported back to the Sanhedrin the captain of the guard and the chief priests were puzzled (vs. 22-24).

All their best efforts to stop Christianity from spreading was failing, all their power which they had used to halt the gospel was nothing compared to the mighty power of God. But things were about to get a whole lot worse for them because someone came and reported that the apostles are free and are preaching again in the temple courts (v 25). This was of course the ultimate challenge to their authority as religious leaders so they went out and brought the apostles back to stand before this Jewish court.

They did it without force for they knew that these apostles were popular among the people and that they stood at risk of getting stoned should they try to forcibly arrest them. When they stood before the Sanhedrin they were reminded of the warning that they had been previously given. They were also accused of being determined to blame them for Jesus' death (v 28), which of course was true.

Interestingly they never mentioned the apostles' escape from prison. It seems that since they could not explain that miracle they must have acknowledged it and then choose to ignore it. Their minds were made up they were not about to be confused by the facts. They wanted the apostles to stop preaching Jesus Christ and to stop doing so now.

4. THE CHURCH WAS PERSISTENT (vs. 29-32)

If the Sanhedrin expected the apostles to be afraid of their warnings then they were very much mistaken. Peter speaking for the rest of the apostles declared that they must obey God rather than men (v 29). In doing so he is saying as he did in 4:19 that it's the Sanhedrin who is opposing God for they are only proclaiming his message and obeying God's commands.

Once again Peter uses this opening to explain the gospel to the Sanhedrin particularly he is keen to expose their guilt for they put him to death but God raised him to life. The word that is translated “whom you had killed” is a very intense word. It means to put to death with one’s own hands. So Peter is making it clear that the Jewish leaders are as guilty of Jesus death as they would be if they had personally killed him.

They might, as well have is Peter’s point.

However the good news is that even though they are guilty of such sin there is hope even for them because God raised Jesus to life for a purpose and that is to be Prince and Saviour (v 31). The term “Prince” refers to the originator or pioneer of something. Here it is used to describe Jesus as the source of eternal life and it is of course closely connected to the term Saviour.

Because Jesus is the source of eternal life, he is able to give us life and therefore is able to save us from our sins. Therefore and here is the application He is able to give repentance and forgiveness to Israel. Notice that it is God who gives repentance and grants forgiveness on the basis of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Repentance is not something that we can do of ourselves, only God can enable us to repent only He can give us the desire to do so. But the good news that Peter is stressing is that sinners like these religious leaders who were guilty of putting Jesus to death can receive forgiveness from God for such a sin and can receive the power necessary to repent in order to receive God’s free gift of forgiveness.

The Apostles we are told (v 31) are the witnesses to and the proclaimers of the events surrounding Jesus life, death and resurrection and so is the Holy Spirit. It is worth noting that the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey him. That ties in with what was said that Sunday evening about our need to urge people to obey the gospel, hearing the gospel is not enough we must obey it that is we must respond to it.

Obedience is being used here in the way that saving faith is used elsewhere in the bible. To obey is to have faith. The word for obey here means obey one in authority and therefore salvation is really surrendering to one who is in authority. Also notice that Holy Spirit is given to every saved person at salvation. Peter is saying then that obeying God and the gift of the Holy Spirit are synonymous with saving faith.

Therefore if someone professes to have faith but is not consistently obedient then we have every right to question if they have salvation at all. Likewise those who profess to have the Holy Spirit because of some apparent supernatural experience but do not consistently obey God are people who simply do not have the Holy Spirit.

5. THE CHURCH REJOICED (vs. 33-42)

These verses give us the results of Peter message. There are three results mentioned.

a) Hostility (v 33) - When God’s word is preached powerfully then we can expect a reaction but it is not always the reaction that we hope for. In this case some people were furious, instead of surrendering to the truth of the word of God they rebelled against it and wanted to kill the messengers. Even though what Peter and the Apostles had said was clearly true a calm look at the evidence shows that, yet when it comes to spiritual things there is no such thing as a calm look at the evidence for people are either for or against it. You are either for or against God. By being present does not mean you must be for Him it’s how you react to His word that will decide which camp you are in.

Do you get angry to be told you are a sinner and going to hell. If so you are against God and his word and need to repent and obey God's gospel through faith in Jesus Christ.

b) Indecision (vs. 34-40) - There is another reaction to the gospel presentation here. There is great indifference to the message. Of course indifference is really another form of hostility because an indifferent person is opposed to the gospel otherwise they would respond positively to it, but at least they do not show their hostility. Gamaliel was a person who was indifferent towards the gospel.

He was a well-respected teacher of the law and he tried to disuse a difficult situation for the authorities. The apostles were put outside as he addressed the Sanhedrin. He warned them to be careful about what they intended to do and gives two illustrations why they should do so. Firstly he refers to a man named Theudas who claimed to be somebody and had a following of 400 men but when he was killed it all came to nothing (v 36). Then there was Judas of Galilee who led a revolt against the census that was taken, exactly when we do not know.

But when he was killed all his followers scattered and it came to nothing (v 37) Gamaliel then makes his point. He suggests that the apostles be left alone, just wait and see is what he is suggesting, it might all come to nothing just like his previous illustrations. However if this message and movement is really of God then he suggests that they should not be opposed since to do so would oppose God (vs. 38-39).

His advice seems sensible to the Sanhedrin so after having the apostles flogged they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus again and then let them go. While Gamaliel's advice seemed wise the idea that what is successful is from God is simply false. Cults and false religions today flourish in many parts of the world and the true evangelical cause is often struggling.

However the real point that I want to make is that Gamaliel is really sitting on the fence, let's wait and see. He was not convinced that this message that the Apostles spoke was from God. What more did he need to turn from his sin and obey the gospel? The evidence of the empty tomb should have been enough, then he had the miracles of the apostles yet he still says wait and see. Gamaliel was a pragmatist and the bible's word to all such people today is that today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

c) Acceptance (vs. 41-42) - Finally there was a positive response but not from the religious leaders but from the apostles themselves. They were not embittered or disillusioned by their flogging and trials but they left rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer disgrace for Jesus sake. Yet in spite of the threats made against them the apostles kept on preaching Jesus Christ both in the temple courts and from house to house.

They understood that it is a privilege to know Christ and to preach Him and nothing was going to stop them doing so. I only wish we all had that same passion for Christ and for his gospel then perhaps we too would see our evangelism effective and God glorified through the work of His church here in the Yorkshire Dales

AMEN