

CHAPTER 6

SUCCESSSES AND FAILURES

In last week's lesson we took a trip through the book of Acts. As we traveled through this Book we learned that the early Christians had a fire burning in their hearts that could not be quenched. They had a message of good news which filled their hearts and overflowed from their lips and not even the flames of persecution could silence them. The heart-cry of these believers is found in Acts 4:20--"For we cannot but _____ the things which we have _____ and _____." They were not able to refrain from speaking!

Early Successes

The book of Acts is not a story of missionary failure. It is a story of missionary success. At the beginning of the book we learn about a movement that had very small beginnings. How many disciples were gathered together at the beginning (Acts 1:15)? _____ Within only 40 years New Testament Christianity had spread throughout the Roman empire with churches established in most of the major cities and with thousands and thousands of believers.

The early chapters of Acts show us the amazing growth that took place in a very short time. Consider the following:

120 DISCIPLES +	ABOUT 3000 +	More Every Day =	about 5000 men (not counting women and children)
(ACTS 1:15)	(ACTS 2:41)	(ACTS 2:47)	(ACTS 4:4)

Notice also in Acts 5:14--"And believers were the _____ added to the Lord, _____ both of men and women."

Before He returned to heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ gave to His disciples this important command: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Did the early Christians take these words seriously? Were they obedient to the Lord's command? Notice what Paul said in the first chapter of Colossians:

(see on the next page)

Colossians 1:5-6 Was the gospel going forth *into all the world*? _____

Colossians 1:23 Was the gospel going forth *to every creature*? _____

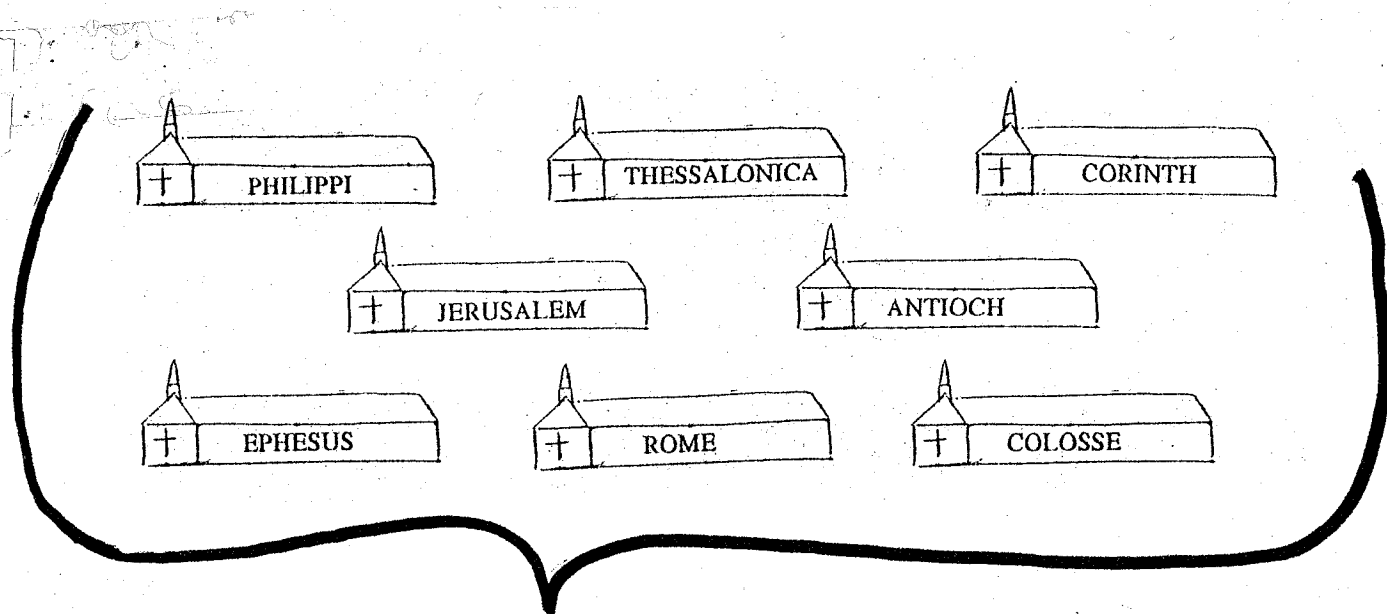
These verses along with the book of Acts show us that in the first century the gospel message was greatly **ADVANCING**, and the church as a whole was very missionary minded.

The United Churches

The local churches of the first century had a **UNITED** testimony. If you were to visit the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch and the church at Corinth, what would you find? You would find three churches pointing to **the same Christ**, proclaiming **the same gospel** and practicing **the same truth**.

You would not find three individual churches each “doing their own thing.” The Churches were in different locations but they had the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, the same Holy Scriptures and the same burning desire to do God’s will and obey Christ’s commands. If you had lived in the first century and had to move from Philippi to Ephesus, you would find the same kind of church in Ephesus as the one you had left in Philippi. If an unsaved person were to travel from Rome to Thessalonica, he would find that the believers in both of these cities pointed to the same Christ and to the same Bible. This is illustrated below:

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES OF THE FIRST CENTURY



A UNITED VOICE--“WE THE CHURCHES!!”

(This UNITED VOICE is illustrated on the next page)

SAME TEACHING	“as I teach every where in every _____” (1 Corinthians 4:17).
SAME PRACTICE	“as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in _____” (1 Corinthians 7:17).
SAME CUSTOM	“But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the _____ of _____” (1 Corinthians 11:16).
SAME ORDER	“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all _____ of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Do we find this same UNITED VOICE today? As we walk up and down our land and visit different churches today, what do we find? Do we find the **SAME** teaching and practices and customs and order or do we find great **DIFFERENCES**? The churches of the 20th century are much different than the churches of the 1st century! Something has happened! Something has **FAILED**! The churches of today no longer have the same united testimony before the world. [Have you gone on vacation with your family and had trouble finding a good church or even finding any kind of church which still believes the Bible?]

Individual Churches That Were Successful

1. **The Church at Antioch.**

We learn about this Church in Acts 11:22-30 and Acts 13:1-4. This was a **BIBLE TEACHING CHURCH** (Acts 11:26; 13:1). This was a **PRAYING CHURCH** (Acts 13:2). This was a **WITNESSING CHURCH**. The disciples pointed so clearly to Christ that the unsaved people who watched them live called them “C_____” (Acts 11:26). Also the Church at Antioch was the first great missionary church. It was from the this church that Paul and Barnabas went forth on the first great missionary journey (Acts 13:1-4).

2. **The Church at Rome.**

The testimony of this church was felt far and wide: “your _____ is spoken of throughout the _____” (Romans 1:8). This was a Church that was *famous* for its *faith*!

3. **The Church at Thessalonica.**

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:7-9. Were the believers of this church good examples to believers who lived elsewhere (verse 7)? _____ Did the testimony of this church spread beyond the borders of Thessalonica (verse 8)? _____ Had the lives of these people really been changed (verse 9)? _____

Think about this: What kind of “far reaching” testimony does your church have? Is the church you attend making an impact far and near? How? Why? Why not? What part do you have in this? Can people living hundreds of miles away be reached by the testimony of your church? How?

Individual Believers Who Were Successful

As we read the book of Acts we learn about characters and individuals who succeeded and stood out and who played an important part in the spread of the gospel. We read about some of the great HEROES OF FAITH such as Peter, John, Stephen and James. The last half of the book of Acts is mostly about the Apostle _____ who did more to spread the Gospel than any man who ever lived.

Here are two other people that we read about in the book of Acts whose hearts were aflame for God’s program of missions:

1) **Philip.**

This man is called “Philip the _____” (Acts 21:8). He was a man who loved to preach the good news about Christ. We learn about this faithful gospel preacher in Acts chapter 8.

What was the one thing Philip did everywhere he went (see Acts 8:5,12,35)? _____
_____ Whether it was a great crowd or whether it was one man, Philip was faithful to tell the good news about Christ.

2) **Priscilla.**

Priscilla and her husband Aquila both had a great zeal for the Lord. They were saved under Paul’s ministry (Acts chapter 18) and Paul taught them the Word of God. At every opportunity they would share the good news with others. In Acts 18:24-26 we learn of the time Priscilla and Aquila met with a man named Apollos and helped him to understand the way of God more perfectly.

Priscilla helped to save Paul's life. In Romans 16:4 Paul mentions Priscilla and Aquila and says that they "have for my _____ laid down their own _____; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles." We are not told any of the details, but apparently Priscilla and her husband risked and hazarded their lives for Paul's sake (compare 1 John 3:16). She was a brave soldier in the army of Christ.

Failure and Decline

As the years went by the Churches began to lose their great power. The flame that had burned brightly began to flicker and become dim and in some cases to go out completely. The fire that had burned brightly in the hearts of believers was being QUENCHED (compare 1 Thess. 5:19). At the end of the first century the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the Church in the city of Ephesus and said, "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy _____" (Revelation 2:4). Their love for the Saviour had cooled off. The Lord also spoke to the Church in the city of Laodicea and He said, "thou art LUKEWARM" (Revelation 3:16). They were no longer HOT and on fire for the Lord. They had cooled off.

What were some of the reasons for such a "cooling off" and for such a DECLINE? How can we explain this failure? Consider the following:

1) **WRONG MOTIVES**

In Philippians 1:14-18 the Apostle Paul speaks of certain people who were doing the right thing but for the wrong reasons. They were "PREACHING C _____" (Phil. 1:15-16) but they were doing this out of ENVY, STRIFE and CONTENTION (Philippians 1:15-16). The **message** of these missionaries was good because they preached Christ. The **motive** of these missionaries was terrible because they were doing it for the wrong reasons. They were not preaching to glorify God and to please Christ and to obey the Lord. They were preaching because they were JEALOUS OF THE APOSTLE PAUL.

We need to be careful about doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. For example, it is right to go to church, but can a person go to church for the wrong reasons? Remember, God not only looks at WHAT we do, but He also looks at WHY we do it! He knows all about the "thoughts and _____ of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

2) **FAMILY FIGHTING**

The devil is delighted when Christians start fighting each other because he knows that they will have little time or energy left to fight the forces of evil and preach the gospel to the lost. Did some of the early churches have problems with “family fighting” (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-12; 3:3; Galatians 5:15; 3 John 9-10)? _____ The Spirit of God is grieved and the flame is quenched when this kind of sinful activity takes place between the brethren (Ephesians 4:30-32). Christians that cannot get along with each other will usually not be very powerful witnesses before the lost.

3) **BEARING A FALSE MESSAGE**

Even in the first century false teaching was entering some of the churches. This was especially true with the Galatian churches (see Galatians 1:6-9; 2:4; 3:1-3; 5:7-12). Satan does not mind fervent missionaries as long as they do not spread the truth. He delights in missionaries that go forth spreading error. Today the cults send out thousands of missionaries throughout the world spreading different messages. The devil is well pleased. Jesus spoke about Satan’s missionaries in Matthew 23:15.

4) **LOVE FOR THE WORLD**

Paul wrote about one of his former companions and said, “Demas hath forsaken me, having _____ this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10). Satan wants to corrupt the church *from within*. He wants people to be “lovers of _____ more than lovers of _____” (2 Timothy 3:4). He wants Christians to have less Bible and more entertainment (2 Timothy 4:3). He wants less prayer and more play. Most of all he wants to corrupt the lives of believers so that they will live less and less like Christ and more and more like unsaved people. The more worldly the Church is the less power it will have in the world. If there is little *difference* between Christians and non-Christians, then why should people become Christians? If being a Christian does not really make a difference, then why be a Christian? When Christians live, talk, think and act like the world then they no longer have anything to offer the world and missions becomes meaningless.

5) **NO PERSECUTIONS**

The early church seemed to thrive under persecution (see the last chapter). It was the “pressure from without” that propelled them out and moved them forward. What was it that made

the early Christians go everywhere preaching the Word (see Acts 8:1-4)? _____

_____ When things were rough and tough on the outside the Christians seemed to get rougher and tougher on the inside! The fiery trials and persecutions made the early church strong and powerful.

Nearly 300 years after the death of Christ the Romans stopped persecuting the believers and Christianity became an “accepted” religion. It became very easy to become a Christian and Christianity even became POPULAR. Thousands of people who were not truly born again started calling themselves “Christians.” This was one of the worst things that ever happened to the Church. Instead of the Church reaching into the world with the gospel the world was reaching into the church and JOINING IT! The churches were fast becoming totally corrupt.

God Is Seeking Individuals

As the years went by the churches lost their UNITED VOICE. The churches had become corrupt. It could no longer be said that the churches on earth had the same TEACHING and the same PRACTICE and the same CUSTOM and the same ORDER. If an unsaved person were to look at the churches of the world he would be utterly confused!

Also as the years went by it was difficult to find even *one church* that was really SUCCEEDING in the world as God intended. There were no churches that could compare with the powerful churches of the first century such as the church at Antioch or Thessalonica or Rome.

As the years passed by God was not looking for a group of churches with a UNITED VOICE. Such could not be found. God was not even looking for ONE CHURCH that was succeeding. Such could not be found. Instead God was looking for even one person who had a right heart and who had a flame within. It was much like the days of the Old Testament prophets:

“And I sought for a _____ among them...but I found none” (Ezekiel 22:30).

“Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now...if ye can find a _____, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the _____” (Jeremiah 5:1).

Successful Individuals

As we look down through the years of history, we do find certain INDIVIDUALS who broke out of the coldness and deadness of their day, and who had a fire in their hearts for the Lord. Here are two examples:

(see on the next page)

1) **SAINT PATRICK**

Most everyone has heard of “Saint Patrick’s Day” but few seem to know very much about this man. He lived about 400 years after Christ and was known as “the great missionary to the people of Ireland.” This man loved the Scriptures and he was on fire for the Lord. He once said this about his labor in Ireland: *“I am greatly a debtor to God, who has bestowed His grace so largely upon me, that multitudes were born again to God through me. The Irish, who never had the knowledge of God and worshipped only idols and unclean things, have lately become the people of the Lord and are called the sons of God.”* Patrick ministered to thousands of people in this land.

2) **SAVONAROLA**

This man was a priest who lived in Italy in the 15th century. He saw the sin and corruption and wickedness of his day and he spoke out against it. Savonarola was trying to be a dim light in a very dark day. He even spoke out very strongly against the religious leaders of his day because they were very corrupt and greedy. Like John the Baptist he was a voice CRYING OUT, letting the people know that they had a great problem and that this problem was SIN!

Savonarola’s sermons were like flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder. Sometimes audiences of 10,000 or 12,000 would hear him preach. He was a real preacher of righteousness.

Here is what he said about the religious preachers of his day: *“In these days, preachers are chained to the earth by the love of earthly things. The care of souls is no longer their concern. The preachers preach to please princes and to be praised by them. The theologians (religious leaders) of our time have soiled everything....They do not know a shred of the Bible, yea, they do not even know the names of its books.”*

With preaching like this Savonarola quickly made enemies. He was finally tortured and hanged, his body afterward being burned.

Other individuals (such as Luther, Tyndale, Whitefield and many others) could also be mentioned. In every age God has had individual men and women who have honored Him and have broken away from the corruption that was all around them.

Today God is still looking for the Church to be what **HE** intended it to be and God is looking for individuals to be vessels fit for the Master’s use so that **HIS LIFE** might be expressed. He is looking for a man or a woman or a boy or a girl that will bend the heart toward Him. Will God find you? Are you this kind of person?