

To Boldly Go Where We've Never Gone Before

Franklin Church of Christ
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January 16, 2005
AM Worship

Introduction:

The signature desire of the Franklin Church is our plea to get back to the Bible. We want to be what the early churches were, believing what they believed, teaching what they taught and doing what they did. We have done well. However, despite our similarities, we are not yet doing all that the earliest congregations did. Consider the church in Jerusalem. They began as 120 disciples; but grew immediately to about 3000 (**Acts 1:15; 2:41**). Through daily growth (**Acts 2:47**), they grew to 5000 men (**Acts 4:4**). Counting women, we can safely consider the membership of that congregation at about 10,000. They suffered a major setback when Stephen was martyred (**Acts 8:1-3**) and almost all their membership moved to other cities, but by **Acts 21:20** they numbered in the thousands again. The times and the people were not wholly different from what they are today. They faced the same obstacles to growth we face, but they overcame them. But how did they do it? Examine the Jerusalem church with me. However, do not just look to the past. Look to our future. What we read today is a word picture of what we ought to be tomorrow. This will not be like anything you have ever known before as a local church. If we choose this path, we must be ready to go where we have never gone before.

Discussion:

- I. **Acts 2:42** – The Jerusalem church was continually devoted to worship.
 - A. Luke describes the early church's devotion to worship in four ways.
 1. They were devoted to the teaching of the apostles, that is devoted to being present when the apostles taught and personally devoting their lives to what the apostles taught.
 2. They were devoted to fellowship. The Pulpit Commentary and Reese's commentary on Acts maintain this to be a reference to the collection as demonstrated in **Acts 2:44**. The term for "common" in **Acts 2:44** is the root word for that translated "fellowship" in **Acts 2:42**. The fellowship in **Acts 2:42**, was the financial fellowship and commonness they had through giving.
 3. They were devoted to the breaking of bread. In the context of spiritual things, this phrase refers to the Lord's Supper as in **I Corinthians 10:16**.
 4. They were devoted to prayer, both congregationally and privately.
 - B. Whether or not it was absolutely essential to attend the worship of the Jerusalem church was not a topic of discussion, they were simply devoted to it. They just did it. This devotion to worship signified something deeper. They were devoted to worship, because they were devoted to God.
- II. **Acts 4:32** – The Jerusalem church was of one heart and one soul.
 - A. As Jesus had prayed in **John 17:20-21**, the church had unity.
 - B. "Considering the large number of persons in this congregation, and the variety of social relations from which they had been suddenly drawn together, it is truly remarkable, and well worthy of a place in the record, that they were 'of one heart and soul.' The unity for which the Saviour (*sic*) had prayed was now enjoyed by the church and witnessed by the world. The most surprising manifestation of it was seen in that complete subsidence of selfishness which led one and all to say that the things which he possessed were not his own, but the property of all. This was ... the spontaneous expression of the love of God and man which had taken possession of every heart" (McGarvey, J.W.; **New Commentary on Acts of The Apostles**; Gospel Light Publishing Company; Delight, AR; v I, p 79.).
 - C. "Rich and poor, learned and simple...Levites and Jews, were so united in Christ that all other distinctions were lost. Selfishness was gone for each loved his brother as himself. What each man had he held it not as his own, but as a steward of Christ for the good of all. ... The ordinary worldly life seemed to have melted into the life of faith and godliness. Their wants were spiritual, their occupations were spiritual, they joys were spiritual. In this happy state, in the clear atmosphere of love, the great truths of the gospel shone out with marvellous (*sic*) brightness; the resurrection of Christ especially stood out in the lineaments of a distinct reality; and there was a rich glow of grace over the whole Church" (Hervey, A.C.; **Pulpit Commentary**; Eerdmans Publishing Co; Grand Rapids; 1950; v 18, p 128.).
 - D. This unity did not mean everyone knew everyone else, did everything with everyone else or had directly helped everyone else. It meant they were of the same mind and not divided (**I Corinthians 1:10**), no one thought more highly of himself than he ought (**Romans 12:3**), they regarded one another as more important than themselves (**Philippians 2:3-4**), no one sought preeminence in the group (**3 John 9**) and they loved one another despite gender, nationality, education, background or socio-economic status (**I John 4:7**). They were one heart and one soul. As Lenski wrote, "As in a living body only one heart beats ... It's whole active life was one in thought, feeling and will" (**Acts**, p 186.).

III. **Acts 5, 6 and 15** – The Jerusalem church aggressively dealt with problems.

- A. This picture of unity was marred by serious problems several times.
 - 1. In **Acts 5**, they faced a fly in the ointment when Ananias and Sapphira did not share the love and unity, but rather lied to the church and the Holy Spirit. It is the first recorded case of church discipline. If you thought mentioning a withdrawal in public assembly was harsh, read **Acts 5** again some time.
 - 2. In **Acts 6**, the church faced a racial dilemma because the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. This threatened to blow the church apart. Luke describes the problem as being far greater than just with the widows. He says, “A complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews” (**Acts 6:1**). The apostles quickly established a plan to overcome the problem without allowing it to fester and destroy the unity of the congregation.
 - 3. In **Acts 15**, they faced a doctrinal controversy when some in the congregation claimed Gentiles had to be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses (**Acts 15:5**). The congregation gathered to discuss the issue, settling it based on the revelation of the spirit. But they did not allow the doctrinal division to simply exist.
- B. I am sure the church probably lost some members in each of these instances. But on the whole, the Jerusalem church was strengthened by working through and overcoming these problems. In fact, the Bible records that the church grew as a result of overcoming these problems (**Acts 5:14; 6:7**).

IV. **Acts 2:46** – The Jerusalem church lost no one in the crowd.

- A. This is one of the most important and yet overlooked keys to the success of the Jerusalem church. One of the biggest fears of growing churches is losing individuals in the crowd. Someone will need help in doctrine but be overlooked in the sea of people. Another will be spiritually hurting, but her pain is unnoticed in the mass. Another may simply be absent, but because of the numbers he is not missed until it is too late.
- B. How did a handful of apostles give account for 10,000 souls? How did the Jerusalem church begin at nearly 3000 on the day of Pentecost and explode to nearly 10,000 in a short time without losing people in the crowd? Simply in this manner, the members of the Jerusalem church were not just associated with one another in the crowd. They also associated in smaller groups in one another’s homes (**Acts 2:46**). No doubt, these groups formed naturally through numerous ways and divisions, probably based on age, interests, backgrounds, etc. But, we can be equally assured that at times one of the leaders would connect a new convert with a group of Christians that were already close.
- C. The necessary practical dynamics of these groups could take up an entire lesson in and of itself. For now, suffice it to say that through this association with smaller groups, people’s spiritual needs were met. The spiritual growth of individuals was accomplished. The spreading of the gospel was multiplied. The grounding of new converts was made sure. No doubt, some fell through the cracks, after all Jesus said that some seed would be sown on shallow ground and the plant would spring up but quickly die out (**Luke 8:13-14**). But, you didn’t hear people saying, “I don’t want to be a member in a large church, I would get lost.” Because they weren’t lost in the crowd, they were connected with Christians.

V. **Acts 6:1-6** – The Jerusalem church knew nobody can do everything.

- A. When the Jerusalem church resolved the racial conflict it faced in **Acts 6**, the leadership of the congregation demonstrated a fundamental understanding of how to lead any corporate body. They knew: Nobody can do everything. The apostles had to delegate duties and provide for a division of labor.
- B. Have you noticed why this problem came about? **Acts 6:1** says it came about “when the number of disciples was multiplied.” They could have avoided this problem by not growing. But, now that they had grown, they had to make special assignments to fulfill special needs.
- C. Considering why this assignment came about, I am puzzled that so many in churches today say, “I want to be a part of a small church, because there is more opportunity for work.” In this passage, seven men received an opportunity to work because the church grew.
- D. Paul taught this in **Ephesians 4:16**. We are all different, suited for different aspects of the work here. We are each responsible to develop our own individual abilities in order to build up this body, serving the Lord and serving others. Too often we are all made to feel guilty because we see a picture of a super Christian who excel at every aspect of the church’s work. But there is no such Christian. Even Paul could not do that. We should not feel guilty nor make others feel guilty simply because we cannot do what someone else can. Rather, we should feel guilty only when we are not doing what we can to the best of our ability.

VI. **Acts 4-5** – The Jerusalem church was bold in the face of rejection.

- A. The Jerusalem church and its members knew they were only effective if they were teaching the unadulterated doctrine of Jesus Christ. They knew they could not cower before the whims of the worldly and those in false religion and still be successful.

- B. In **Acts 4**, Peter and John were told to quit teaching in the name of Jesus and were threatened. In **Acts 5**, all the apostles were arrested, beaten and threatened with death if they continued to teach the Gospel. In **Acts 7**, Stephen was martyred because he taught the Gospel. In **Acts 8**, the church in Jerusalem was scattered through persecution because of their teaching. In **Acts 12**, James was executed and Peter arrested because it pleased the Jews. On the list goes. How did the church in Jerusalem respond to all of this? They kept right on teaching. (**Acts 4:31; 5:42; 8:4; 12:24**).
- C. The Jerusalem church did not allow the threat of persecution to deter them from teaching the truth boldly, let alone the threat that someone might visit their assembly and then never return. Amazingly, despite their apparent lack of concern with rejection, the church continued growing (**Acts 5:14; 8:12-13; 12:24**).

VII. **Acts 6-8** – The Jerusalem church did not rely on free agents.

- A. I have become highly disillusioned in some ways with my own profession, for lack of a better term. In our modern day, preaching is a professional activity. There is a class of preachers that are traded back and forth among congregations. Most of the time, somebody decides they want to preach and they start looking for a job as if they were a free agent pitcher or a quarterback trying to find a team. Because of this, preachers are rarely a real part of the congregation. In many churches they come in for a few years and if things get rough, they leave and look for another team. In these cases, neither the congregation nor the preacher ever feels a real sense of partnership. No doubt there is authority for someone to be an evangelist and move frequently. But that was by no means the norm in Jerusalem.
- B. One of Jerusalem's keys to success was their development of their own individual members do the work of ministry. Instead of relying on free agents, they worked on their farm teams.
- C. From where did the seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom in **Acts 6** come? Were they men from elsewhere who applied for a job? No, they were members in the congregation who had been trained to work. Stephen was trained to teach and in **Acts 6:8ff** he did so. Philip was trained to preach and was therefore ready when the persecution came to go out teaching (**Acts 8:5ff**). The Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to Samaria to help with the work for a time (**Acts 8:14**). Barnabas was able to go to Antioch and help the brethren there (**Acts 11:22**).
- D. The Jerusalem church was not filled with anxiety that their preacher might move or die leaving them without a pulpit man. They did not have to hope the next guy who came along looking for a job would do as good a job. They were training people up through their own ranks to fulfill that duty. Of course, you realize the Jerusalem church had 12 preachers and multiplied that number as it grew.

VIII. **Acts 8:4; 11:19-21** – The Jerusalem church set the world ablaze.

- A. In a sense, we are here today because of the effectiveness of the Jerusalem church. One of the most amazing aspects of the growth of Christ's church in the book of Acts is found in **Acts 8:4**. "Those who had been scattered went everywhere preaching the word." So much teaching and grounding had been done among the congregation in Jerusalem, that when the members of this church moved, they positively impacted the church in other places.
- B. Of course, there was one fundamental difference between what these people did in **Acts 8** and what Christians do today when they move. When the brethren in **Acts 8** moved, they didn't have the luxury of taking a few months to determine the sound church of which they would become a part. They didn't get to say, "Oh, I can't move there. I would have to drive two hours to meet with a faithful church." They were forced into other cities without churches and they started new ones (**Acts 11:20-21**).
- C. The Jerusalem church was effective not just because it was successful in Jerusalem, but because it blazed the trail for churches everywhere.

Conclusion:

In America today, there are no faithful congregations that have successfully attained the level that the church in Jerusalem did. There is no preacher, teacher or elder for us to call and ask, "How can our congregation follow your example to become larger and more effective just like the Jerusalem church was?" If we make the choice to be constructively discontent with where we are presently and determine that we will not be satisfied just to be exceptional among our peers, we will have to be trailblazers among modern American churches.

As you look into the future, considering this vision and wondering, "Is it attainable?", allow me to assure you, it is. Understand this, for the church as a whole to move beyond its current level of effectiveness in present day America, some sound congregation somewhere must demonstrate that a modern church can have the success that Jerusalem had and maintain faithfulness to God's Word. Some church must blaze a trail as the Jerusalem church did. I ask you two questions, "If not us, who? If not now, when?" We can do it and we can start this year. Are you prepared to be a church like Jerusalem? Are you prepared to boldly go where we've never gone before?