

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMBSY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

MARCH 2007

CHURCH STATISTICS, WHAT HAPPENED?

In the beginning there were twelve (Acts 1:2) then there were one hundred twenty (Acts 1:15), then there were three thousand one hundred twenty (Acts 2:41), then there were eight thousand three hundred twenty (Acts 4:4). The first mega-church was born and continued to grow until they stopped counting and it is simply stated that “all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number” (Acts 5:14) and “the disciples were increasing in number” (Acts 6:1). A conservative estimate would be about thirty thousand members by this time. There were only twelve men and seven “deacons” on the staff. They had no arena-mall-like building in which to hold Sunday services. In fact they did not have Sunday worship services, so they didn’t need a worship minister or a praise band. Building a “worship center” or a “family life center” was never a thought they entertained. No one thought about “attending church”, they were the church. What they “attended” to was the Apostles’ teaching, their fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers plus seeing that the needs of the people were supplied, even if it meant parting with their earthly possessions (Acts 2:42; 4:32-37). How do we account for this phenomenal growth of this church? What method did the church employ to grow? What was its “evangelistic program”? The fascinating answer is they had none. This church reached its great size by four means: 1. incredible events, such as Pentecost; 2. miraculous healings on the part of the Apostles; 3. the daily ministry of the Apostles and finally 4. the continuous meetings from house to house out of which was born a united fellowship.

What this church was known for was not its size nor the influence it had on the city of its location, but the impact it had upon the whole Roman world (Col.1:6). Its fame lay not in the fact of its growth in numbers but in its decrease in numbers. God’s method of operation for the church is seen here in the fact that it is not God’s will to get the world into the church, but to get the church into the world. These converts who had come to Jerusalem to the feast of Pentecost from sixteen different nations in the Empire (Acts 2:9, 10) evidently remained in Jerusalem. They, who had come into this all new glorious atmosphere, the presence of the Apostles, living in common with all who had experienced a life changing phenomena and being introduced to a revolutionary way of life, were reluctant to leave it all and return to their homes. They were comfortable basking in the success of the hour. But this was not God’s will. It is never His will for the church to become comfortable in growth, locality and materialism. In spite of its success and rapid growth the church was not without its problems. Religious people, who have always been a problem for God, became the church’s first problem. The religious leaders tried to silence the Apostles, but to no avail. Within the church hypocrisy and lying raised its ugly head and grumbling and

complaining threatened the unity of the believers. But these were minor problems compared to what they were destined to face. Religious persecution took its toll and the martyrdom of Stephen brought about a radical change in the life of the church. We read: “And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1). The church for the moment was shut down in Jerusalem, but this meant that the entire empire would soon be evangelized. If we are right in assuming the membership of the church was about thirty thousand think of the impact for the cause of Christ that would be felt by thirty thousand Christians witnessing wherever they went. Let’s make an application and translate this into our day. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimates there are over 1,200 mega-churches in America (they define a mega-church as exceeding 2,000 in attendance each week), plus the fact that most of the religious community is made up of smaller churches with a membership ranging from a number in the teens to a number in the hundreds. What would happen one Sunday morning if all these members left their morning service and instead of going home to a Sunday dinner fanned out into their community and began to preach the word as these early Christians did?

The early church did not “willingly” leave their newfound church home in Jerusalem and preach the word throughout the Roman world, they were driven by persecution. Jesus had said “upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18), but things were not going as the church growth specialists would think it should. When a church loses members, fails to attract the world, and is unable to build massive buildings, then the conclusion is they are not doing the right thing. The whole membership of this church was lost overnight and the only attraction from the world was persecution by a worldly religious system. One thing in their favor was they had no property or buildings to lose. But considering all these events it doesn’t appear that Jesus is doing a very good job in building His church. However in the passage quoted above He had all the centuries in view until His return, so regardless of the circumstances the church finds itself in, He is still building it. Dr. E.M. Blaiklock, Professor of Classics at Auckland University in New Zealand wrote: “Of all the centuries, the twentieth is most like the first.” (the twenty-first century would fit this statement even more). As Ray Stedman stated in *The Open Church*: “Once again, Christians are a small minority in the midst of a despairing and pagan world, and they are confronted on every side with violence, hostility, ignorance, widespread immorality, and existential despair. They are thus thrust back into the very climate of the first century where the events and triumphs of the book of Acts occurred.” A prime illustration of this is the threat of Islam that America, and consequently the church faces. In her book *Because They Hate* Brigitte Gabriel states: “Americans are unable or unwilling to recognize the nature or

the extent of the threat presented by radical Islam. Whether motivated by naïve wishful thinking or rigid political correctness, they assert that Islam is a 'moderate', 'tolerant', and 'peaceful' religion that has been hijacked by 'extremists'. They ignore the repeated calls to jihad, Islamic holy war, emanating from the government-controlled mosques of so-called Islamic countries. They refuse to accept that in the Muslim world, extreme is mainstream." If the church today faces persecution it will be Islamic in nature, comparable to the religious persecution the early church faced from the legalist Jewish system. The sociological situation is comparable to that of pagan Rome in the first century.

So how is the church today meeting this challenge? Sadly the average church today can be compared to Israel in Isaiah's day (Isaiah chapter 1). They were said to have abandoned the Lord, despised the Holy One of Israel and had turned away from Him. Their cities had been burned with fire, their land lay desolate and strangers were devouring them yet God had to send them a prophet to tell them what was going on right before their eyes. Why did this condition exist and why were they not aware of their degenerate condition? Verses 3-15 answer this question: They were too busy being religious. In our language they were too busy going to church. They had become as useless as a watchman's hut in a cucumber field and as a shelter in a vineyard. God looked at their multitude of sacrifices, the burnt offerings of rams, the fat of fed cattle, their appearing before Him and trampling His courts, the offerings and observances of new moons and Sabbaths, their spreading out their hands in prayer, and said "I am weary of this, it is an abomination to Me". In fact He said He hated what they were doing. This says that God can become weary and disgusted with all our own efforts.

In the New Testament the Pharisees and Sadducees became the prime example of religious failure which serves as a warning to the church today. The Sadducees sold out to materialism and ritual. The Pharisees produced a dead religion although they were in search of a means to reach a level of acceptance with God. The Pharisees (representing Evangelicalism today) were a very close-knit club. Their answer for pleasing God was "become like us". Their message: (to put it in modern language) "believe like us, dress like us, act like us, like what we like and don't like what we don't like". In church language: if you want to know God and change your life come to us. We have a nice building, a great musical program, an outstanding youth program with a hippy young youth director and a great staff to serve you. Anything in the world that attracts you we can provide the same, just come and get it. As a result of this thinking the modern church's target has been the church itself, not the decaying society around us.

The early church became the target of persecution because it "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), threw cities into confusion, and threatened to destroy the economy (Acts 16:21; 17:6). Today's church has turned itself upside down and crawled into bed with a world that has always been upside down. Instead of being a threat to the world's economy the church is dependant upon it to finance their

massive structures and spending programs. Is it any wonder that the church that lets the world determine its music, its method of evangelism and its reason for existence poses no threat to the worldly system? Rock and roll becomes the music of choice to reach the young people, targeted communities becomes the method of reaching a specified and desired clientele for church membership and the reason for existing is to meet the felt needs of a baby boomer generation who has no interest in Scriptural righteousness and holiness. The church in Jerusalem was disbanded by persecution and scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Yet in a few short years the church had swept across the Empire, confronted the pagan culture with the Lordship of Christ, demonstrated to the world a new and living way and made Roman emperors set up and take notice. A movement that began in a small corner of Palestine in a little more than thirty years reached Rome. At the heart of this phenomenal growth was the Word of God. C.H. Turner as quoted by William Barclay, points out six phases of the church in Acts: 1:1-6:7: tells of the church at Jerusalem and the preaching of Peter. It finishes with this summary: "*The word of God was increasing, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was being greatly multiplied and a large number of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*" 6:8-0:31: describes the spread of Christianity through Palestine and the martyrdom of Stephen and ends with the summary: "*the church then through all Galilee was having peace, being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord was being multiplied.*" 9:32-12:21: this includes the conversion of Paul, the extension of the church to Antioch and the reception of Cornelius, the Gentile, into the church by Peter. Its summary is, "*And the word of God was increasing and being multiplied.*" 12:25-16:5: this tells of the extension of the church through Asia Minor and the preaching tour of Galatia. It ends, "*the churches then were being confirmed in the faith and were abounding more in number daily.*" 16:6-19:20: this relates the extension of the church to Europe and the work of Paul in great cities like Corinth and Ephesus. Its summary runs, "*So mightily was the word of God increasing and prevailing.*" 19:21-28:31: this tells of the arrival of Paul in Rome and his imprisonment there. It ends with the picture of Paul "*proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness unhindered*". In a day when the word of God is a scarce commodity, even in our so-called conservative churches where sometimes the Word has little value, it is important to note how many of these sections of Acts ends with a reference to the Word of God. Today's methods may fill churches, just as they can fill stadiums for rock concerts, but work done in that way will be the world's work, not the work of God.

I bring this article to an end by asking the same question David Wells asked at the end of his book *Losing Our Virtue*: "Is it too much to hope that the church can yet again recover its moral seriousness, that it can recover its vision of the holiness of God, its trust in the greatness of His power?" His answer was "we need the faith of the ages, not the reconstructions of a therapeutically driven or commercially inspired faith. We need it, not least, because without it our postmodern world will become starved for the Word of God."

