

The Explosive Growth Of The Church

Series on Acts

Over the years there have been movies that have been so successful, that Hollywood couldn't resist making a sequel. Superman, followed by Superman 2. Toy Story, then Toy Story 2 & 3. Generally, a sequel takes the story on from the original (unless it's the Star Wars genre that went all over the place). We like sequels, because we want to know what happened next. Did you know that the New Testament has a sequel in it? One of the Gospel writers was Luke, a doctor and a follower of Jesus. He recorded the life of Jesus in the Gospel, but he went on to write the sequel to the Gospel, which is the book of Acts. It's called the Acts of the Apostles, but that's not a very good name, because hardly any of the Apostles feature in it. A better title would be The Acts of the Holy Spirit. Or the Acts of God. The book of Acts is the follow on story of all that Jesus did and taught. Before we look in detail at those stories in the coming weeks, I want to overview the whole book today and speak about three things from the book of Acts that challenge the practice of our faith.

1. The Amazing, Rapid Growth Of The Early Church.

Never in the history of a religious movement has there been growth like this. The story starts in Acts Chapter One with the disciples and about 120 believers gathered in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. Jesus is no longer physically with them. They are bewildered and a bit frightened. But all that changes on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes upon them and they are filled with power and boldness. These timid disciples are changed into bold witnesses for Jesus, who take the transforming gospel into the streets. The results are electrifying. After Peter preached at Pentecost **"those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41 NIV)** The church grew from a few hundred to several thousand followers in a day. When we read these numbers we need to remember that in those days only the men were counted, so if we add in the women and children who believed, the numbers would have been much higher. Then we read of Peter and John speaking to the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin. **"Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand."** (Acts 4:4 NIV) From the Sanhedrin the Gospel message goes back out onto the streets, where there are miraculous signs and wonders happening through the Apostles. The result?

"Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number". (Acts 5:14 NIV) As we come to Acts Chapter nine, Saul, the persecutor of the church, has encountered Jesus and is so radically changed he is fearlessly preaching that Jesus is the Messiah. **"Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord". (Acts 9:31 NIV).** At first it was tens of thousands of Jews who came to believe in Jesus. But then the gospel jumped the cultural barrier, as Peter began telling non Jews, and the Christian faith began to spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Historians estimate that by 350 AD the population of the Western World was about 60 million people which is about the size of the population of the United Kingdom today. Their best estimates are that by 350 AD, 33 million of the 60 million in the Western world were Christians. Can you imagine a new religion starting in the UK from nothing, and within 350 years, more than half the population are followers? There has never been a time like it, where half the population of the Western World turned away from pagan religions to follow Jesus. Humanly speaking, those first Christians had nothing going for them. They were only a few hundred in number. They had no money. They had no proven leaders. They had no technology for promoting the gospel. No TV channels. No radio. No printing presses. No internet. The revolution that is happening in repressive Middle Eastern countries today has been hugely aided by cell phones, text messaging and Facebook. It's happened so quickly because people have been able to communicate so easily. But the early Christians had none of those advantages. Yet within 350 years of the death of Jesus, more than half of the Western World knew enough about Jesus to follow him.

Why was that? There are lots of peripheral reasons why it happened. Political stability through Roman government. Good communications through Roman roads. Disillusionment with pagan religions. But the major reason why the Gospel spread so quickly was because the followers of Jesus did what he told them to do – to go into all the world and preach the gospel. To be his witnesses. To tell others the good news of a Saviour. Here is first the challenge to us from the book of Acts. Are we as excited about Jesus as they were? Those first Christians gossiped the Gospel, and the news of Jesus spread because Christians opened their mouths to talk about him. Do we?

2. The Enormous Obstacles.

Because we have been Christians for so long, and because many of us have been brought up in societies that have had a Christian foundation, most of us don't appreciate how radically different the Christian message was for those who heard it for the first time. I saw this in Romania just after the revolution, when I was speaking to a group of Doctors, Lawyers and University graduates. I could see the look of amazement on their faces as they began to comprehend the things Jesus taught. If a person has never heard the Christian message before, it's pretty mind blowing. The idea that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. That he was God, walking around in the form of a man. That he routinely performed miracles like making the blind see, raising the dead to life, and forgiving sins. That he died and three days later came back to life and started appearing to individuals and large groups of people. It's a huge obstacle for people to believe those things if they have never heard them before. And remember that none of this was written down for the first 60 years or so. It had to all be communicated by word of mouth.

Those were not the only obstacles. The leaders of the established Jewish religion did their level best to stamp out this new belief in Jesus. The Romans did the same when Christians began to say that Jesus is Lord rather than Caesar is Lord. Christians were arrested and imprisoned. They were savagely beaten for their faith. Some of them were crucified. Many of them were deprived economically for choosing to follow Jesus. Some were put in the arena as sport for the gladiators or fed to wild animals, to be torn apart because they chose to follow Jesus. They were hated and despised, and tortured for their faith. They suffered terribly. Yet this new faith spread from an obscure little town in a corner of the Roman world, to the capital of the mighty Roman Empire within the lifetime of the first generation of believers.

The obstacles to the gospel are different in our generation. Scientific rationalism and scepticism has relegated claims of Christ to the realms of Star Wars and Harry Potter. Richard Dawkins has convinced a lot of people that belief in any faith, but especially Christian faith, is intellectually dishonest. Try speaking up at a university and claim that you believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. You will be met with anything from scorn and disbelief, to pity. In our generation it's very cool to declare yourself to be an atheist, and very uncool to declare yourself to be a Christian. For a Christian believes in absolute truth at a time when lots of people think there is no such thing as absolute truth. You believe what you believe and I believe what I believe and both our beliefs are equally valid. The popular belief is that Christian faith comes down to a matter of opinion. We also face the obstacle of materialism. People are not seeking answers to life in spirituality but in materialism. "Why would I need God when I have enough money, a happy marriage, contented kids and a wonderful country to live in?" The obstacles to the gospel are different, but how much like those early Christian are we? Those first Christians were not fazed by the obstacles. Despite the enormous obstacles, far greater obstacles than we face, they took the good news about Jesus to the whole of their world. They didn't give up, and neither should we.

3. The Boldness And Courage Of The Believers.

The book of Acts doesn't start off with brave believers. They were just a small group, gathering in an upper room, not sure what was going to happen. But then, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them with power, and those followers of Jesus were transformed. Those who ran away at the crucifixion of Jesus were out in the streets, so full of the Spirit of God that people thought they were drunk. And Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times, preached to his fellow Jews, and told them in no uncertain terms that they had just crucified the Messiah, and called them to repent. And they did!

As you follow through the story in Acts, you find examples of incredible boldness. Peter and John are dragged before the High Priest. With boldness Peter tells the High Priest and the Sanhedrin that they are responsible for killing the Messiah. When Peter and John are ordered not to speak about Jesus any more, the first thing they do is go to a prayer meeting, then go out to tell more people about Jesus.

Read through the book of Acts and you will see there is boldness in prayer, asking God for the impossible. There is boldness in confronting sin. There is boldness in the way the believers shared their possessions with one another. Boldness in praying for healing. Boldness in addressing evil spirits in the name of Jesus and commanding them to go. Even after great persecution came upon the church following the death of Stephen, people preached the word of the Lord with boldness. And when Saul, the persecutor of the church became a follower of Jesus, he preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. When he arrived in Jerusalem, we read in Acts Chapter 9, that he was speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. I don't know about you, but when I read the book of Acts, I have to ask myself "Do I demonstrate that kind of boldness and courage?" What I find really challenging about the book of Acts is that this sort of boldness and courage was normal Christianity. If you were to describe Christian living today, would you use the word boldness? Boldness in talking about Jesus. Boldness in our praying? People, when we get to study the specifics of this book in the coming weeks, we are going to be challenged about the way we live for Christ.

The "Arab Spring"

In the last six months we have seen a phenomenon happening across the Arab world. In Tunisia, Egypt, the Yemen, Libya and in Syria we have seen complete or partial revolutions take place. In almost every case the people on the streets have been met with water cannon, tear gas, and bullets. Hundreds if not thousands have been killed trying to rid their country of brutal dictatorships. Here's the remarkable thing for those of us watching from the sidelines. The more people are beaten up and imprisoned, the more people who are shot, the more people come out onto the streets to march. The more blood that is spilled, the greater the determination to win freedom.

The "Gospel Spring"

That's what the church used to be like for the first 300 years of its existence. There was a revolution that took place across the western world. It started with a handful of followers of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, who went out to conquer the world with the good news of the Gospel. The Gospel wasn't contained within church buildings. It was spread around the world by people like you and me, who told their friends and relatives that there was life in the name of Jesus. Now here's the thing. There are about the same number of us gathered in an upper room in Nyon, Switzerland in 2011, as there were gathered in Jerusalem all those years ago. What if the Acts of God were to be written all over again? What if the Spirit of the Lord fell upon us as he did then, filling us with boldness, sending us into the world to tell the good news about Jesus? Wouldn't it be a bold prayer for each of us to pray "Lord fill me with your Spirit, and send me out from this place to spread the news of Jesus throughout the world."

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