

Sermon February 21, 2010

Core Values: Growth!

Acts 2:47; 9:31 (see PPT slide for compilation of verses)

Summary: Values: Growth Luke shows us that adversity, rather than destroying the first church, actually helped it grow and spread throughout the world. These Christians learned to depend only on the Holy Spirit. Their growth is a model for how God wants to grow His Kingdom through us.

I. A Tale of Two Cities

A. The two stories

- 1. Luke's account of the beginnings of the Christian Church takes place in the city of Jerusalem – the city where Jesus died and rose again.**
- 2. Luke's story is a "tale of two cities":**
 - a) On the one hand, it is the story of the Establishment's unceasing opposition to a new Jewish sect made up of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.**
 - b) On the other hand, it is the story of how that little band of people became a world-wide movement in a single generation.**
- 3. In an amazing way, it took both stories, both Jerusalems, to grow a church that would change the world.**

B. Establishment Jerusalem

1. The Jerusalem of the Book of Acts was a city under Roman occupation.

a) Jerusalem was like Baghdad or Kabul today.

b) It was a city filled with foreign troops, armed militias and rival parties.

c) In other words, it was a pressure cooker that was always on the verge of exploding into open riot and revolt.

2. For that reason, the Jerusalem Establishment – made up of the ruling upper class – did everything it could to collaborate with the Romans and keep the masses under control.

a) If the Establishment could keep things under control, then the Romans would not feel the need to march in with their armies and straighten things out.

3. We get an intriguing glimpse into the mindset of this ruling Establishment when John reports how they came to the decision to put Jesus to death:

a) John 11:47 NIV Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs.

b) John 11:48 NIV “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

C. Opposition

1. It is for that reason that as soon as the Church came into being the Establishment pushed back with a vengeance.

2. The Establishment attacked the Christians with a well-planned strategy of ever-increasing pressure in order to stamp out this new movement:

a) First Phase: Arrest and threatening of the spokespersons:

(1) When Peter and John explained how Jesus had healed the crippled man at the Temple Gate, the authorities came and threw them in jail.

(a) Acts 4:3 NIV They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

(2) The next day they threatened them, then let them go.

b) Second Phase: Imprisonment and physical punishment:

(1) Peter and the other apostles continued to preach and heal people.

(2) As a result we read:

(a) Acts 5:17 NIV Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the part of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.

(b) Acts 5:18 NIV They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

(3) Although many of them want to put the apostles to death, instead they have them flogged and released under strict orders “not to speak in the name of Jesus.”

c) Third Phase: Full-scale persecution:

(1) A leader named Stephen is falsely accused of blasphemy and brought to trial.

(2) This time the Sanhedrin condemns him to death.

(3) What follows is wide-spread persecution designed to stamp out the new movement once and for all:

(a) Acts 8:1 NIV On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

3. Jerusalem, the birth place of Christianity, seems to also be the place where it will die.

II. Adversity and Growth

A. The Giant Sequoia

1. The Giant Sequoia is the largest living organism on earth.
 - a) The General Grant sequoia stands over 267 feet tall.
 - b) It is 40 feet in diameter and has a circumference of 107 feet.
 - c) It is between 1500 and 2000 years old.
2. But in order to grow, the tiny seed that became the General Grant sequoia required burnt ground.
3. In fact, the greatest danger to the world's sequoias today is the lack of forest fires.
 - a) Forest fires clear the ground down to bare gravel at the base of the trees, making it possible for new trees to sprout and grow.
 - b) What's more, fires continually clear out competing species that would grow up around the sequoias.
 - c) When these younger competing species grow tall, and a forest fire burns through the grove, the fire is much more powerful – fierce enough to damage or kill the sequoias.
 - d) No fires/no sequoias.

B. A Growing Church

1. The same was true for the early Church.

a) The waves of fiery persecution that swept through Jerusalem actually stimulated the Church to grow into a world-wide movement.

2. In fact, Luke tells us that every time the Church suffered opposition or persecution the result was more growth!

a) Following the first arrest of the apostles, Luke tells us:

(1) Acts 4:4 NIV But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

b) After the apostles were threatened to stop preaching we read:

(1) Acts 5:14 NIV Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

c) After the apostles were imprisoned once more and flogged we read:

(1) Acts 6:7 NIV So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

3. The more the Establishment tried to impose ITS story, the more the Church exploded in ITS OWN story of growth.

C. A World-wide Movement

1. Finally the Establishment in Jerusalem unleashed an attack designed to destroy the new Christian movement once and for all.

a) Acts 8:3 NIV But Saul [later known as Paul] began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

2. The result was the opposite of what they intended; the Church took off:

a) Acts 8:4 NIV Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

3. What had been a city-wide movement now spread throughout the countryside:

a) To Samaria – evangelizing the despised Samaritans.

b) To Ethiopia – when Philip shared the Good News with a court official on his way home.

c) To Damascus – when Saul was converted to faith in Jesus.

d) To the sea-side town of Joppa – where Peter preached and healed the sick.

e) To Caesarea, the major port on the Mediterranean – where Peter shared faith in Jesus with Gentiles for the first time.

4. What's more, Christians took the Good News to Antioch, establishing a multi-ethnic church that sent out Paul and others as missionaries to the entire Roman world.

III. Core Value: Growth!

A. Created to Grow

1. The first Christians understood that God raised them up as His Church so that they could grow.
 - a) They could have simply given in to the authorities or retreated into hiding when the troubles came.
 - b) Instead, they allowed their troubles to make them stronger.
2. They would have understood the modern-day miracle of the Church in China.
 - a) When the communists chased the last western missionaries out of China in 1949 it is estimated that there were about 1,000,000 Chinese Christians.
 - b) How many of them were put to death in the horrific persecution unleashed by Chairman Mao we'll never know.
 - c) A generation and more passed with little or no contact between Christians in China and Christians in the free world.
 - d) But when China finally opened up to foreign visitors, missions experts were stunned to discover a thriving Chinese church – most of it operating “underground.”
 - e) The 1,000,000 believers in 1949 are now 100,000,000 believers and still growing.
3. Living things are created to grow; adversity only makes them stronger.

B. Strengthened by the Holy Spirit

1. Luke tells us that when the wave of persecution subsided the church experienced better times:

a) **Acts 9:31 NIV** 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.

2. Here was a church that grew not only numerically, but spiritually.

a) **It had learned not to rely on the politics or economy of its time and place.**

b) **Only the Holy Spirit could give it the strength to go on in the face of opposition.**

c) **Only the Holy Spirit could encourage and comfort in the face of rejection and discouragement.**

3. Most of the other Jewish sects would soon fade into history; the Church of Jesus Christ would spread around the world.

C. Core Value: Growth!

1. More than anything else, God created us to grow.

a) **Opposition may seem like an overwhelming obstacle to growing.**

b) **But remember: growth and adversity work together.**

c) **The same Holy Spirit who strengthened those first Christians will do the same for you and me.**

2. The first Christians' Core Values worked together to make them the kind of church and the kind of people that God could grow:

a) **Awe in the presence of God**

b) **Sharing with those in need**

c) **Together in big ways and small ways**

d) Reaching out to touch the lives of those around us

3. Now it's our turn – so let's get growing!