

Now What? 4

We all know that, in the first few months, years and decades, the infant church faced a multitude of difficulties, distractions and potentially destructive and even deadly issues that could have squelched or even killed this great movement of God.

Remember the church itself was made up of entirely immature believers led primarily by a few uneducated fishermen turned fishers of men. There was persecution from the Jews, Romans, local governments and communities. There was relatively no safe, comfortable, common place to meet. False teachers were already infiltrating the church and undermining the truth about Jesus. There were no bibles, study materials, seminaries or even a formal, written document containing the primary doctrines of the church. There were just a few letters that eventually began to circulate from church leaders. Even with the establishment of deacon ministry and appointing of elders/pastors, there were far more new believers than there were trained experienced elders/pastors and deacons to care for them.

So how did they even survive much less thrive in such a negative and even hostile environment? What kept them on track? How did they do it?In addition to the fact that they were absolutely **convinced of and preached the resurrection, filled with the Holy Spirit**, created and supported a **culture of love, integrity and generosity** like the world had never seen, and **pastors and deacons** had been called out to preach and serve the church, let's consider another quality that dominated the early church culture that promoted their strong health and continued growth.

Church Health/Growth Factor: Missions/church planting

When Jesus spoke to the disciples after His resurrection and before His ascension saying.....

19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. **Matt 28:18-20 (HCSB)**
and

you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” **Acts 1:8 (HCSB)**

Who was Jesus making these commands to?

Just the disciples- On both occasions, the only immediate audience was in fact just the disciples. Was this a finite, limited, temporary command intended just for those whom He had hand selected to start the church movement? Would these commands be fulfilled within the lifetime of these eleven men standing in His presence at that time?

Apparently Matthias and Paul didn't get the memo because they perceived that it applied to them. Matthias preached the gospel as far north as the northern side of the Black Sea. He eventually returned to Jerusalem where he was stoned to death because he would not deny Christ (Foxe).

Paul we know was stoned once, beaten with rods three times, received 39 lashes five times, shipwrecked three times, suffered hunger, thirst, poverty, persecution, rejection and imprisonment just for preaching and witnessing of Christ resurrected.

Stephen the deacon was stoned to death for proclaiming the resurrected Jesus. Neither did Philip, Barnabas, Silas or Timothy get the memo because they sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel.

All followers of Christ- It just makes sense, that since Jesus didn't say you Peter, you John, you James, you Mike, you _____, you _____, you _____, that Jesus was commanding all of us who are His true followers to make and teach disciples and be His witnesses. The task was and is too enormous to restrict it to a few even if you included all pastors and deacons throughout history..... The goal established by Jesus is that.....

This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations. And then the end will come. Matt 24:14 (HCSB)

And we see in the very early history of the church that they understood these commands of Jesus to be for all of us and all the churches.

As recorded in Acts 9, Paul and Peter were already spreading out to the regions around Jerusalem preaching Christ. Peter had ended up staying in Joppa, a port city in Israel on the Mediterranean, several days after raising Tabitha from the dead there and many turned to the Lord because of that great miracle.

While Peter was staying in Joppa, God gave him a vision about killing and eating unclean animals. God did this to convince and prepare Peter to go to the home of a gentile named Cornelius and present the gospel. This was God's plan to open up the way of Christ to all, not just Jews. This was no small task for these dedicated Jewish Christians had grown up with the idea engrained into their thinking that they had the exclusive favor of God on them.

Peter understood and obeyed the vision and went with Cornelius' messengers to the house where a large number of gentiles had been gathered by Cornelius. Cornelius shared with Peter how God had given him a vision to send for him.

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "In truth, I understand that God doesn't show favoritism, ³⁵ but in every nation the person who fears Him and does righteousness is acceptable to Him. ³⁶ He sent the message to the sons of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know the events that took place throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after

the baptism that John preached: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and curing all who were under the tyranny of the Devil, because God was with Him. ³⁹ We ourselves are witnesses of everything He did in both the Judean country and in Jerusalem; yet they killed Him by hanging Him on a tree. ⁴⁰ God raised up this man on the third day and permitted Him to be seen, ⁴¹ not by all the people, but by us, witnesses appointed beforehand by God, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people, and to solemnly testify that He is the One appointed by God to be the Judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about Him that through His name everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they heard them

speaking in [other] languages and declaring the greatness of God. Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water and prevent these from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days. Acts 10:34-48 (HCSB)

This breakthrough in understanding and evidence to back it up that Christ and the gospel was for all people in all places immediately began to change the scope of outreach and ministry of the church. At a time when the safe and “logical” thing to do would have been to circle the wagons and begin to focus on protecting, training and strengthening all those new believers, the followers of Christ instead began to spread out more and more.

Word got back to the leaders and the whole church in Jerusalem about how the gentiles in Joppa had turned to Christ. Peter then returned to Jerusalem and gave an account of what happened, how they gladly received Christ and how the Holy Spirit came down on them. There was discussion, a period when no one said anything, then they glorified God.

19 Those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their

way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the message to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, Cypriot and Cyrenian men, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Hellenists, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² Then the report about them reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with a firm resolve of the heart—²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith—and large numbers of people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers, and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Acts 11:19-26 (HCSB)

What do we remember Barnabas from? He sold a field and gave the proceeds to the church. Sacrificial giving. (Acts 4) Now we find Barnabas serving as a key leader, probably an elder or

pastor, of the church in Jerusalem. But this pastor did not stay in Jerusalem. He was sent out to check out what God was doing in Antioch and, for the most part, never returned.

¹ In the local church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have called them to.” ³ Then, after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off. Acts 13:1-3 (HCSB)

Health factors- Missions/church planting:

Maintain outward focus- even when things got really tough the early church kept sending out its finest to win souls and start new churches. I believe this is key to any church's ability to achieve and maintain strength and health. It doesn't make earthly sense. The world says take care of yourself.

³ Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. ⁴

Everyone should look out not [only] for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Phil 2:3-4 (HCSB)

This should not only dominate our personal thinking. It should be the mind of the whole church.

Keep sending out people long term, short term, career, volunteer...

1 Send your bread on the surface of the waters, for after many days you may find it. Eccl 11:1 (HCSB)

The world says buy bread, store it, hoard it, keep it to yourself, you might need it some day. God says- let it go, give it away, share, bless others. It will come back to you in marvelous, miraculous ways.

Faithful givers=strong leaders It's obviously not guaranteed, but it sure happened with Barnabas. He first was a generous, sacrificial giver to the church. Then later he surfaced as a likely elder/pastor of the church in Jerusalem. Then he was sent to and became a key leader in the church plant at Antioch until he was selected to join Paul on his missionary journeys. Ultimately he separated from Paul and went out on his own with John Mark. It all seems to have started with a sacrificial gift.

6 Remember this: the person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. **7** Each person should do as he has

decided in his heart—not out of regret or out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work. **2** Cor 9:6-8 (HCSB)

The church thrived then and it will thrive now when she establishes and promotes a healthy balance between making disciples and teaching disciples. The trend, especially as a church ages, and even more especially during difficult times, is to become self-centered, being more concerned with paying the bills than winning the lost and starting new churches. But it is clear in scripture that even during times of tremendous difficulty, suffering, and persecution, the early church sent out their best to witness, preach, minister and start new churches. What kind of church do you want to be? A self-absorbed spiritual country club or a base of operations for the great commission?

What about you? Are you going to just sit and soak or would you give and go. What is God calling you to do?