

Sermon for Sunday, January 5, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"HOW TO MAKE A CHURCH EXPLODE"

Acts 6:1-8

Text: "And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs  
among the people."

Acts 6:8

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the early Christian Church literally exploded into the world. The crucifixion of Jesus was probably about 30 A.D. Within 15 years of that date there were already little communities of Christians scattered all over the known world. That first little group of believers in Jerusalem numbered about 120 according to Acts 1:15. Yet, as the first century came to a close, the size, the life-style, the power of those who had become Christians was so great that it had become the most serious threat the Roman Empire had ever experienced - so much so that a vicious and ruthless campaign was undertaken to wipe out the Christians.

Let me set the historical sequence for you. After the death of Jesus only eleven disciples are left. Shortly thereafter, those eleven along with others who believe, gather together in an upper room and begin to pray and fast, waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. It is upon these 120 that the Spirit comes on Pentecost and the Church springs into action. On that Pentecost we are told that about 3,000 more became believers. But a persecution breaks out and the disciples are scattered from Jerusalem. Unfortunately for those bent on destroying the little band of believers, it was like beating out a brush fire with a broom - all they did was scatter the sparks and everywhere those persecuted Christians went they started new fires. For example, in the 8th Chapter of Acts we are told in verse one that a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem and the Bible says, "and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria." And then we come to verse four where we read, "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word." So that is how it all began. Those believers went all over the world telling people about Jesus. And everywhere they went, people listened and believed and little communities of believers sprung up. Within the great Roman Empire, the seeds of destruction had already been planted and the doom of that great empire was already sealed. Yet, out of the ashes of its failure and collapse, there was to arise a new empire, the Holy Roman Empire, built on the faith of those believers and on the church they were to establish. As the centuries were to roll on, it was from the church, from the believers, that the impetus would lay. And out of the Christian religion came the foundation of what we know today as Western Civilization.

Now, the question I wish to deal with this morning is this: What were the factors that caused that little band of believers, that little Christian community, to explode with such fantastic force into the world? What caused that little group of unimportant Jews, living in a rural town in a remote province of the Empire, having no social, political, military or intellectual significance in the eyes of men, to become the mighty force which was to spread from that remote area to influence the history of the whole world? What was at work in the lives of these common, peasant folk that was to be the one enduring thing to survive the passage of the centuries and make them the single most important group in the annals of recorded history? Let me suggest to you that the Bible tells us there were three important factors at work in their lives that caused them to be the most decisive group the world has known.

See how it works. The first factor was the character of their lives. As the early Christian community began to develop, it became apparent that the apostles

themselves could not do everything and it became necessary to have a division of duty and responsibility. So, a decision was made to elect seven men to do certain very menial duties such as waiting on tables to feed the people. Yet, in choosing these men for this very humble task, notice the spiritual qualifications required - notice the character of the lives of the men they selected. The apostles said, "pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

Now, if you were making notes on my sermon this morning under point one about the character of the lives of these men you could put three sub-points. First, they were men of good reputation. They were men admired not only by their fellow Christians, but they were people in the community that others recognized as men of good reputation. They were men of integrity whom other people trusted, admired, and respected. Secondly, they were full of the Spirit. That is, when Pentecost came and the Spirit was given as Jesus had promised, they were men of such spiritual character, such spiritual dedication, that their hearts and lives were literally filled with the Spirit. As a matter of fact, that group of 120 people gathered together for prayer and fasting were believers in Jesus but they had not yet been filled with the Spirit. That happened to them later at Pentecost. Also, we are told in the 8th chapter of Acts that the people of Samaria believed Philip when he told them about Jesus, but it was not until later when the apostles came down from Jerusalem and prayed for them and laid hands on them that they were filled with the Spirit. So, these men chosen not only believed in Jesus, their hearts and lives were so surrendered to Jesus that he could literally fill them with his Spirit. And, I might add, the change in their lives was such that other people could see something about them - they could see a quality of life about them, a spiritual quality about them, that others could recognize that they were filled. You see, it wouldn't make sense for the apostles to tell the people to choose seven men full of the Spirit if it could not be recognized that they were indeed filled. So, first they were men of good reputation, second, they were filled with the Spirit, and then thirdly, they were to be men of wisdom. That early church badly needed wise men. It desperately needed men who had God's wisdom so that they could give the sort of leadership to the believers that they needed. The apostles wanted the early church to have the best possible leadership not only spiritually, but intellectually as well.

So, the first thing that caused the church to explode into the world was the character of the lives of its leaders. They were to be men of good repute, full of the Spirit, and of wisdom. Now, the second thing that caused the church to explode was the character of service those seven men gave the church. Let me remind you that they chose seven of their best men - good reputation, men full of the Spirit, and men of great wisdom. Yet, do you realize what they were choosing these men to do? Why, to wait on tables! Isn't that just amazing? Isn't it simply incredible that they took their best men to do a very humble and menial task like waiting tables?

But let me point out something to you. St. Paul, over in the 12th chapter of I Corinthians compares the church to a body. And he says that unless every part functions well, the whole body is sick - if one part hurts, the whole body hurts. As he expressed it, "if one member suffers, all suffer together." He says, "the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable..." Do you begin to see? In our scripture this morning we read that "the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." That means the body - the church - the community of believers - was showing signs of sickness because some weak part was not functioning properly. And when that happens, the whole body gets sick. If a toe hurts, the body limps. Therefore, they

took their very best to do the least, the humblest, the most menial task of the body so that the entire body would be well and healthy and could function effectively.

Let me make some comments about this insight that I feel is most basic. Today we will ordain and install some men as Elders, Trustees, and Deacons. Some of these men are outstanding leaders in the city of St. Louis. They are men of good and great reputation, they are men filled with the Spirit, they are men of wisdom. Yet, do you realize that we will be asking these busy, important men - these men whose time is worth a great deal, whose counsel and advice and guidance would be worth great sums of money - we are asking these men to do some very humble, simple, seemingly almost unimportant things - things like seeing that the lawn is mowed and the building cleaned, like seating little old ladies, like cooking pancakes for a family night supper, or just passing out bulletins.

But - and this is the point - if those things are not done and done well, the organism, the body, the community of believers, the church gets sick. And when the body is sick all the parts hurt and nothing functions properly. And while those things may not seem worthy of our leaders talents and abilities, they are the things that keep the body alive and well, that keep it healthy and vital and growing. And isn't that amazing? We take our best to do the least things and as a result, the whole body grows healthy and strong. And I think that it is an important insight we need to remember about the church that the Bible calls the Body of Christ.

So, the church exploded into the world because of first the character of its leaders and secondly because of the character of the service they gave to the body to keep it healthy and well. Now, thirdly, the church exploded into the world because its leaders not only serve the body to keep it healthy and well, beyond that, on their own, they were out in the world telling about Jesus. For example, one of the seven was a man named Stephen. In verse eight of our scripture this morning - the passage that I chose as our text, we are told that Stephen, "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." And as Don told us last Sunday, it was the witness of Stephen that in all likelihood was the background experience that led to the conversion of Paul. Or look again at Philip. His job in the church was to wait on tables. But out there in the world he was a real fired-up man of God. It was Philip who preached to Samaria and led to its conversion. It was Philip who converted the Ethiopian Eunuch. And over in the 21st chapter of Acts, we find him at Caesarea, now known as Philip the Evangelist, and Paul - on his last journey to Jerusalem - spends the night with him on the way.

Yes, the church needs men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom; yes, the church needs its best, most capable, most spiritual men to do even the humble things to keep the body - the church - healthy and well, but most of all it needs men like that who are out in the world witnessing to Jesus and sharing the good news with a lost world that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself; that God so loved the world he gave his only son.

Now, when you have men with those three characteristics - the character of their spiritual life, the character of their service, the character of their ministry to the world, then the church will literally explode into the world. In our scripture this morning, in verse seven, we read, "And the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." Over in chapter two of Acts, the Bible says of those early Christians, "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by

day those who were being saved." took their very best to do the least, the best last, the best first. Yes, the early church literally exploded into the world. You know, I would like to see this church blow up for Jesus and just explode all over this city. When we have people and when we have leaders who are first, men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, who secondly serve the church in humble ways that the whole body might be well and strong, and who thirdly are out in the world witnessing for Jesus, then - and only then - will we have such an explosion. May God hasten the day when this church just blows up and explodes all over St. Louis.

But - and this is the point - if those things are not done and done well, the organism, the body, the community of believers, the church gets sick. And when the body is sick all the parts hurt and nothing functions properly. And while those things may not seem worthy of our leaders talents and abilities, they are the things that keep the body alive and well, that keep it healthy and vital and growing. And isn't that amazing? He took our best to do the least things and as a result, the whole body grows healthy and strong. And I think that it is an important insight we need to remember about the church that the Bible calls the Body of Christ.

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