

TBC – 10/6/02 p.m.

TRUE CHURCH GROWTH

Acts 9:31

Intro: After the Lord Jesus ascended back to the Father, it became immediately apparent that His apostles, the early deacons, and those who were being saved, become the targets of the same opposition which our Lord had faced while He was here on earth. The first one to suffer martyrdom at the hands of the Jews, was Stephen, who had been chosen by the church in Jerusalem to assist the elders. Obviously Stephen, and another of the deacons, a man by the name of Philip, became great witnesses of the Gospel. But Stephen paid for his testimony by being stoned to death. We have the record of his message and his death in Acts 7. But at the conclusion of chapter 7 we have this statement, speaking of Stephen:

58 And [the Jews] cast him out of the city, and stoned him [i.e., Stephen]: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul (Acts 7:58).

Saul saw Stephen stoned, and Saul saw him die, although it does not seem that he participated in the stoning. But chapter 8 begins with the statement, “And Saul was consenting to his death” (Acts 8:1).

In Acts 8:1 as we go on reading we learn that “at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem.” Then as we go on reading in the chapter we come to this statement in verse 3:

3 As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison (Acts 8:3).

Saul is not mentioned again until the beginning of chapter 9. There we read in verses 1 and 2:

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

It seems very clear that one of the leading enemies of the church and of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, was this young Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. He did more damage than is recorded for us in the book of Acts, but his references to his life before he became a Christian, are found in his epistles, and it seems that what he did haunted him until the day of his death.

However, his work of opposition did not last long. On the way to Damascus he was struck down by a great light from heaven, and the result was that he was wonderfully saved. Then, instead of arresting the Christians and taking them bound back to Jerusalem, he joined them and began preaching that Jesus was truly the Messiah.

All of this is the setting for the verse that I have chosen as my text for tonight: Acts 9:31:

31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Notice that Luke tells us about:

I. THE REST THAT THE CHURCHES ENJOYED.

This means “rest” from persecution. And it was not only in Jerusalem that the church had “rest,” but also throughout Judaea, in Galilee, and even in Samaria. So this shows how widespread the persecution was, and it suggests that Saul was behind all of it. In fact, he admitted this in his letter to the churches at Galatia in these words:

13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:

14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:13-14).

“Rest” means *rest from persecution*. Saul of Tarsus was out to do away with the church altogether, but the Lord stopped it by saving Saul of Tarsus, and, as we all know, he became the outstanding missionary of the early church, preaching the Gospel with great zeal, which once he had tried to destroy. The Lord had warned His disciples that they could expect hatred and opposition from the world. And it is amazing that the church has not been embroiled in opposition and persecution from that day until this. But God, in His grace, has granted from time to time that His people should have “rest” from the enemy. The battle will not be over for the church until the Lord comes for us, but how thankful we can be for the “rest” that God sees fit to give us.

The problem that the church faces, though, is that these times of “rest”

often become times when the church goes to sleep. But that was not the case in those early days, and Acts 9:31 is the verse which tells us what was going on. (Read Acts 9:31 again.)

It was during that time that the churches were edified, and the church grew because believers were “walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.” Churches can grow numerically without growing spiritually, but the multiplication of churches and the number in those churches was not only numerical, but spiritual. God was wonderfully at work. People were being saved. The numbers in the churches were increasing, and more churches came into existence. It was one of those special times in the history of the church.

There were several reasons for this as Dr. Luke mentioned in writing this book of Acts, and I want us to look at them tonight. And that is the reason I have chosen as my subject for tonight:

II. TRUE CHURCH GROWTH (Acts 9:31).

I don't need to tell you, because you know this, that we are living in a day when there are many churches that are tremendous in size. And numerous seminars have been held by pastors of large churches in which they are telling pastors of small churches how they can make their churches large. But I doubt if there have been many seminars which have taken Acts 9:31 as their key text.

Personally I doubt very much if the Lord, or the apostles, or the early leaders of churches, felt that churches should be so large. Keeping up with the people is practically an impossible job. And one major problem is that the New Testament has not been followed in the way that churches work at this matter of growth. Church services have been designed to attract the unsaved, to make them feel comfortable at church because we give them the kind of music that they have been used to in the world, and we focus upon entertaining them so that they will come back. *Nothing could possibly be more out-of-step with what the apostles and early church leaders were interested in.* Luke tells us that the main focus of the early church was not to the world, but to believers. And the emphasis with those early Christians was upon:

A. Edification.

Probably if you used that word in many churches today, the people would not know what you were talking about. What is edification? It is a word which literally means *house-building*. In its verb form it is the word which the Lord used when He said, "I will build my church." He was not talking about an organization, but He was talking about *the people*. A church is not a building, or an organization, but it is made up of people. And people who know the Lord Jesus Christ need to be edified. They need to be built up in the faith. They need to know the truth of God's Word, and they need to live according to the Word. Luke went on to explain what that meant. But it is very important that believers understand that the main ministry of the church is *edification!* This is what the Apostle Peter had in mind when he wrote:

2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:2).

And then in 2 Peter 3:18, at the very end of his second epistle, he wrote:

18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

Let me say it very kindly, but we need to understand this: The meeting of the churches is not primarily to win people to Christ, but it is to build up the people of God in their most holy faith. Too often preachers preach to people who are not present, and ignore the believers who are present.

The epistles of the NT indicate in an unmistakable way that the people of God need to grow. The apostles gave themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. They wanted believers to understand the truth of God. That was basic to their growth. It is amazing what the Lord will do when the people of God operate on the truth of the Word of God. But this is just not a priority in the majority of churches today. And too many people, if they are really saved, are stunted in their growth. Nothing is more attractive to a true child of God than the faithful teaching of the Word of God.

But let me go on to a second point which grows out of the first point. Note how Luke expressed it:

B. "Walking in the fear of God."

What does a true understanding of Scripture teach us. It teaches us about the majesty of God, about the glory of God, about the infinite difference

there is between all of the Persons of the Godhead and us. We need to stand in awe of God. We need to live in submission to His holy will. In our day I don't know of anyone who is doing greater service to the church than Jerry Bridges when it comes to the all-important matter of fearing God. He says in one of his books that it used to be that Christians were known as God-fearing people, but somehow that term has fallen into disuse. Fearing God is not what most Christians are interested in. We want God to conform to what we want and the way we want to live. What we need to be concerned about is doing His will, living for His glory, spending our days in worshiping Him. Those early Christians were learning in their church how to walk in the fear of the Lord.

This is true Christian living. This is where, as Jerry Bridges so powerfully explains, that true Christian joy is to be found. He has called his book, *The Joy of Fearing God*.

References to fearing God are all through the Bible. Notice them as you read them. One reason many Christians do not know anything about what it means to fear God, is that they know so little about God. So in the early church they were learning about God, and learning how they were to live so as to please Him.

But we still have one subject to cover. A truly spiritual and growing church will also be:

C. "Walking . . . in the comfort of the Holy Spirit."

If you know the Gospels, and most of you do, you know that this is a statement which takes us to three most important chapters in the Gospel of John: chapters 14, 15, and 16. There we have what the Lord Jesus told His disciples just hours before He was crucified. It was about the coming of "another Comforter," and that Comforter, as our text indicates, is the Holy Spirit.

Please turn to John 14:16 and 17. (Read.)

The Lord Jesus was the Comforter of the apostles while He was here on earth, and now we have the Holy Spirit to carry on that same work which the Lord did while He was here on earth. Now a comforter is a helper, a supporter, a guide, one who cares for us and is concerned about our every need. Now how does the Holy Spirit help us? How does He give us

guidance? How does He meet our needs? How does He protect us?

Isn't it interesting that the Lord Jesus didn't say anything here, or in the other Comforter passages about speaking in tongues? And yet many believers who talk about the Holy Spirit today make tongues the main point. The Lord Jesus didn't do that. How does He help us and guide us and protect us and care for us.

Let's look at the other Comforter passages in this message the Lord gave to His apostles:

- 1) He brought the subject upon the verses I have already mentioned: John 14:16-17.
- 2) The second is John 14:26.
- 3) The third is John 15:26-27.
- 4) The fourth and the most extensive is John 16:7-15.

How does the Holy Spirit help us, etc.? By taking us to the Word, all of the Word, and by speaking to us about Christ?

This is where our focus needs to be in the church, but since the Holy Spirit has come to indwell each of us permanently, we can enjoy the Spirit's ministry personally and privately in our homes, as well as in our family relationships, in addition to the church.

The question is, Will we do it?

Concl: Now notice the last two words of our text: "were multiplied."

How could God's way for church growth be any clearer? We are not to aim at great numbers. It is good to see people coming together for the right purposes, but simply the multiplication of the number of people we have, is not what is important to the Lord. It is that those of us who know the Lord are being edified in the faith, and so walking in the fear of the Lord and daily enjoying the comforting, helping, guiding ministry of the Spirit, and so the Lord is multiplying His work.

Not many people know about Trinity Bible Church located down here between Sandy Blvd. and Airport Way, but God has placed us here, at least for now. And our main job is to please Him. And when we please Him by doing His work in His way, He will add to us those whose hearts He has touched to want the very thing that He has called us to do. Let's dedicate ourselves even more to do His work in His way, and always for His glory.