

## How did the Early Church Grow?

*“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know...This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses.” (Acts 2:22, 32)*

In the face of far more obstacles than we meet today, the early Christian Church grew in numbers so rapidly in its first decades that even opponents living in far off Macedonia decried the reality that Christians were “*turning the world upside-down*” (Acts 17:6). For example, at that time in history it was against Roman law that anyone should worship Jesus instead of Caesar (Acts 17:7). Consequently Christian believers faced persecution of varying degrees depending on their location and circumstances. At best they received neither authority nor encouragement from government to share their faith. The printing press wasn’t invented for another 1400 years (obviously CPH had yet to come into existence!). Yet despite the absence of earthly advantages<sup>1</sup> the early Christian movement grew explosively.<sup>2</sup> Why and how did this happen? Was it the result of a naivety on the part of the audience, or manipulation on the part of the proclaimers? The answer to both concerns is “No!” Was it on the other hand because of some power of God (the Holy Spirit) that was made available only then? Again the answer is “No!” It was instead because of their harmonious employment of two biblical themes in their proclamation; namely the power of the Holy Spirit and the truth of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The second chapter of Acts provides one example of how this was done. Literally the very first Christian sermon ever preached was delivered by the Apostle Peter on the *Day of Pentecost* which, as the name implies, came fifty days after Easter. Although the Jews had assembled that day in Jerusalem for the purpose of celebrating the *Feast of Weeks* (occurring as it did fifty days after the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* (Lev. 23:16, Luke 22:7), Jesus’ disciples were there in obedience to His command to them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). And so it happened as Jesus promised, that there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on believers in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38).

However, one thing that is striking about the Apostle Peter’s sermon is that even though it was inspired by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it was NOT centered on the Holy Spirit, but instead on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This is just as Jesus had earlier promised, “*When the Spirit of truth comes...He will glorify me [Jesus] for He will take what is mine and declare it to you*” (John 16:13a, 14, **boldface mine**). Careful study of this chapter will underscore this reality. Peter’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:17-21 was prompted by the mistaken notion of the crowd that those who were speaking “*in other tongues*” (v. 4) were simply “*drunk*” (v. 15). To allay their confusion he states to the contrary that they were instead filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 4), who is the bringer of order, not confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33).

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<sup>1</sup> Elton Trueblood writes, “*That the Christian movement could have succeeded so that the humble men who fished on the shores of the Sea of Galilee today are better known than the very Caesars who ruled the world...is so amazing it would be incredible if we did not know it to be the case.*” (*Philosophy of Religion*. (Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 140).

<sup>2</sup> Estimates range between 100,000 to 300,000 believers by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. See Kaari Ward, ed. *Jesus and His Times*. (Reader’s Digest, 1987), p. 298, \*\* and U. of Wash. Prof. of Sociology, Rodney Stark. *For the Glory of God*. (Princeton, 2003), p.27.

<sup>3</sup> As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, “*It is in fact more important for us to know what God did to Israel, in God’s Son Jesus Christ, than to discover what God intends for us today.*” (*Life Together*. (Harper and Row, 1954){.

It is at v. 22 that Peter begins the body of his sermon by declaring, “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man **attested to you** by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him **in your midst, as you yourselves know...**” He begins his conclusion of the same sermon with the words, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that **we are all witnesses**” (2:32), and Finally closes with, “[God has today] poured out [that which] **which you see and hear**” (2:34). I ask you to notice from the five clauses that are in **boldface**, that Peter gives heavy emphasis to the factual grounds for the message of Christ. Notice also his appeal to a *public* reality of the data in his list below:

1. “*a man attested to you by mighty works and wonders and signs*” (v. 22)
2. “[*These things*] *God did through Him in your midst*” (v. 22)
3. “*as you yourselves know*” (v. 22) 4. “*we are all witnesses*” (v. 32)
5. “*which you see and hear*” (v. 33)

For these reasons we shouldn’t be surprised that he stated in his first epistle, “*Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you*” (1 Peter 3:15). So I repeat, Peter employs apologetics a handful of instances in the very first Christian sermon which, by the way, led to 3,000 people seeking baptism (2:41). Peter did not divorce Spirit-inspired faith from reason, but, to the contrary, harmonized the two for the very reason that the Holy Spirit is the “*Spirit of Truth*” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

Consider carefully then the ramification of the lying behind boldfaced examples highlighted above. Peter is implying that the powerful signs and miracles of Jesus were firstly a matter of public record that anyone who was present would be able to witness for themselves. Secondly, in every single case Peter is assuming the audience is prepared to grant the facticity of the claims that Peter made concerning Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

In our own day it is for two reasons absolutely vital that we heed the example of the Apostle Peter by employing his methods in our proclamation of the Gospel. Firstly, we have truth on our side that is firmly based in our knowledge of both science and history. One does not have to be either a professional scientist or a historian in order to declare to our neighbors that a whole battery of facts affirm that the Gospel is true. What we do need to do, however, is at least to familiarize ourselves with these facts. Secondly, we need to understand that Christianity is under fire by opponents of the Gospel bolstered by a determination that is increasing in intensity. So even if we don’t sense a personal need to have our faith strengthened, we are to provide sound, persuasive reasons to others for believing that Christ is the only secure and sound foundation on which to place their faith. Statistics clearly indicate that atheism is increasing in numbers at a rate faster than any other religious group in our culture today. Yet while the challenge we are facing is significant, at the same time we are also granted an exciting opportunity to be light-bearers of truth amidst an increasingly-darkening culture (Romans 1:22). It is my conviction that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the capacity and potential to turn this decline around. At the same time, the Gospel also assures us that in every way Jesus Christ is Lord!