

Worship

Worship in the Early Church

Lesson #12 for September 17, 2011

Scriptures: Acts 1:1-11; 2:14-41; 17:15-34; 18:1-16; 1 Corinthians 13.

1. When Jesus died hanging on the cross, the disciples went into hiding and were in a deep depression. They could not believe that their dreams had been crushed. Two days later, they were thrown into confusion by reports that the body of Jesus was missing and the tomb was empty. Over the next week, they became fully convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. During the 50 days from Passover to Pentecost, Jesus appeared to them a number of times both in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Then, back in Jerusalem for Pentecost, they came together in the upper room, set aside all their differences, worked through the issues that had separated them, became united as they had never been united before, and went forth to Pentecost.
2. The history of the early Christian church starting at Pentecost and continuing for approximately the first three and one-half years under the influence of the early rain was remarkable. What caused such rapid, almost explosive, growth? Why did over 3000 Jews accept Christianity after Peter's sermon at Pentecost when Jesus Himself, the living Son of God, had been among them for three and one-half years with what appeared to be very little success? Would it be fair to say that Jesus had sown the seed; and now, the disciples were reaping the harvest? Did the resurrection of Christ have something to do with this change in results?
3. Jesus had told them to begin their work in Jerusalem and, in time, move to Samaria and to the other parts of the world. (Acts 1:8) Who lived in the ends of the earth?
4. But, not everything was perfect in the early church. Read Acts 1:3,6. Jesus had told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait. What did they do? Apparently, God provided the convincing proof that they needed with sufficient evidence so the disciples would go forth and never turn back. But, they still could not give up—at least initially—their cherished hope that Jesus would somehow become the King of the Jews. Had they, for the first time, actually realized that Jesus was not only a potential king of the Jews, but also the Messiah, and God? They had to rethink everything that had happened to them while they were with Jesus in light of the fact that Jesus was God.
5. What was it that changed the disciples? Why did Jesus impact their lives so incredibly? Where did that courage come from that inspired them to unlock the doors, go forth, and even stand before the Sanhedrin and unflinchingly accuse them of killing the Messiah, the Son of God? (Acts 4:8-13) The Jewish leaders must have been in shock.
6. From history we know that most of the disciples ended up as martyrs, sacrificing their own lives for the truth in which they believed. What would it take for us to die for the truth?
7. What will happen to the church under the influence of the latter rain? Will it be any less remarkable than the former rain? What is holding us back from experiencing that latter rain right now? (2 Peter 3:12) Do we lack faith? Do we clearly understand what faith is? One Sunday school boy is purported to have said, "Faith is believin' what you know ain't so!" Does faith imply believing something that we are not too sure about? Or, as our Bible study guide suggests, is faith "a belief in something that you do not fully understand"? The

disciples had to choose between believing what they and their people had believed for generations and believing what Jesus had taught them for the past three and one-half years . That required a paradigm shift. God cannot and will not bless us with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that we can more powerfully misrepresent Him!

8. Why do you think the sermons and witnessing of the disciples had such an impact? Was it because they correctly represented God? (Matthew 5:16) Or, was it because they had true love for one another? (John 13:35)
9. We live in a world full of people who have almost no biblical orientation. What can we do to reach out to them? If people are satisfied with where they are, it is hard to convince them that they need to change.
10. How should we respond to someone who believes that evolution is a better explanation for the origin of things here on this earth than creation? How do we convince people to believe the biblical stories? Does science really favor evolution? All we can do is to present the best evidence that we have available and let them make up their own minds.
11. Often, the most convincing way to start speaking to someone about the truth is to give a personal testimony. Have we practiced doing that? Do we know our Bibles well enough so that we can explain the basics of our beliefs and provide the evidence? Can we explain how and why God interacted with His people from Genesis through Revelation? This kind of information forms the foundation of true worship.
12. If you review the sermons which are recorded in the New Testament, you will notice a pattern. The apostles usually mentioned some of the prophecies in the Old Testament, showed how they were fulfilled through the life and death of Jesus, gave a personal testimony about how it had impacted their own lives, and then appealed for people to accept and believe in Jesus. Thousands responded.
13. Where did they get the idea that this was a good pattern for sermons? Is it possible that is what Jesus did with the two men traveling on the road to Emmaus? (Luke 24:13-35) Did God choose to disguise Jesus on that occasion? Why? Notice especially their words in Luke 24:21, *GNB*: “We had hoped that he would be the one who was going to set Israel free!” Anything which did not fit with that paradigm, they tended to reject or ignore.
14. The portion of Peter’s sermon which is recorded in Acts 2 is very brief. Try to imagine what it will be like some day to see and hear that entire sermon in 3D, living color! When Stephen Spielberg sees what God will do on that day, he will turn green with envy. In that sermon, Peter covered the essentials of the Christian message. Why did it have such an impact on his listeners? Did the fact that it was heard in so many different languages have an impact? Don’t we actually have more evidence in our hands today than they did? We have not only the history of the Old Testament and the New Testament but also the history of the Christian church from the times of Pentecost to the present including the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
15. Preaching has become almost the essence of Christianity. Some preachers have developed ministries that are very charismatic, and thousands of people flock to their churches. What is their appeal? Are those people following a charismatic person? Or, are they attracted by a powerful Christian message rooted in the Word of God?
16. Think of a sermon or perhaps a series of sermons that you have heard in the past which

had a powerful effect on you or others around you. What was it that made those sermons effective? In order to understand what makes an effective sermon in a given situation, consider some of the following questions:

- 1) Who was the preacher?
 - 2) To whom was the sermon delivered?
 - 3) What was the larger social context in which the sermon was preached?
 - 4) How did the preacher specifically connect with his hearers?
 - 5) What was special or unique about the sermon?
 - 6) What impact did the sermon have on the audience?
 - 7) Are there certain settings in which such a sermon would be particularly effective or powerful?
17. Read Acts 17:15-34 and 18:1-16. Paul was escaping from Berea where he had conducted a successful ministry, and the Bereans had been willing to actually investigate the truth for themselves. In Athens Paul found a very different environment. It was a place where philosophers reigned. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had been leading thinkers in Athens. Paul thought about their situation and preached a powerful sermon appropriate to their context. But, apparently the results were not that impressive. Why do you think that was? Was the Athenian audience a tougher audience? Did they have any background in the Jewish Scriptures? Paul used good oratorical tools and methods to try to reach them with a powerful message. But, not many responded. In Corinth Paul's methods and the response were somewhat different. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)
18. Humans seem to have a need to reach out to something above and beyond themselves. Someone has suggested that there is a "Jesus-shaped hole" in the heart of every human being.
19. As you look at your world, is it apparent that people see a need for Jesus? What kind of biblical background do they have? If their biblical background is minimal, what can we do to help them?
20. Edgar Guest has made a powerful suggestion:
- I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye is a better pupil, more willing than the ear;
Fine counsel is confusing, but example is always clear,
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see a good put in action is what everybody needs. . . Edgar A. Guest
21. What kind of worship do you do outside of the church setting? Do all the people who associate with you during the week recognize that you are a Christian? Do you ever try to hide your Christianity, feeling embarrassed when others speak against it? Or, do you feel a constant sense of awe, reverence, repentance, and love for God and for others?
22. Some people are starting to suggest that sermons are no longer relevant in our fast-paced television-based and Internet-based society. Is that a problem? The response on the part of some has been to turn their church services into a form of entertainment. Is that what

God intended? Jesus told a lot of stories and parables. Was that for entertainment? What should we do to make the Christian lifestyle and message more attractive to those around us? When people look at us, are they attracted to our religion? Or, are they repulsed?

23. Paul went from Athens to Corinth. After a very short time there, he thought that wicked city was not a fertile field for Christianity. But, God appeared to him in a vision and said, "Many in this city are my people." (Acts 18:9-11, *GNB*) Paul ended up staying there for one and one-half years and fathering a very important early Christian church.
24. But, that church was not without its faults. See 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; 8:1; 12:1. The immorality and sensuality that had given Corinth such a reputation also, to some extent, invaded the Christian church. People were also having charismatic experiences and speaking in so-called tongues.
25. In response to these issues, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13. In that context, what was the significance of that chapter? Was love considered to be one of the spiritual gifts? Why is God Himself described as being Love Personified? (1 John 4:8,16) What is implied by the following statements by Ellen White:

No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian. {*Ministry of Healing* 470.1}

A kind, courteous Christian is the most powerful argument that can be produced in favor of Christianity. {*Gospel Workers* 122.1}

The unstudied, unconscious influence of a holy life is the most convincing sermon that can be given in favor of Christianity. Argument, even when unanswerable, may provoke only opposition; but a godly [228] example has a power that it is impossible wholly to resist.—*GW*, p. 59. {*ChS* 227.5}

26. So, what should we learn from the early experiences of the church? Peter's sermon? Paul's sermon? Did the communal living in Jerusalem have an impact on others? What did the Jewish people see in the disciples that attracted them? Was it the love? The truth?
27. We have been promised that a latter rain is coming. The Scriptures suggest that the latter rain will be more powerful and more extensive than was the former rain. Are we prepared for its arrival? Would we be willing to stand up and give a sermon like Peter did if we were called upon by God to do so? If not, when will the time come? (See 2 Peter 3:10-12; *Evangelism* 694-697)

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