

Message #9
Acts

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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INFLUENTIAL CHURCH ACTS 2:41-47

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

(PROJECTOR ON--- ABE LINCOLN BIRTHPLACE) Does anyone recognize this building? Any guesses? This is the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. Actually it is a reconstruction. The original log cabin was dismantled sometime before 1865.

Most of you know the broad outlines of his birth and life. Lincoln was born in a log cabin in Kentucky in 1809. His father was a carpenter and a farmer. His mother was illiterate. Lincoln rose from obscurity to become President of the United States. Part of what endears Abraham Lincoln to us is the humble nature of his beginnings. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Many of our favorite stories in the Bible involve influential people who came from humble backgrounds. Moses was born of parents in Egypt who were slaves. They were told by the authorities that all of their baby boys were to be killed. The Egyptians felt threatened by the growing population of Hebrews. Moses was rescued from the bulrushes on the Nile River by Pharaoh's daughter.

Much of what makes Christmas so attractive to us is the story of the humble birth of the Savior of the world. He was born of poor teenage parents in the little town of Bethlehem. He was born in the kingdom of a man who wanted to kill Him when he heard about His birth. Arguably He went on to become the most influential human being who ever lived.

In recent weeks we have been studying the birth of the church, as recorded in the Book of Acts. Part of our attraction to this story also comes from the humble nature of its beginnings. We have seen that there was only a small group of 120 followers of Jesus who were meeting together in Jerusalem. These were led by twelve men who were hardly regarded as leaders of society. For the most part they were poor and unsophisticated commoners. Several were fishermen. None of them were especially well-educated. None of them were rich. None of them were politically powerful. None of them were even recognized by their society as being religious leaders. They were persecuted and rejected by the religious establishment. But it was from these inauspicious roots that the church sprang. Our focus this morning is going to be on just how this church began to grow and become powerful.

For us in this local church there is cause for encouragement. We have a fine congregation and a fine facility. But we are in a small community. We have humble origins. We are not Central Christian Church. We don't have celebrities in our midst. We have no politicians or famous actors or celebrities among us. We don't have a multimillion dollar budget. We are not written up in *Christianity Today* magazine. But that is OK. We can have influence, and we can accomplish significant things in God's

program. In order to do that we need to learn from the example of a humble church which came to have great influence for Christ. So let's look at our passage to see what we can learn from the story of the beginnings of the church of Jesus Christ.

I.

The first thing that stands out about the growth of this church is THE WORK OF A SOVEREIGN GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE WORK OF A SOVEREIGN GOD) We see that in vv. 41 & 43. As much as we humans like to categorize things--- to measure and quantify them, to describe the route to success, happiness, or achievement in a certain number of steps--- there is an element in Christian ministry that is not definable, controllable, or even dependent on us. That element is the sovereign work of God.

In seminary I had a missions course that dealt with church growth and gave considerable attention to the findings of a researcher by the name of Ralph Wagner. He was a missionary who became a researcher and a leader of the church growth movement. He sought to quantify and formulize the elements necessary for church growth. But there are at least some parts of the growth of local churches or the universal church which are not quantifiable or subject to a formula. This is the sovereign work of God.

We have already seen this sovereignty of God at work in our study of the Book of Acts. Jesus had told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They were obedient to that command, but it is doubtful that they understood just what this coming of the Holy Spirit would involve. His coming certainly was not their doing. When the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, He caused the disciples of Jesus to miraculously speak in the native languages of the Jews who had moved to Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman Empire.

That caught the attention of a lot of people. A crowd gathered. They demanded an explanation for the miracle that they had witnessed. So Peter stepped forward and argued from the Hebrew Bible that this was the work of the Holy Spirit and that Jesus was the Messiah and that they bore responsibility for His death. Peter then called upon his Jewish listeners to repent and be baptized. To be right with God, to experience forgiveness of sins, and to go to heaven they must put their trust in Jesus. We have seen that three thousand people responded to his invitation.

In one day more people chose to become committed followers of Christ than Jesus ever saw during His earthly life. Was Peter a better speaker than Jesus? Did he have a better understanding of the steps to church growth than did Jesus? I don't think so. The difference was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's coming was the sovereign work of God. The Holy Spirit used the message of Peter. But whereas the sermons of Jesus had produced a more limited response, the Holy Spirit sovereignly convicting these listeners of their sin produced a great response.

Verse 43 identifies another element in the sovereign work of God. It says that **“many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”** God was doing

miraculous things. Christians down through history have looked at passages like this and have sought to bottle this kind of miraculous activity to recreate it, to formulate some methodology by which to repeat it. But it just doesn't work. This was the sovereign work of God. It was not the result of a formula, of faith, or of the will of man.

Notice that these signs and wonders were occurring through the apostles. These men were sovereignly appointed by Christ. Now Christ was sovereignly working through them by means of the Holy Spirit to do miraculous things. Why weren't such miraculous things being performed by the other Christians? Was it lack of faith?

The text does not specifically say. But the apostles were the appointed leaders of the church. There was no New Testament yet to guide these first Christians. So some special authentication was needed to demonstrate in a visible way that these twelve men were the God-appointed leaders of the church and that the doctrine which they taught came from heaven. The miracles that Jesus performed served a similar purpose. They demonstrated that He was the Messiah described in the Old Testament, and they authenticated the message which He preached.

Ephesians #2 v. 20 makes reference to this unique, foundational role of these first leaders. (EPHESIANS 2:20) Paul speaks of Gentiles having been made part of God's household, **"...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone..."** There is a hint here, it seems to me, that the amazing power of these apostles may have been limited to the beginning period of the church. For once a foundation has been laid, there is no longer a need to lay that foundation again, just as there no further need for another cornerstone. (PROJECTOR OFF)

That is not to say that God does not still do miraculous things. Many of us here can testify to having witnessed the miraculous power of God. But we don't see some of the more amazing things that we are going to find in the Book of Acts being done today. I don't see people being raised from the dead. I don't see the shadow of Christians falling upon the sick producing instant healing, as happened with the Apostle Paul. It isn't just because we lack the kind of faith that these early leaders had. It is because of the sovereign work of God. Such amazing things can only happen as the result of His will, not our own.

The point is that there is an element of God's sovereignty in the influence that local churches have today in our world. Sometimes there is a particular opportunity that comes along in the history of a church whereby it is able to have great influence. Sometimes there is a gifted leader with a particular vision who comes along and enables a church to have a special influence. Sometimes there are several elements that come together at the same time and a local church just blossoms.

The most influential evangelist in all of Latin America in our lifetimes, and probably second only to Billy Graham in the rest of the world, is Luis Palau. (PROJECTOR ON--- LUIS PALAU) He died four years ago. In the course of his ministry he spoke directly to

an estimated 30 million people in 70 nations. He had a crusade near our church in Connecticut. His sister spoke once in our church. Palau traced his spiritual formation and development to the small church in which he grew up in Argentina. This church had no clue about what would happen to this young man in the future. But this small congregation had a formative influence upon him. In the end he became greatly used of God. It was the sovereign work of God, and the faithful work of a small church. Who knows what might happen with some of the young people we see among us?

So in our attempts to follow the Biblical guidelines for having an influential church, we need to keep in mind that there is a significant element through all of our work and efforts and faithfulness that we cannot control. That is the sovereign will and working of God.

II.

The second characteristic of an influential church is identified in v. 42. (II. DEVOTION TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES) It is DEVOTION TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES. We do have control over this factor. Verse 42 tells us, **“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”** We looked at this verse last week in terms of the role of worship in the early church and the elements that were present in the meetings of the church. Today we are looking at it from the perspective of habits of the early Christians that contributed to the establishment of an influential church.

A.

Notice that there were several elements involved in this diligent pursuit. The first object of their devotion to spiritual disciplines was THE APOSTLES' TEACHING. (II. DEVOTION TO... A. THE APOSTLES' TEACHING) These Christians obviously had the Hebrew Bible as a source of doctrine. But this church thing was a new arrangement in the plan of God. It was the apostles who were the source of correct information about the plan of God in view of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the advent of the Holy Spirit and the formation of the church. There was no New Testament yet. There were no Christian bookstores. There were no Christian apps.

Down through church history there have been disagreements about the proper source of authority for Christians living in the church age. Some have argued that proper authority is based on the relationship that a group of Christians have to the first church. Can a church trace its lineage to the church that we are looking at in our passage this morning? The Roman Catholic Church has argued that it is the true church because of its long existence that can be trace back through history to this church formed at Pentecost. Even in Protestantism there are subtle suggestions that older churches, or churches that have connections with older churches, are somehow more authoritative. Our church in Connecticut was the first Baptist church in the community. So it took on the title of First Baptist Church of Fairfield. But is the title “First Church of Whatever” partly intended to convey that it has more divine authority than other churches because it is the first of its breed?

Another source of authority for Christians has been related to the line of personal succession to the first apostles, especially to Peter. The argument has been that Peter was obviously the leader of the early church. He was appointed to this position by Christ Himself. He became the first bishop of Rome, and this authority was supposedly passed on to a line of successors that stretches down to Pope Frances.

Again in Protestantism there are variations of this theme. I attended an ecumenical pastors' meeting a number of years ago. One of the pastors present was an older fellow who had studied under Karl Barth. That name might not mean anything to most of you, but Barth has the reputation among many Protestants of being the greatest theologian of the Twentieth Century. So I could sense that this guy had respect from other ministers by virtue of his connection with Karl Barth.

We do a similar thing sometimes when we find out that somebody has a connection with a well-known evangelical that we respect. "So-and-so was an associate pastor at John MacArthur's church? Then he must be good, and what he says deserves extra respect." Right?

A third suggested source of authority for Christians is doctrinal succession. In other words, the source of authority for Christians should not be a church that traces its origins back to the first church, not a spiritual leader who traces his ecclesiastical position back to Peter but rather to doctrine that can be traced back to that of the apostles. For the New Testament is the product of this apostolic teaching. We have in our hands the teaching of the first century apostles.

Devotion to this apostolic teaching then and now involves more than just listening to, and studying, God's Word. It also means applying and practicing it. The combination of understanding apostolic teaching and applying it is what contributed to the influence of that early church. It is what will contribute to our influence as well. That is why the teaching of God's Word is central to our vision statement which we sometimes sing at the beginning of our service.

B.

A second element in this devotion to spiritual disciplines is identified in our text as FELLOWSHIP. (II. DEVOTION TO... A. B. FELLOWSHIP) As I pointed out last week, the absence of the little word "and" after "fellowship" suggests that the breaking of bread and prayer may have been intended to define what Luke meant by fellowship.

We tend to refer to fellowship as any activity where a bunch of Christians get together, especially if food is involved. Now there is certainly nothing wrong with Christians getting together. But fellowship as used by the first Christians seemed to refer to specifically religious activity. A get together was not considered fellowship unless Christ was a focus of discussion and activity.

C.

The term BREAKING OF BREAD (II. THE DEVOTION... A. B. C. BREAKING OF BREAD) may sometimes be used in the New Testament simply in reference to eating. But the association here of breaking of bread with apostolic teaching and fellowship and prayer would seem to indicate that this bread breaking had a specifically religious content.

In 1 Corinthians #11 we have perhaps the fullest reference in the New Testament to how the Lord's Supper was celebrated. In that passage the indication is that Christians had a meal first and then they celebrated what we call "the Lord's Supper." In early church history after the New Testament there are frequent references to agape, or love, feasts. So it seems that Christians often met to eat together and celebrate the Lord's Supper. That is probably what is in view here.

D.

This early fellowship also involved PRAYER. (II. DEVOTION... A. B. C. D. PRAYER) The original language here would be translated more literally as "the prayers." In the next chapter we will see Peter and John going to the temple to pray. So it would seem that the Christians had temple prayers and church prayers and probably private prayers.

A key thing, then, in the influence of this early church was devotion to spiritual disciplines. Just like in football, a key factor in a successful team is mastery of the basics. In football it is blocking and running and tackling and catching. In churches it is devotion to Bible study and the fellowship of breaking bread together and the fellowship of prayer.

The impression that I also get from this verse and this passage is that much of this activity was done together. It happened in the temple and in homes. Christians seemed to be spending much time together. With our individual work situations and family situations and health circumstances it is not always possible to be as involved in church activities as we might wish. But the New Testament pattern suggests that there is benefit and influence that results from Christians together devoting themselves to spiritual disciplines, to doing things like going to the men's conference next Saturday.

III.

Verses 44-46 describe another characteristic of an influential church. These verses talk about THE PRACTICE OF SHARING. (III. THE PRACTICE OF SHARING) Luke writes, **"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,..."**

These early Christians had a remarkable commitment and unity. They displayed it in their generous sharing of resources. The extent to which they shared is not normal. It was evidence of the work of God.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, **“For many of us the obstacle to charity lies not in our luxurious living or desire for more money but in our fear--- fear of insecurity.”**

One thing that money does, or at least that we are inclined to think that it does, is provide security. So to give away financial resources, especially a significant amount, is to undermine our own security--- unless we are convinced that our real security lies somewhere else. Clearly these early Christians were convinced that the source of true security was somewhere else.

Some have suggested that this story is an early example of socialism or communism. That is not really so. In communism and socialism the civil government compels its citizens to give money to the state for it to distribute. The giving here was voluntary.

The Bible does not really address the issue of what economic system ought to be followed in the present world. It does at several points seem to assume the right of private ownership of property. It does stress certain principles that the followers of God should follow in their use of financial resources. For example, there is stress in the Bible placed on giving, on the danger of loving money, on the importance of saving, on the value of hard work, and on the responsibility for caring for family.

The fact that these Christians were selling property and possessions as needs arose indicates that some of them had significant wealth. Back in #2 v. 5 we saw that many in Peter’s audience, who apparently were included among those who became Christians, came originally from other parts of the Roman Empire. Because of their religious devotion apparently many of them had moved to Jerusalem to be near the temple. In order to pull off this kind of major move many of these people had significant financial resources. But now there was much sharing going on.

What was the cause of the need? In #6 reference is made to the Jewish widows of the diaspora, that is Jewish women who had moved from other parts of the empire. Because they lost their husbands, they were in need. Their Jesus commitment meant that they were cut off from any welfare offered by the Jewish religious establishment.

Other Christians were faced with persecution. Unbelievers generally seemed to view the church positively. But Jerusalem was controlled politically and religiously by the traditional Jewish hierarchy. They were the ones who had been directly involved in the execution of Jesus. So they were not going to be favorable to these early followers of Jesus.

In John #9 we are told about the man blind since birth who was healed by Jesus. When the man’s parents were called in by the religious authorities, they were hesitant about answering the questions from the priests. (JOHN 9:22) Verse 22 tells us, **“His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.”**

So becoming Christians probably meant being kicked out of the synagogue. It may have meant the loss of jobs. Some may have been kicked out of their families. Clearly there were financial needs that resulted, and those who had resources were sharing them with the unfortunate. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We know from historical references outside of the Bible that there were at least a couple of Jewish groups that regularly met together for a common meal. Perhaps that practice was a model for the behavior described in v. 46, where the Christians were meeting together in the temple and breaking bread from house to house. In some ways these believers were expressing their faith in old forms, which was a natural thing to do. The whole atmosphere was characterized by gladness and sincerity of heart.

Our local church has a history of helping out those in our midst who encounter financial difficulties. That is a good thing. We use our deacons' fund for this purpose. If you want to send money to that fund, just note that on your check or include a note in your envelope. We also have a moving ministry. We help out people in our midst who are moving. Our next move will be Wednesday, March 26, in the morning when we will help out Bill, there in the back.

IV.

Consider finally THE RESULTS (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE RESULTS) of these principles that were practiced by the Jerusalem church. Notice in v. 43 that it says that **"awe came upon every soul."** The actual Greek word for "awe" means "fear." The reference to believers in v. 44 would suggest that the "every soul" is referring to unbelievers in v. 43. The sovereign work of God, the devotion to spiritual disciplines, and the sharing were having an impact upon the community in which these first Christians lived.

According to v. 47 they were **"having favor with all the people."** The religious leaders in Jerusalem may have held the religious and political power. But the influence of committed Christians could not help but have a positive impact upon the people who came in contact with it.

About a century later a philosopher by the name of Aristides delivered a defense of Christianity to the emperor Hadrian when he visited Athens. The kind of behavior exhibited here in Jerusalem was apparently followed by the Christians who followed. This is what Aristides told Hadrian about the church:

"...they do not commit adultery or immorality; they do not bear false witness, or embezzle, nor do they covet what is not theirs. They honor father and mother, and do good to those who are their neighbors. Whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly... Whatever they do not wish that others should do to them, they in turn do not do..."

"Those who oppress them they exhort and make them their friends. They do good to their enemies...."

“As for their bondmen and bondwomen, and their children, if there are any, they persuade them to become Christians; and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction.

“...They love one another; the widow’s needs are not ignored, and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting...

“When one of their poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear of any of their number who are imprisoned or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free.

“If they find poverty in their midst, and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities. They observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah...

“If any righteous person of their number passes away from the world, they rejoice and thank God, and escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby....

“Such, O king, is the commandment given to the Christians, and such is their conduct.”

(PROJECTOR OFF) The Christians of the time of Aristides had certainly made their influence felt. That is the kind of influence that we would like to have, is it not? That kind of impact comes from a recognition that it is ultimately the result of the sovereign work of God. It does also come from fulfilling our responsibilities as individual Christians to devote ourselves to spiritual disciplines and to share with one another of our resources as we are able to do. The end result will be an influence that points people toward faith in the God who is really there.