

THE STRENGTH OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Many of our middle aged to senior members remember a television program called "What's My Line?" For some of our younger friends, this was one of the original TV quiz programs. A 4 member panel would try to guess the occupation of different guests that were presented to them by asking "yes" or "no" questions. Usually, the panel was very adept at guessing the occupations, no matter how strange or bizarre they might be. But in December of 1973, the panel faced perhaps its greatest embarrassment. That was when Jim came onto the stage and sat down beside the host. The panel asked Jim numerous questions. And Jim answered each one with candor and honesty. But the panel was not able to isolate Jim's occupation. Even though Jim should have been a well-known figure. Even though Jim was in a position of public office. Even though Jim was then the governor of Georgia. Even though in just 2 years, Jim would be President of the United States. So Jimmy Carter holds the interesting distinction of being the only President of the United States who appeared unrecognized on nationwide television.

It is always amazing how a person can rise suddenly from relative obscurity to political and social prominence. We are experiencing this today with the sudden rise of Barak Obama, a Senator from Illinois who is quickly rising to national prominence in the upcoming Presidential race. With mass media, campaign strategies and marketing techniques, a person can rise from relative obscurity to being a household name almost overnight. In fact, in a day where people are always looking for something new and different, it seems to be the goal of promoters to find someone or something new every month to keep the interest of the American public. And most of that which is new is very superficial and faddish. But that whole process of going from anonymity to visibility is fascinating to people. I think this is one reason why the American Idol has such a rabid following.

The church was formed by the Lord Jesus Christ almost 2,000 years ago. It was born in a pre-media day - there were no means of spreading news instantaneously. Yet, it was during these early years of the church that it grew and spread more than any other time in church history if you look at percentage growth. What was it that caused such phenomenal growth in the early church? It certainly was not their marketing techniques or their campaign strategies or their media exposure for they had none of these at their disposal. Yet the church went from a handful of people to the most dominant influence in the Mighty Roman Empire in just a couple of centuries. The church rose from complete anonymity to the most visible and influential institution in the entire Empire, much more significant than the State Religion that received National support and money.

How could this happen? I think that we need to address this question, especially in a day when we are so tempted to rely upon the superficial means of marketing and campaigning and media-blighting that are promoted by the superficial world in which we are living.

I was just leafing through the book of Acts looking at some principles that revealed the strength of the

early church this past week and I thought I would draw your attention to 5 major characteristics of that early church that I believe contributed to its phenomenal growth and influence. I believe that we must continue to make these principles foremost in our minds and practices if we are to continue to have the influence on this community that God would want us to have for His glory.

1. The members of the early church were completely devoted to the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ. The truth of the resurrection was so fresh in their minds that they constantly lived with the realization that Jesus Christ was alive and living within them. This gave them great confidence as they literally walked with the Lord.

Now the resurrection of Jesus Christ has always been under attack. Just this past week we have been bombarded with news releases claiming that the bones of Jesus have been discovered in a tomb in Israel. This, of course, is a media blitz to get people to watch a TV program. There isn't a recognized archaeologist that I know of who has given credence to this find that actually was discovered in 1980. But now in order to motivate people to watch a TV program, there has been an advertising blitz to manufacture interest. It doesn't matter to them that they are attacking one of the foundations of the Christian faith. They just want to make money.

Almost every chapter of the book of Acts has some reference to the risen Savior. Dr. Luke, a scholar and careful historian who had personal access to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea where Jesus was buried, wrote this book to people who also were contemporaries to the events of Christ's life, many of whom had seen Jesus personally. And he includes some reference to the resurrection in almost every chapter.

*the account of the ascension of the risen Savior in Acts 1 with the angelic announcement - "This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. 1:11

*Peter's sermon - "But God raised him from the dead freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" 2:24

*Another sermon of Peter in chapter 3 - "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this." 3:15

*Peter defending the healing of the crippled beggar, "It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed." 4:10

*It didn't matter what the occasion was. These early church leaders always managed to get in a word about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So critical was this event to them that it completely changed their lives. This truth was always with them. They lived with the confidence that a living Savior was always with them to guide and strengthen and empower.

2. And this brings us to a second characteristic. These early church members were aware that they had been sent on a mission with authority from God himself.

*The book of Acts opens with the statement of Christ, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" 1:8

*And then throughout the book, the apostles say again and again, "We are his witnesses of these things"

*In chapter 4, when the Jewish leaders ask, "By what power are you doing this?", Peter does not hesitate - "It is in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" 4:10

*When Peter and John are ordered by the secular authorities to stop preaching, they reply without hesitation, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" 4:19.

*In the next chapter they again reply, "We must obey God rather than men" 5:29

*There was no question in the minds of these early church leaders that they were acting on the authority of God himself.

*Now this is critical for us as Christians to realize today. For in the day of relativity in which we are living, one of the criticisms that is often given is "what right do you have to claim that you have the truth?" "Who do you think you are anyway?" And many Christians are backing down before an increasingly aggressive and hostile world today.

*Now we all realize that you cannot force spiritual belief on someone else. The Holy Spirit must work in his or her heart, and the individual must ultimately believe for himself or herself. But every Christian has divine authority to proclaim the message of the truth. When we give forth the truth, we do not speak for ourselves, but we rather speak as an ambassador of the king of the universe.

*When President Bush has a message to give at a press conference, Tony Snow, his spokesman, does not enter the room timidly and apologetically. He walks in with confidence and gives the message that he has been sent to communicate. How much more should we have confidence in proclaiming God's truth. John 1:12 says those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ have been given the authority, the right, to become children of God. In 2 Cor. 5:20, Paul said "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf; Be reconciled to God."

A Christian cannot adequately represent the king of the universe if he does so with apology and timidity. The early Christians were confident in the authority that they had in Christ. That doesn't mean that their message was always accepted. In fact, it was usually rejected. But they presented it with authority anyway.

3. The early church emphasized one central message. They were focused in their presentation of God's truth.

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12

*Philip preached Christ to him 8:5

*At once Paul began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 9:20

*When various problems came up, such as the care of the Grecian widows, they dealt with these matters of concern so that adequate care could be given to those in need. But then they got right back to their major focus - proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*This singleness of focus gave the message great power. There is great power in a singleness of focus.

*We take for granted the blessing of having electric lights to illuminate the sanctuary. It is easy for us to forget that for the first 36 years of our church's existence, members worshiped by kerosene lamplight. RBC was actually the 3rd building in Rockford to have electricity. But now we just flip on a switch and the entire sanctuary is lit up. The fixtures have been set up so that the light is diffused throughout the entire sanctuary so that we all can share in the light given. But if we were to take just one of these lights, and focus all of the energy into a laser, we could generate the power necessary to cut through the block walls of the church. It would be the same light. But there would be a unity of focus.

*So it is with the church of Jesus Christ. Many good things can be justified. Christ's command to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbor as our self is quite broad - it could encompass many activities. And we need to be demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ in every way that we can to help one another.

*But God knew how easy it would be for the church to lose its central focus. So he ordained 2 ordinances - baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both picture the same, central truth of the church. The saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel must always be the laser that gives the church power to penetrate into the hearts of people who so desperately need spiritual help.

*The world would love to dilute the ministry of the church into just another social club. But we have more than enough social clubs in the world right now. But who is reaching into the spiritual needs of a lost world? This must be the central focus of the church.

4. The early church used prayer as the major methodology in accomplishing God's work.

Now it is natural to pray when we are in trouble. Even pagan people pray when their backs are to the wall. But the early church went farther than this. They used prayer as the routine methodology to accomplish God's work.

*After the Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, the disciples were meeting for prayer when the Holy Spirit descended upon them on that day of Pentecost. Acts 2

*It was as a result of their prayer, that they were filled with the Holy Spirit to speak God's word with boldness. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." 4:31

*It was as the church was praying that the angel released the Apostle Peter from prison in Acts 12.

*It was as the church was praying, that the Spirit lead the church at Antioch to send out the first foreign missionaries, Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13

*It is clear from the book of Acts that prayer was the central part of the methodology of the early church.

*Now we live in a day when many are offering helps for church programs. And certainly, these programs should be perused and considered for there are many helpful suggestions found in them. But at the core of some of these programs is the attempt to clone the marketing techniques of the business world and put a spiritual coating on them. And this is producing at times very superficial results in the church.

*Prayer allows God's power to run his church. And we have to remember that God has managed his church very well for some 2,000 years now. Empires have come and gone, the world based economy has changed from agriculturally based to industrially based to technologically based, but the church of Jesus Christ has continued on - and is alive and well and spreading today throughout even the most remote places on the earth. As the old hymn puts it so eloquently, "O where are kings and empires now, of old that went and came? But, Lord, thy church is praying yet, a thousand years the same." It is only God's power that could do that. How foolish we are to try to use some man-made gimmick as a methodology when we could be using God's divine power through prayer.

*Now this doesn't mean that we are not in tune with the times, adjusting in methodology to meet changing needs in our society. The message of the church should never change, but the methods of the church have and must change to meet different needs. But foundational to any method must be prayer. For it is God's power and God's direction that must be primary in his church.

5. The early church members had no hesitation in being willing to lay down their lives for what they believed. They had conviction of principle.

*When Peter and John faced imprisonment for preaching the gospel, they answered, "We have to obey God rather than men." 5:29

*Stephen was willing to die for his faith in chapter 7

*the church was driven from Jerusalem and spread throughout the Roman Empire by persecution in chapter 8

*James, one of the members of the elite 3 of the apostolic band, was beheaded in chapter 12.

*Peter was arrested and thrown into prison in chapter 12

*Paul was beaten and stoned and left for dead in chapter 14

*Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into Prison in chapter 16

*There were continual attempts to stop the spread

of the gospel by physical force. But it didn't matter. These early church leaders were so dedicated to the cause of expanding the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ that they just kept on preaching and teaching. And they counted it a privilege to suffer for the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior had suffered on the cross for them.

Some of the old reformed churches of Europe chose an interesting motto. It was a phrase from Exodus 3:2, referring to the burning bush that Moses had seen. The phrase was "Nevertheless, it was not consumed". In a sense, this would be an appropriate summary for each period of church history. For the enemy has fired

every weapon in his arsenal at the church. He has tried persecution and division from within and false teachers and apostasy and corruption and prosperity - but every period of church history could end with the statement "Nevertheless, the church was not consumed". For it was Jesus Christ himself who said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it." The strength of the church at any time has not been found in its organization or in its marketing techniques or in its humanly devised plans. But the strength of the church has always been found in the commitment of its members to the risen savior, in its recognition of the authority of God, in its focus on the message of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, in the power of its prayer and in its commitment to principle for the glory of God.

Certainly times have changed. Rockford Baptist Church is far different today from the church of Antioch in Biblical times. The Rockford Baptist Church today is far different from the Rockford Baptist Church that was started on this very property before the Civil War began. But there are some basic characteristics that the church of Antioch and the Baptist Church and Society of Laphamville shared in common and that we also must have if we are to continue to do the work that God has for us to do. We must remain committed to the risen Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, we must recognize that it is by God's authority that we are here, we must continue to focus on the saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must have all of our programs and organization driven by prayer, and we must remain committed to the principles of God's Word if we are to be all that God desires for us to be in this community.