

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 15

A Growing Church

Acts 2:47b "... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

I recently spent an hour or so visiting various Church Web sites on the Internet around the world. It is fascinating to see the various slogans and statements that are made by Churches – particularly in America. Most often you will find Churches describing themselves as a *"friendly church."* Another well-worn saying is: *"A warm welcome awaits you."* One often used slogan I found is: *"Where everybody is somebody, and Jesus Christ is Lord!"*

Well, in one Church in Jacksonville, Florida, I found a variation of this last saying which I may never forget. No doubt it was well meaning and I am sure the people in that Church loved the Lord. But they had placed a slogan at the top of the page promoting their Church which said, *"Where Jesus Christ is everything and everyone else is nobody!"* I couldn't believe my eyes. I also couldn't help but wonder what kind of person that slogan would attract. There is little doubt that they had not communicated well what they wanted to say. Surely, they thought people were somebody. What they wanted to say, probably, was that Jesus was so wonderful that in comparison to Him everything else was secondary.

The slogan does point to the fact that so many Churches do not think through what they are doing to reach people. In fact, many Churches do not even think much about what they are doing. Some don't even know what they are doing. And some don't even know that there is anything they should be doing! If you were to ask the average Church member in Australia the question, *"Where is your church going?"* they would say something like, *"Going, why we're not going anywhere. We've been at this location for 100 years!"*

The early Church we've been focusing on in the book of Acts was a great Church because it had focus. It knew that it should be doing something and knew what that something was. These disciples had experienced the life changing power of Jesus and had also caught a vision of how that same power could change the lives of people they knew - and they were doing something about it. It has been said that there are three kinds of people: those who watch what happens; those who make it happen; and those who wonder what happened. These early Christians were those who made it happen.

We have seen that they were a regenerate Church, a devoted Church, an awe-filled Church, a united Church, a generous Church, and a joyously worshipping Church. Now we see that they were an evangelistic Church, a growing church. Notice what the Scripture says in Acts 2:47: *"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* These believers were seeing their friends, neighbours, relatives, and co-workers come to know Christ. They were at work and God was at work.

One of the first things we notice is that God was indeed at work. This is why people were being added to the Church. This is always why people ultimately embrace Christ and His gift of salvation. That cannot happen unless God is at work because only God can bring someone into His kingdom. We can't save anyone. We see the sovereignty of God at work here in this early Church.

Our text says that the Lord added to their number. These Christians understood that people were coming to faith because the Lord Himself was doing something through His Spirit. This is something we need to remember and depend upon. This understanding needs to be built into our approach to reaching out to people. Unless we see clearly that Jesus saves, we will have a faulty concept of evangelism and become very frustrated in the process. Additionally, we will fail to draw upon the resources of God for our evangelistic efforts and fail to spend the time in earnest prayer for unbelievers.

Of course, the reason that God is at work to reach people is that He loves people. This is why Christ came and died - for people. This is the primary reason the Church exists on planet Earth - to reach people with the love of God. We are to reflect the heartbeat of God for people. It is a desire to see them come to Christ and be saved. It is a desire to see their lives transformed in a positive way by the good news of God's love for them. The question is, *"Do we desire what God desires?"* It is a question that is very troubling. It seems that from the behaviour of most Churches and Christians that we don't really desire what God desires – not strongly anyway.

George Barna's surveys indicate that fewer than one in four Christians even believe that it is their responsibility to witness to others. Most Christians think that it is the job of the 'professionals' to evangelise. In fact, most Christians never share their faith with someone else and few have ever led someone to Christ.

Dr. D. James Kennedy, founder of Evangelism Explosion, stated that *"One of the saddest statistics of our day is that 95% of all Church members have never had the joy of seeing someone come to Christ."* It seems we are more content to be the keepers of the aquarium, rather than be fishers of men.

But what about the Great Commission? We all know it, don't we? It is where Jesus commanded us to reach out and share the good news.

Matthew 28:18-20 *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

This was not a suggestion; this was our purpose as His disciples. One thing is true. We need to have God do a work in our hearts to change both our minds and our behaviour. One little girl returned home from Sunday School and expressed disappointment with the class's reaction after the day's lesson. *"We were taught to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations,"* she said, *"but we just sat there."*

During the reign of Oliver Cromwell, the British government began to run low on silver for coins. Lord Cromwell sent his men on an investigation of the local cathedral to see if they could find any precious metal there. After investigating, they reported, *"The only silver we could find is in the statues of the saints standing in the corners."* To which the radical soldier and statesman of England replied, *"Good! We'll melt down the saints and put them into circulation!"* This is what may be needed today as well. The saints need to have our hearts melted with the love of God and we need to put ourselves in circulation. Not only must God be at work, but so must we.

God is the only one Who can save, but He has chosen us to carry the message of that salvation. It takes the cooperation of believers to share the message with others. God has called us into a partnership with Jesus.

Romans 10:13 *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

But it goes on to say in the following verses, that before people can ask the Lord for help, they must believe in him; and before they can believe in him, they must hear about him; and for them to hear about the Lord, someone must tell them.

Look at what Paul had to say to the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."*

God wants us to participate in this ministry of reconciliation! That is precisely what He has in mind for us. The Bible says that this God, Who reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, also He gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Those of us who have been reconciled now have the privilege and the responsibility of entering into the ministry of reconciliation. But how do we do this?

We find the key when it says that God He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We have been given a message to share. We have not only been given grace but the secret of grace. We have been given a message that sets others free. We have been given a message that pardons. We have been given a living, dynamic message. It is living because we have experienced its power. It is living because we have been set free by believing it.

This message is the truth of the gospel. It is the truth that anyone who believes in Jesus can be set free. It is the truth that there is no sin too black that Jesus has not already forgiven. It is the truth that there is no problem too complex that Jesus cannot solve. It is the truth that our neighbours can be brought into God's kingdom. It is the truth that our relatives can be reconciled to God. And we have been given this message of reconciliation.

Now it should be obvious to any of us that a message must be delivered. Someone once observed that many Christians are like the Arctic River, frozen over at the mouth. Unless we speak this message of reconciliation, others will never hear it. The greatest tragedy of all would be to have the truth that sets people free, and never to share that truth.

How can we be effective in sharing this truth? What will it take for us to begin to boldly declare the truth that will set others free? Do we need some new program? Will that be the answer? I would like to propose to you that what we need is not a new program. There are already many programs for evangelism which are quite good. But we do not need a better understanding of an evangelistic program, rather we need a better understanding of our evangelistic position.

Because we have been reconciled ourselves, and have been given this message of reconciliation, we have been made official ambassadors for Christ. We read these very words in the text - we are therefore Christ's ambassadors. We must understand that position. We must come to see ourselves in that capacity. We are agents of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors. We have a platform from which to speak. As an official agent of the Kingdom, we represent the King. We have a divine appointment, and we must begin to see ourselves this way.

What does it mean to function as an ambassador? It means several important things. It means, first of all, that we represent the King. An ambassador represents his/her government. The word of a King, Queen or Prime Minister would be passed on to a foreign government through an ambassador. The word of reconciliation with which we are entrusted is the word of our King, Jesus Christ. So, to be an ambassador also means that we are entrusted to handle the word of the King. We are entrusted to be faithful to share what the King desires us to share. We must be accurate with His words. We must be faithful to share them and to make sure they are understood.

As an ambassador we are also privileged to speak with the authority of the King. When our ambassador speaks for our government, that speech carries the authority of our government. When we speak for King Jesus, our speech carries the authority of the King. When we offer salvation on the terms revealed in God's Word, we can be sure that when people respond to our word on behalf of our King, our King will back up His word.

This is why that text says that when we speak it is as though God were making His appeal through us. We are speaking on Christ's behalf. We stand in the place of Christ in this ministry of reconciliation. We are agents of the Kingdom. We are Christ's ambassadors.

Until we begin to see ourselves as agents of the Kingdom, ambassadors for Christ, we will miss most of the opportunities that present themselves every day. What we read in this text is a radically new way of thinking about ourselves. We have heard the words before, and because of that they may not have the impact they should. We need to hear them with fresh insight. We need to ask God to create in us this mentality of being an ambassador.

As agents of the Kingdom, we are to infiltrate every walk of life. As ambassadors for Christ, we are to represent our King and faithfully share His word to all people. We have been reconciled so we can participate in seeing others reconciled. We have been shown the way so that we can show others.

Many years ago, an artist, seeking to depict on canvas the meaning of evangelism, painted a storm at sea. Black clouds filled the sky. Illuminated by a flash of lightning, a little boat could be seen disintegrating under the pounding of the ocean. Men were struggling in the swirling waters, their anguished faces crying out for help. The only glimmer of hope appeared in the foreground of the painting, where a large rock protruded out of the water. There, clutching desperately with both hands, was one lone seaman. It was a moving scene. Looking at the painting, one could see in the tempest a symbol of mankind's hopeless condition. And, true to the Gospel, the only hope of salvation was "*the Rock of Ages*," a shelter in the time of storm. However, as the artist reflected upon his work, he realised that the painting did not accurately portray his subject. So, he discarded the canvas, and painted another one. It was very similar to the first: the black clouds, the flashing lightning, the angry waters, the little boat crushed by the pounding waves, and the crew vainly struggling in the water. In the foreground the seaman was clutching the large rock for salvation. But the artist made one change: the survivor was holding on with only one hand, and with the other hand he was reaching down to pull up a drowning friend.

In Jesus' name hear this, friends. We are safe. We are on the rock. We made it. Praise be to God. But what about all the others floating by. What about our comrades in the broken, beaten boat of life that is simply not going to last the distance and get them to safety? From our safe position, are we prepared to get wet and help them out of the water, or are we just content to enjoy the safety of the rock without rescuing as many as we can around us?

I have deliberately not talked about evangelistic methods. Nor have I exhorted you to race out there tomorrow and share the four spiritual laws with a neighbour. My purpose today was simply to shake us up enough for the Holy Spirit to awaken something in our hearts. There must be a change in our hearts before we even contemplate how we are to be salt and light in this community.

It is my firm belief that the methods and the vehicles for evangelism will come. As I have shared many times before, the most powerful tool we have is our own testimony – our own story of what God has done in our lives. That is the most effective way of reaching those around us.

If we know that the Lord Who came to seek and to save the lost has entrusted us with the same holy mission and that this is the primary reason for us still being on this planet; if that truth starts to take root and gets a hook into our heart; then, and only then, will we begin to see captives set free and the kingdom of God grow beyond our wildest expectations. God will add to our number daily, those who are being saved, when we embrace our calling as ministers of reconciliation in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.