

The Biggest Loser

In the TV show *The Biggest Loser*, the biggest loser is of course the winner. It is all about losing fat and building healthy strong bodies. The church is the body of Christ. Sometimes we can become obese and lose our strength. We must get a grip on our health as we mature.

By far the number one questions that have been running through my mind for a pretty good while now as we are celebrating 10 years of making and teaching disciples for the glory of God together in Cape Coral is “Where do we go from here?” “How can we be sure we are in good health?” and “What will it take to get there?” I cannot be content to settle into the status quo of churches that, for the most part, just occupy a comfortable couch in their community. I want to personally make a difference in Cape Coral and I want to lead this church to have a greater impact than it has even had in the past. Where can we go to find solid, tangible answers to those questions? Church business meeting? Hire a church growth guru? Shall we do as King Saul did and hire a fortune teller?

Call me old-fashioned if you like but I believe the principle answer is in the scripture and in corporate worship and prayer. We will discover, at least, the general principles of where we go from here and what it will take to get there from scripture and we will discover the specific details, the 21st century application, through seeking, surrendering to, and obeying God. Then, as we worship and pray, God purposes will be revealed to us.

No time in the nearly 2,000 year history of the church, that I’m aware of, has the church grown more quickly or had a more

significant impact on the world than in the first 70 years or so of her existence. It started in one city with one small group of believers and by the beginning of the 2nd century AD they had literally changed the world. And they did it without cars, planes, or trains, and without sound systems, TV, the internet, radio, cell phones, web-sites, email or Facebook.

What can we learn from the early church that is relevant and applicable to us today? Are there evident principles of what it takes to be a healthy, thriving, reproducing New Testament church? Yes!

Probably just days after the great events of Pentecost where the Holy Spirit came down and began to dwell in the lives and bodies of the true followers of Christ empowering them with authority and boldness and three thousand were added to the church, Peter and John were heading to the temple complex in the middle of the afternoon. They healed a lame man who then joined them, leaping and praising God, as they entered the temple complex. A crowd rushed toward them as they arrived at Solomon's colonnade. Peter preached the gospel to the crowd. The temple guard and Saducees confronted them and arrested them.

Despite the disruption and conflict, the scripture says that the number of believers grew to about 5,000 men plus women and children. That was one small group of 120, prior to Pentecost, had grown to conservatively estimating over 10,000 in a matter of days or at the most weeks.

The Jewish leaders threatened Peter and John and commanded them not to preach in Jesus' name any more but they did not punish them because of the miracle and their popularity with the people.

23 After they were released, they went to their own fellowship and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** When they heard this, they raised their voices to God unanimously and said, "Master, You are the One who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them. **25** You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David Your servant: **Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples**

plot futile things? ²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers assembled together against the Lord and against His Messiah. ²⁷ "For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, assembled together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your message with complete boldness, ³⁰ while You stretch out Your hand for healing, signs, and wonders to be performed through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." 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.

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. 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 4:23-33 (HCSB)**

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I think it is pretty reasonable to conclude that Peter and John did not whine, gripe or complain about being arrested, kept in jail overnight, and threatened. It seems, by the response of the

church, that they celebrated the privilege of suffering for Jesus' sake. Their "report" was a testimony which glorified God and edified the church.

24 When they heard this, they raised their voices to God unanimously and said, "Master, You are the One who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them. **25** You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David Your servant: **Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot futile things? **26** The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers assembled together against the Lord and against His Messiah.** **27** "For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, assembled together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, **28** to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place. **29** And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your message with complete boldness, **30** while You stretch out Your hand for healing, signs, and wonders to be performed through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." **Acts 4:24-30 (HCSB)**

It is hard to picture in my mind how this prayer meeting actually went down. How could they all have prayed "unanimously" such a spontaneous and complex prayer? My guess is that that their hearts and minds were unified as one or a few prayed out loud.

I've got to say, I would have loved to have been at that prayer meeting. They prayed, but it wasn't a "woe is me" or "Lord,

deliver us from all this evil” or “What are we going to do?” Their prayer was totally unselfish. They praised and gave glory to God. Then, they prayed for boldness to speak the message of Christ and power to accomplish the miraculous through the name of Jesus.

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)**

This is a rare but not totally uncommon activity of God when His people come to Him, seeking Him especially in worship and prayer. Mount Sinai shook violently when the people of Israel stood at the foot of the mountain in God’s presence. The earth shook as Saul and Jonathon routed the Philistines in battle. David said in his song of thanksgiving that the earth shook and quaked as he led the Israelites to defeat the Philistine giants. The foundations of the doorways shook when Isaiah entered the temple. The earth shook on Easter Sunday morning. And then, in that assembly of believers in the first of all churches, the place shook!

How awesome, how terrifying that must have been,..... but we must not get so caught up in God’s effort to get their attention that we miss the greater activity of God- His power and presence so filled that place that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God’s message with boldness.

“Filled with the Spirit” Please understand the distinction between the indwelling of the Spirit which began and continues

to take place in the life of every believer at conversion and remains their throughout the believers life and the filling of the Spirit which can vary profoundly based on the believers walk with God. You may not particularly notice but others certainly will. Dr. Sullivan said the most Spirit filled people He knows are the one who share Christ. I don't think being filled with the Spirit is so much something we seek or ask for. It just naturally happens as we live in obedience, deny ourselves take up our cross and closely follow Christ.

The consequence and evidence of God's presence in that prayer meeting was not so much that the place shook or just that they were filled with the Spirit. The ultimate and most powerful evidence of God's presence and filling was the they began to speak God's message with boldness. (This affirms Dr. Sullivan's statement)

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)

Two very **key elements** regarding the health of that church and any church:

One heart and soul- How can even a small group of people much less a whole church have one heart and one soul? They can't! Unless, they are totally surrendered to God. They were obviously, young and spiritually immature as they were, of one heart and one soul. And because of that one powerful factor God moved, physically and spiritually in that place. This is one of the

most important factors in overall church health. Disunity is the cholesterol that causes massive heart attacks in the body of Christ. Unity of heart and soul in and for Christ will shake the church!

Self-denial, complete unselfishness. This self-denial is very closely connected to, and absolutely necessary for, achieving unity. This self-denial certainly included possessions but it wasn't just about them. It was about releasing personal agendas, feelings, and needs to the good of the whole church.

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)**

The consequence of the unity and unselfishness of the first church was “great power” and “grace.” Was that important or no big deal? Do you want a life full of power and grace? Do you want this church to be full of power and grace? Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Jesus.

An interesting and wonderful behavior sprung up in the church as a direct result of the unity and unselfishness that brought on all that power and grace.....

34 For there was not a needy person among them, because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, **35** and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as anyone had a need. **36** Joseph, a Levite and a Cypriot by birth, whom the apostles named

Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement, ³⁷ sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. Acts 4:34-37 (HCSB)

Was this selling of personal property for the sake of the church required? No. Peter clarified that in his confrontation of Anaias and Sapphira....

⁴ Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Acts 5:4 (HCSB)

Compelled by the power and grace that was on them, individuals and families in the church were led by the Spirit and their love for the church to sell things that were not pertinent and relevant to their own survival and needs and made the proceeds available to the apostles to use wherever needed in the ministries and function of the church.

The church today in America, including this church, is not suffering nearly as much from the bad economy as it is suffering from the selfishness and materialism of her members. Our building fund is now operating on a week by week basis. All our reserves are depleted and more than half of you have not even offered to pray about it.

Oh that the power and grace of God might fall on us and literally shake us! But that power and grace will not come until begin to deny ourselves and come together with one heart and one soul. Shake us Lord! Shake us!