

The expansion of the early church was amazing. As Earle Cairns write in his Christianity Through the Centuries:

The number of active believer in Jerusalem after the Resurrection was estimated at approximately five hundred by Paul ( 1 Cor. 15:6)...Pliny's letter proved that Christianity was strong in Asia Minor shortly after the beginning of the second century. During the first century it had been confirmed largely to the eastern section of the empire, with the Jews being given the first chance to accept Christianity as the gospel reached new cities. During the second century, expansion was rapid among the Greek-speaking Gentile population of the empire. The church in Alexandria became the chief church of Egypt. Christian could be found in all parts of the empire.

One of the reasons for the expansion was persecution. Christians who were forced to flee from Jerusalem won converts in Samaria. Others preached in Antioch, which was then the largest city in Samaria and the nexus of the Hellenistic culture. From there Christianity spread around the shores of the Mediterranean and around the world. Persecution, rather than thwarting Christianity, aided its expansion.

The main reason the Church spread as it did was that the church by nature is expansive. Christ is the only way, and He set the supreme missionary example by giving his life for the world. This produced in his followers a mindset of outreach, sacrificial service and growth.

What was the first church like when it burst forth with the news of God's love for a needy world? What is it that make the church truly great?

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (vv. 32-37)*

UNITY (v. 32)

Luke tells us that "All believers were on in heart." They had a unity of heart. The Scriptures use the word heart to indicate the wellspring of our being, "...the central place to which God turns, where religious experience has its root, which determines conduct." The heart is our inner spirit. The church in Acts was united in the deepest part of its being. They shared an inarticulate bond, a great secret. They could sense a fundamental unity with other believers.

Sometimes we meet someone, and before a word is spoken we sense a oneness with him or her. If we are true believers, we share a fundamental unity in the core of our beings.

This inner greatness also produced a unity of soul. "All believers were on in...mind." They shared the same basic mental focus and thought about many of the same things. This was made

possible by the Spirit of Unity (Holy Spirit) dwelling inside of them. They were truly brothers and sisters. This was the greatest, most profound, most satisfying unity the world has ever seen.

As a result, there was no division. This was astounding because just a few days before, when 3,000 were converted, they came from everywhere.

There were:

*Parthians, Medes, Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs. (2:9-11)*

This does not mean these believers saw everything eye to eye. It is wrong to suppose, as sadly as some do, that when believers dwell in unity they will carry the same Bible, read the same books, promote the same styles, educate their children the same way, have the same likes and dislikes—that they will become Christian clones. The fact is, the insistence that others be just like us is one of the most disunifying mind-sets a church can have because it instills a judgmental inflexibility that hurls people away from the church with lethal force. One of the wonders of Christ is that he honors our individuality while bringing us into unity.

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)*

Bishop Westcott said: “External visible unity is not required for the invisible unity of the church.” The early Christians certainly differed in their opinions on many things—food, clothing, language, customs. But they were united as to who Christ was, that he was Lord of all. All of them recognized the necessity of living for him. The Oxford Codex adds to this passage: “Neither was there any severance between them.” One heart, one soul, and no severance! They were founded and established on Christ.

No one has explained this better than A. W. Tozer:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers met together, each looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become “unity” conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.

First John 1:7 puts it this way; “If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.” King David painted a word picture of this in Psalm 133:1-3:

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon*

*the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.*

In explaining how expansive unity is, David recalled a scene with obvious affection-the high priest being anointed with oil. When the oil was poured over his head, it ran down his beard and onto his robes. David used this picture to poetically portray how unity overflows to others, which David saw as wonderfully refreshing.

Jesus said in John 17:21, "...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also maybe in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." It was the believer's great unity that enabled the spread of the gospel. That bonded band of brothers and sisters conquered the world- Christ-followers who sailed the oceans and marched the continents to both throne and dungeon. When the church is great, there is great unity.

GRACE (vv. 32-33)

*All the believers were on in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power and the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. (vv. 32-33)*

"Much grace" here is literally "mega-grace." Grace- the gifts and favor God pours upon the undeserving. Christ came to an empty people and poured his grace upon them. We are saved by grace, healed by grace, nurtured by grace.

There is no appropriate response to grace except thanksgiving. The believers hearts were like that of Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, whom King David chose to graciously care for after Jonathan's death, promising that his land would be restored to him and that he would always have a place at the king's table. In response, "Mephibosheth bowed down and said, 'What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?'" The hearts of the Christians in the early church were full of God's grace, and it overflowed to those around them. When the church is great, there is abounding grace.

Power

A great church also has "great power"- literally, "mega-power." The root from the Greek word translated "power" (Greek *dynamis*) is the origin of our English word dynamite.

With explosive power they "continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (v. 33). Despite all the counter propaganda of the Sadducees, the church received divine power to present the fact of the Resurrection. Paul later wrote in Romans 6:4:

*We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

They themselves had resurrection life, and as a result the people who heard believed. There was hard evidence (living eyewitnesses, etc.) to prove that Christ was alive. But for many it was

enough to see him living in the lives of his followers. Their “great power” was resurrection power!

## CARE

*They shared everything they had.... There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (vv. 32b, 34-35)*

If we focus on what seems to be the impracticality of this, or upon the seeming communism, we miss the point. Communism says practically, “What is yours is everyone’s.” Christianity says, “What is mine is yours.” A generous, giving spirit permeated this great church. The overall atmosphere was one of care for one another.

This included material care. The New International Version well captures the sense of verse 34: “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from sales and put it at the apostles’ feet.” This spirit was especially evident in the Macedonian church, which begged Paul for the privilege of giving:

*And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will...For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5,9)*

There was also a spiritual care. Material sharing was just the tip of the iceberg. The believers were people-oriented. When Christian sincerely care for one another’s material needs, they want to minister to spiritual needs as well-bearing one another’s burdens, sympathizing with and praying for one another. In touch with other’s hurts, they gladly sacrifice time and comfort for those who are in need.

A married couple I know had an ongoing interest in a struggling single mother who couldn’t afford to pay her bills. They took her aside, told her they wanted to be her burden bearers, and then asked her for all her bills. This couple was not wealthy but they wrote out a check for each of this mother’s bills. This is aggressive care in the name of Jesus.

Just how deep this care in the early church went is seen in the brief mention of Barnabas in verse 36-37:

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Barnabas was named after his spiritual gift – “Son of Encouragement,” son of exhortation, son of consolation. Every mention of Barnabas in Acts pictures him as an encourager. For example, when Paul dropped poor John Mark, Barnabas came alongside and patched him up, so that he went on to live a productive Christian life.

Here in Acts 4 Barnabas’ encouragement was highly effective. He did more than say, “Be warm and filled.” He gave whatever he could. Such a life draws people to Jesus. In Jesus’ own words:

*“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)*

Such a love is something people can understand, and it is something they want desperately!

Luke’s portrait of the great apostolic church still inspires believers today. I love what St. Ignatius said later of the church in Rome, which applies so beautifully here:

It was a church worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of congratulation, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy in purity, preeminent in love, walking in the law of Christ and bearing the Father’s name.

What about the church today? We build great buildings, but do we build great people? We may have well-oiled machinery programs that are the envy of others, but how do we compare to the early church. When the church is great, there is a greatness in unity. As believers hearts beat together in spiritual oneness, their fellowship of soul put their common focus upon Christ. And when the world sees such great unity, it is impacted by the grace flowing from the church-great grace. There is also great power. People come to believe because they see resurrection life in the church. And when the church is like this, there is great care as its people expend their lives to help one another.