

## **Has anyone noticed how crazy the world seems right now?**

Seriously, it seems the earth is literally cracking up – volcanos, earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, floods, droughts – Polar ice caps appear to be melting at an alarming rate, raising water levels all over the globe. Politics has become racist, fake news is covered as truth, trust in journalists is at an all-time low. Morals seem to be no longer valued as something good. The frightening news of a new Ebola outbreak!

Scandals are erupting everywhere. Poverty on our doorsteps challenge us. Dysfunction, brokenness, abuse, mental and physical. It seems everywhere you look you see awful situations that people are forced to live in. Violence is ubiquitous – all most everywhere you look there's another shooting, knife attack, acid being thrown on someone and terror attacks just make us all a bit more vigilant. Gangs are growing in their influence, schools unsafe because of a growing drug problem and bullying at an all-time high.

Injustice abounds. Human trafficking at all-time highs, men and women being sold as slaves across the world. In April this year 5 Norfolk kids were rescued from human trafficking. This is touching us even here in our fine city of Norwich.

The church seems to be losing its influence in the world. We're like "here" but struggle to really stand out. How on earth can the church make an impact in such a dark world? How can the church shine in such a toxic culture? How can we as Christians influence our world when the problems are so huge, earth shattering and worldwide?

What on earth was the secret of the early church? Let's be honest here they didn't have beautiful buildings like ours, they had no sound systems, lights or haze machines. They didn't have electric guitars or drums. They didn't have a social media campaign. There was no Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. No billboard advertising campaigns, no TV, Radio or Internet – they didn't even have mobile phones!! How did they turn the world upside down?

In the first century of the early church no one had heard of Jesus Christ and yet the church literally exploded in size and influence. Christians were the stand out people of the day! They didn't have easy access to the Bible as we do yet the message of Jesus turned the world upside down. The reality was they became the Bible of the day!

The first century world was in profound spiritual darkness and drowning in the ocean of hundreds of religions with a thousand personal variations and, not to forget, the ubiquitous supreme worship of an Emperor who thought he was a god. Yet the church grew daily and by thousands!

The 1st Century world displayed immorality that would cause even the most brazen amongst us to blush. Perversion and immorality was insidious, pervasive, and abusive and it permeated the culture of the day. Yet the early church built a church known for its holiness and good works.

Christianity exploded to the four corners of the Earth in less than a hundred years. The church continued to grow even as the Roman government sought to exterminate them. The church grew even in the midst of some of the most brutal persecution, which included being thrown to wild animals in the Colosseum, the Christians grew in number.

**Throughout the Book of Acts we read accounts of the church like this one. Acts 2: 40 – 47,** "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added

to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

This is Peter speaking on the day of Pentecost and he said, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." He knew, they knew and it was no secret the world's culture was toxic. It was no secret the world was dark and dirty. Society was corrupt and perverse. The answer was to accept the message of Jesus, be baptised and get planted in the church.

The people of Peter's day did exactly that! They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, breaking bread and to prayer! They were filled with awe at the power of God in signs and wonders, the believers were together and had everything in common, some sold properties and possessions to give to those in need. They met together regularly in large crowds and in people's homes, they worshiped together and The Lord added to their number daily!!

What was it? How did this happen? What was their secret? Why did the early church grow so fast? I think there's a lot for us to learn, a lot for us to apply to our own lives! **3 Things I see – forgive me if they appear very simple:**

**1. They really really really believed in Jesus** – they had experienced His salvation! They had been transformed by Him and His teachings. Many of them had witnessed Jesus' resurrection and saw Him and heard Him speak after He was dead. We're taking eye witnesses. Nothing lukewarm here!

**1 John 1:1** says this, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

But we're not just talking about eye witnesses only – we're talking about people, thousands of them, who had had a life changing experience with the living Christ as they heard the message preached. They had heard the message of salvation, in turn they had believed on Him and had had a life changing experience with Jesus. These people really believed! They could not deny that Jesus had forgiven them, transformed them and they conducted a dynamic relationship with this risen Jesus.

**2. They were filled with the Holy Spirit:** These people had a power emanating from them. For them God had added His super to their natural, He had added His extra to their ordinary! These people were filled with the Holy Spirit and moved with great power in the world around them. With these people the word spread – they pray and miracles happen!

These people were passionate, enthusiastic, bold, on fire, white hot in their faith. Not only did they really believe but they took their faith practically and put it into overalls and things happen. They were willing to get their hands dirty. This passion led them to help the poor, the sick, the broken and those in great need. They were fearless. Their love for Jesus took them to places no sane person would go – but they went anyway!

These people passionately believed in the power of prayer, they met together sometimes daily! They were devoted to the teachings of the church leaders. They were people who knew how to worship

and who need very little encouragement to do so – they were passionate about Jesus and wanted to live their lives devoted to Him.

They were standouts their lives ran counter to the culture of the day – in fact they were radicals and revolutionaries who many rumoured were turning the world upside down.

They lived out the words of Jesus from **Acts 1: 8**, “You will **receive power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

**3. These people were radically committed to their Jesus mission** even to the point of dying for it. They shared their story throughout Jerusalem and then because of great persecution in the city they moved out to Samaria. Controversy ensued when they began to share the message of Jesus with those who didn’t have Jewish roots. They spoke to Gentiles and Pagans and were delighted to see them responding to the message of Jesus! They were not embarrassed or ashamed of the message they carried.

Each of the disciples within 40 years had gone to the 4 corners of the earth to share the message of Christ and they established 100’s of church and saw thousands coming to Jesus. Each of the disciples, save one, died for their faith as martyrs. Within 300 years Christianity turned from being a back water Jewish cult to becoming the most powerful force in the Roman Empire! Under the emperor Constantine Christianity became the empires faith!

These people were not ashamed or embarrassed of their testimony of Jesus – even in the midst of great persecution. They were not embarrassed or reluctant in sharing this life changing message of Jesus. They were bold, empowered by God’s Spirit and they were not afraid!

**Romans 1: 16 – 17** says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

**4. They were people who gave:** Not only were they willing to give their lives for their mission they were willing to finance it. They were people who put their resources at God’s command. Where there was need they stepped up – they were the ones who stood out as being generous and were willing to be God’s economic engine in the gatherings by tithing, bringing offerings and just being generous with what they had.

The scripture in **Acts 2:44 – 45** says, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”

They were willing to meet the needs of the church. No one cajoled them, sweet-talked them or twisted their arms they were willing to give and do so with a cheerful disposition. They knew and understood the Biblical principle of giving – they understood generosity. They would have been schooled in the principles of giving they would have heard the words of Paul’s teaching and given a hearty amen! Many were from a Jewish background and were solidly schooled in the principle of tithing.

**Paul’s instruction is fascinating in 2 Corinthians 9:6–8** “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”

They took their new life and literally gave it away to others freely. They lived their faith. They were standouts in the dark world they lived in. They loved their way into the lives of people in their world. It was their love that distinguished them other religions of the day! They lived out the words of Jesus and it made them standouts in their culture.

They became standouts when they ran to the sick. They became standouts when they financed the programs that helped the needy. They became standouts when they supported their leaders with wages. They became standouts when they served whole heartedly to see people coming into this relationship with Jesus that had transformed their lives. Their lives were stand out lives.

**Brennan Manning**, author wrote, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world finds unbelievable.”

But the early church stood out from the crowd because they truly lived what they believed. Imagine if we today lived with such a powerful belief.

They not only experienced the Baptism of the Holy Spirit but they saw thousands others have that same life changing experience with Jesus too. Imagine if we were to act like this as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians.

It was a passionate white hot faith that quickened their lives. It was an experience based upon the life of Jesus. There was a white hot passion. Their lives demonstrated their belief. They were different kinds of people because of their belief. Imagine if we today expressed this kind of white hot passion.

Now this was not some new religion as their detractors had suggested, no this was a living active relationship with a person – a relationship with Jesus who they had known and trusted in. It was not a religious belief system, it wasn't a systematic theology, and it was a belief in a person they had experienced in real life. Their experience was not a creed or part of a liturgy but a deep seated belief in Jesus that radiated a love that actually attracted people and didn't repel them.

Imagine if we were to live like this. Imagine the impact of our church if we decided to become such standout believers and followers of Jesus.

The disciples truly believed in their mission to go into all the earth and tell others about what they had experienced. They believed so fully they were willing to die for what they believed. Not fanatics but true believers. They believe so passionately that they were willing to not only die for their faith but to actually really live for their faith. Imagine a church like that!