

Now What? (2)

It is quite obvious that there were some pretty powerful, amazing things going on in the church in those first few days, weeks, months and years after the resurrection of Jesus. The transformation of the disciples was astounding and quite miraculous in itself. We attribute this to the convincing reality of the resurrection and the work of the Holy Spirit.

12 Many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles. **Acts 5:12** (HCSB)

As the apostles and early believers began to saturate Jerusalem and the surrounding regions with the gospel, thousands of people were being saved at singular spontaneous “events” as well as daily people were being added to the church. Can you imagine the logistical challenges the early church faced and all this under a heavy cloud of persecution from the Jewish leaders?

I would also remind you that the message of the resurrection was the focal point of the apostle’s preaching.

33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. **Acts 4:33** (HCSB)

Another astounding thing we must take note of was the way the church ministered to and took care of each other and those around them. The unity and generosity of those early, rookie believers was profound, generous and sacrificial! This gained them a very positive reputation with the entire community of

believers and unbelievers alike. And remember, Christianity primarily spread, especially in its earlier days, among the common, the poor, and the outcast. There was very little wealth among the fledgling church but they gave it up without any heavy-handed coercion from the apostles.

³² Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. Acts 4:32 (HCSB)

The Christian culture of turning the other cheek, going the second mile, offering a coat, infinite forgiveness, non-condemnation, and generous charity was quite new on the face of the earth. It was so strange and contrary to the existing Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures that, coupled with the convincing, Spirit-filled preaching of the resurrected Christ, you see why it was so quick and powerfully world changing. I content that one of the key ingredients of the rapid and phenomenal growth of the church was their love and generosity.

But then, you knew it was coming, the first “issue” arose in the church. Of course then, as well as now, the church was full of flawed, imperfect, sin-scarred human beings. Someone was bound to slip. It was just a matter of time.....Remember last week that we read how Barnabas had sold a piece of land and then laid the money from the sale of the land at the apostles feet. We can reasonably assume that this offering was made at a time and place where the church was assembled. It was an act of

worship. Barnabas wasn't showing off. Bringing gifts to the altar, rather than having it collected, was the common practice then and prior throughout Old Testament times. I'm sure it inspired and encouraged others to do the same. But it was during that time of sacrificial giving that one couple decided to go through the outward motions without the inward convictions of sacrificially selling property by being deceitful about their offering.....

1 But a man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a piece of property. **2** However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. **3** Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds from the field? **4** Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God!" **5** When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. **6** The young men got up, wrapped [his body], carried him out, and buried him. **7** There was an interval of about three

hours; then his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ “Tell me,” Peter asked her, “did you sell the field for this price?” “Yes,” she said, “for that price.” ⁹ Then Peter said to her, “Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out!” ¹⁰ Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

Acts 5:1-11 (HCSB)

As stated previously, mighty, miraculous and powerful things were going on in the early church, and as a result, the church was growing and God’s people were sacrificially serving and giving. They were walking the walk, but not quite all the church. Truth- No matter how profoundly powerful and obvious a work of God is, there will always be some who don’t catch on. There will be skeptics, counterfeiterers, imposters, freeloaders and deceivers.

Note that Peter was quick to point out that the issue with Ananias and Sapphira wasn’t about the land or the money. As far as we know, no one had called for anyone to sell their personal property and give any of the proceeds to the church.

People sold and gave as they were led by the Holy Spirit and compelled by their own heartfelt compassion. That's how giving should be. The tithe is required. Giving gifts above the tithe is from the heart and led by the Spirit..... The problem with Ananias and Sapphira was their deception of the church and of God.

Our first reaction might be, "wasn't that a bit harsh?" Ananias and Sapphira both dropping dead right there in front of the church just because they weren't being honest about their gift? I've seen far worse things said and done in the church without even a pimple breakout or bruise showing up, but these two died!

I can't say that I understand fully, but it is quite obvious that everything that happened good and not so good was much grander and more demonstrative than any of us have likely seen in a lifetime of walking with Christ. The best I can understand is that the early church did not have the written word or a long history to reputation and integrity to validate their message. The only thing they had to establish Christianity as the one and only true way to life, God, and eternal life was their message- the resurrection, their charity and their integrity. If the resurrection had been proven untrue or the lifestyles of the early believers had shown themselves inconsistent with their faith claims, Christianity would never have gotten off the ground much less spread beyond the immediate regions of Jerusalem. So, everything that happened in those early days and years was huge and profound and consequently convincing. Do you think anyone else lied about how much they were giving?

Let's review the healthy church factors that led to such phenomenal growth and influence from last week and then we'll add those we discovered today.

Growth factors:

1. Resurrection- They believed it. They testified of and preached it.

33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. **Acts 4:33 (HCSB)**

This must be central to our message!

2. Filled with the Spirit-

31 When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God's message with boldness. **Acts 4:31 (HCSB)**

I don't think this is something we necessarily need to pursue. If we could pursue it and catch it, it is likely something we would take pride in and brag about it. I would guess that those who are the most Spirit-filled are the ones least likely to even be aware

of it. They are just in love with Jesus and their not ashamed of it. They are living lives of obedience to Christ's commands, prayer, bible study, and worship is ingrained in their life-style, and sacrificial serving and giving is a major part of their identity as a follower of Christ.

15 Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise— **16** making the most of the time, because the days are evil. **17** So don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. **18** And don't get drunk with wine, which [leads to] reckless actions, but be filled with the Spirit: **Eph 5:15-18 (HCSB)**

New factors.....

3. Integrity- Maybe if someone dropped dead in the middle of a worship service.....

Oscar- loan \$24,000. \$200/mo at ½ interest rate

Why? 1977-1986 **trust/integrity**

Loan New Hope money? Better than investing through a bank...

Set an example of good works yourself, with integrity and dignity in your teaching. **8** Your message is to be sound beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be ashamed,

having nothing bad to say about us. Titus 2:7-8 (HCSB)

Without integrity, we've got nothing!

4. Expect imposters deceivers, doubters, nay sayers,

13 Evil people and imposters will become worse, deceiving and being deceived. **2** Tim 3:13 (HCSB)

No matter how profound, miraculous, amazing and wonderful the work of God is, some will still doubt, complain, whine, question, argue, judge and condemn. That is their nature. Don't be distracted or discouraged by them. Expect it and deal with it.

5. Generous giving- was at the heart of church health and growth. The message of the resurrection and generosity of the church is what led to the Christians having such a positive reputation in the community and it was this same generosity that led to those being added daily to the church.

6 Remember this: the person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. **7** Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not out of regret or out of necessity,

for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work. **2** Cor 9:6-8 (HCSB)

What kind of impact might it have in Cape Coral if word got around that people were selling personal property and giving sacrificially to the church? What impact would it have in our community to hear, in spite of the economic devastation we have been through, that we had all given enough money to pay off the bank and be debt free? Someone has already offered to match \$1 for each \$3. What will you do?

An important question we should all be asking ourselves is- “Why isn’t the church today like the early church? Why aren’t thousands coming to Christ when preachers preach? Why aren’t people being added daily to the church? Why aren’t we seeing great and mighty works of God on a regular basis? The easy answer is to blame it on our present culture, the culture of rebellion against God and the things of God, the culture of tolerance toward everyone and everything except Christianity, the culture of self-worship.

Or, we could quit playing the blame game and get honest with ourselves. Are we convinced of the resurrection and do we proclaim it frequently and unashamedly? Are we living lives of impeccable integrity so that our reputation in the community is admired and respected by all? Are we filled with the Holy

Spirit? Are we known throughout our community for our unity, love for people, and generosity?

Not only should we not blame our culture for our impotence, we must be careful not to blame each other for the lack similarity between our church and the early church. It's my fault. It's your fault. Stand up and take responsibility for who you are or are not in Christ.