

Examining the Uncomfortable Church

By John Battenfield

The book of Acts shows us what the early Church was like at its infancy, when living for God was a life-and-death decision every day for its members. They embraced the words of Jesus in Luke 9:23-24.

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." (NIV)

The temptation is to view 'taking up our cross' as symbolic of the burdens we carry in life. "My job is my cross." "My in-laws are my cross." "Diabetes is my cross." The disciples who heard Jesus say these words knew he was talking about a one-way street to death. That's the only thing a cross is: death to self and death to the world.

The Cycle

The Church in the first century joyfully adopted this risky lifestyle. Particularly in the first eight chapters of Acts we see the apostles and disciples caught up in a cycle of dangerous and counter-cultural activity for the cause of Christ.

Unity and Practical Church Life

Acts 1:12–2:3, 2:42–47, 4:32–37, 5:1–11, 6:1–6

Like today, the Church in Acts was not a building, but a community of people, with real needs and real struggles. Because of the fierce anti-Christian sentiment rampant in the first century, church members huddled together in homes and secret meetings, often the only times of relative safety they enjoyed. Despite these constricting circumstances, the Church worshiped, broke bread, learned and taught, and raised up leaders. Never since has the Church been as united in purpose and spirit.

Public Display

Acts 2:4–13, 3:1–10, 5:12–13, 5:15–16, 6:8

Also like today, the disciples' daily activities brought them in contact with the unsaved masses. Whether we like it or not, as Christians our lives are on public display. In his sovereignty, God has chosen to use his children to impact the culture around them. So we are to live our lives in such a way that makes people ask, "What is so different about you? You seem at peace in the midst of trials. You put others above yourself. I want what you have." The answer is not *what* we have, it is *who* we have. Jesus.

God speaks through Followers

Acts 2:14–40, 3:11–26, 4:31, 7:2–56, 8:4–40

Living out the Word of God would be incomplete without speaking the Word of God. Communicating the truth about human depravity, God's redemptive work on the cross, and the reality of a life "more abundantly" is the ministry Christians are called to in the Great Commission. In the power of the Holy Spirit, men like Peter, Stephen, and Paul boldly proclaimed the good news to gathering crowds. They were intentional and took advantage of the opportunities God laid before them. In fact, they were constantly looking for those very opportunities. They were "prepared in season and out of season" to "give an answer to everyone" who asked them to give the reason for the hope that they had (2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Peter 3:15).

Conversions Galore

Acts 2:41, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7

When we are obedient in living out our faith and sharing the truth with a dying world, God uses us to call people to himself. Thousands of converts were welcomed into the Church in the first few days and months after Pentecost. God was preparing those hearts to hear and the disciples were obedient. This kind of partnership is always successful in God's perfect timing and perfect will. What was the secret to such amazing church growth?

Trials and Jail Time

Acts 4:1–3, 4:7–21, 5:17–40, 6:9–7:56, 8:3

The enemy is not pleased when God receives the glory. Is your church an affront to Satan's schemes? Are you dangerous to the forces of evil? The Bible promises us that if we are followers of Jesus, we will face opposition. If no one is opposed to how we live, are we truly following Jesus? Involvement in God's kingdom work requires a values change. It was a values change for Peter to leave his fishing boats and become a leader in the church. It was a values change for Paul to leave his prestigious pharisaical lifestyle and become a missionary to those whom he had persecuted. As James wrote, trials are a part of the Christian life. The disciples understood that. God brought those early believers before some of the most influential men of their time so that the reputation of Almighty God would be upheld and made known to all peoples. Would you and I be going to heaven if Paul had kept his mouth shut? Our God is bigger than our circumstances.

Punishment and Persecution

Acts 5:40, 8:1–3

Each time this cycle begins again, the patience of the enemy grows thinner and thinner, and the retaliation grows more desperate and nasty. Floggings, stonings, and scatterings were a very real eventuality for most Christians in the first century. It brought into focus just how real their faith was. Stephen understood. He lived the full cycle in a very short time. Because he was available to God, regardless of his abilities, he assumed a practical role in the church, displayed the power of God through miracles, spoke boldly of the things of heaven, saw converts come to Christ, was put on trial for his faith, and forgave his murderers as he was stoned to death. And it is believed he endured all of this before he was twenty years old.

Martyrdom

Acts 7:57–60

Only after Stephen's death could we really understand the impact this event had on the Church and the cultures that surrounded it. How did it affect cloak-collecting Saul of Tarsus? We may think that dying for your faith was something that happened long ago in more frightening times, but the truth is that in the twentieth century more Christians were martyred than in all the previous centuries combined. This is *the* age of the persecution of the Church. Do we pray for these atrocities to stop? The deaths of God's people do not go unnoticed by the world. That is why Jesus said to take up our cross and follow him: so the world would see and consider Christ; to make him famous.

Rejoicing

Acts 4:23–31, 5:41–42

Where did the disciples get such a seemingly backward attitude in the midst of such trouble? After honoring several Old Testament saints for their endurance despite their circumstances, Hebrews 12:1–2 says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (NIV)

Questions for Further Thought

1. How does the Church of today resemble the Church of the first century? Do you see evidence of this cycle in your church? Why or why not?
2. Why didn't the Lord, at the moment of our salvation, take each one of us to heaven to be with him?
3. How did the early Church relate to the culture it found itself in and vice versa? How should the Church today relate to our present culture?
4. Consider this statement: The increase in people joining the Church is a natural result of the spiritual state of the Church.
5. How do we promote Christ in our daily lives? What are some reasons we may not?

