

Introduction

- The church is dying on its feet!
- Rate of decline is such that there will be no church in 2050!
- I was at the General Assembly last May, and yet again these were the prophecies of doom being bandied about.
- We are **concerned** by the headlines, but then let them **wash over** us
- Decline, especially of the overall membership, is something I've grown up with
 - its the only reality I have ever known.
 - worse, its something I've been conditioned into accepting as reality.
- The Church of Scotland as a denomination has been declining steadily since the early 1960's:
 - 1.3 million in 1960 (25% population)
 - just under 700K in 1996 (less than 14% population)
 - now 590K, 11.5% of population
- Nationally CofS has halved in size in less than 35 years!

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- in 1960 the three congregations that were predecessors to DSA had a combined membership of over **3300**;
- the membership is now a little under **700**;
- that's not much over **one fifth** of the membership!

- The figures don't tell the whole story! Attendances haven't gone down the in same way, which suggests those listed as being on the roll then didn't have the same level of commitment as those on the roll now do.
- **Nevertheless, have we become accustomed to accepting this as the norm?**
- Huge percentage decreases in membership - if we were a business, with assets depreciating this fast, we'd have long since done something about it!
 - and our forward planning often assumes this reality will persist - Presbytery plan documents!
 - sometimes we seem hardly concerned at all that we are not growing, never mind that we are not impacting in any significant way our culture & society!
 - that we are apparently not fulfilling Jesus' command to **"go and make disciples of all nations"**.

- All this contrasts sharply with situation in Antioch that we read of earlier.
- **What are the differences? What lessons can we learn?**

Some Background

- Remember the background: **growing church in Jerusalem**:
 - antagonism and persecution by the Jewish authorities - led to Stephen's death
 - scattering of the people
 - particularly Greek speaking Jewish Christians, in group associated with Stephen
 - so scattered beyond borders of Palestine, up Eastern Med coast, Cyprus, Lebanon, and on to...
 - **Antioch** 3rd city of the Empire (Rome, Alexandria); large, cosmopolitan, bustling!

- Once those scattered Christians arrived, they started to tell people about Jesus:
 - since they were Jews, they started with those they naturally had most in common with, who would understand how Jesus was the fulfilment of the OT promises.
- But these were Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, whose cultural outlook was already more cosmopolitan than their Hebraic, Jerusalem counterparts.
- And so - **possibly having heard of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the leadership in Jerusalem's response to it** - fairly natural that they started telling others beyond the Jewish community:
 - probably at this stage **"God-fearers"**, Gentiles who were attracted by Jewish monotheism, but who had not fully signed up - had not been circumcised!
- Starting to break out from Judaism into the wider community...

- taking the risk of speaking to someone whose way of looking at the world was completely different from their own, who wasn't "like us"
- **As they spoke of Jesus to these non-Jews, "a great number of people believed"**
 - they believed, the church grew dramatically, they were taught and built up by first Barnabas, later joined by Paul/Saul, and their growth in the faith was demonstrated practically, concretely as they sent money for the poor of the church in Jerusalem.

Why did all this happen?

- What characterised their activity, their reaching out with the gospel, that we may learn from as we seek also to speak of Jesus to a generation that does not know him?
- Acts 11:21 acts as a kind of summary, and focuses our attention onto two dimensions of what happened in Antioch:

1. The Lord's hand was with them...

- (Acts 11:21) *"The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*
- Notice first part of that verse - **the Lord's power/hand was with them.**
- Not their own skill or ability or clarity or anything that ultimately made the difference - it was God's hand at work.
- They were there, they did actually speak of Jesus - they did not abrogate their responsibility to speak of and serve the living Lord - but as they did so, it was Jesus himself who acted to draw men and women to himself.

- Important principle for us to apply - sometimes we are in danger of trying to organise our outreach in our way - we plan, we prepare, we sometimes even advertise, we get the big name speaker along, we do whatever - and sometimes forget its God's work.
 - that's not to say those things are wrong!!
- But always concern to seek God's leading, direction, prompting, enabling.
 - that'll mean prayer, persistent, patient prayer - seeking that direction, calling for that enabling.

- It was precisely because it was God's work that when Barnabas arrived (**some kind of early Christian quality control inspector!!**) he was glad to see God at work and **"encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts"** (v.23).
- And because it is the Lord's work we can take on things that seem impossible:
 - the church doesn't have a high public profile, spiritual things are not commonly talked about, most of us feel awkward speaking about our faith, and I doubt many of you would look at many of those you come into regular contact with a say **"I could see them becoming a Christian"**
 - **we don't have a lot going for us!**
 - nor did these Greek speaking Christians: asylum seekers, from a persecuted minority, no security of home or job... and to speak to Gentiles, those beyond the religious pale!
 - but **"The Lord's hand was with them"!!**

- That's the first principle - its the Lord's work, his hand moving & acting.

2. ...and turned to the Lord

- (Acts 11:21) *"The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*
- Second principle is contained in second half of v.21.
- It highlights the **focus** of their evangelism, the object of their attention.
 - despite introduction, our focus should not be on numbers, on the statistics;
 - rather, like these first Christians, our **focus should be on Jesus Christ.**
- These people are not described as turning to **"the Way"**, as Christianity was most widely known in this period, or of becoming disciples of the believers who'd come

- up from Jerusalem and told them this great good news.
- No - they are described as "turning to the Lord":
 - he (Jesus Christ) is the one to whom their loyalty is turned, the one on whom their attention is focused, the one of whom they speak.
- In vs.24 the growth in the church ("brought to the Lord") is literally "added to the Lord" - they aren't added to the church, to the fellowship, but to the Lord.
 - (Church is after all his body!)
- Or again, in vs.26, first called Christians - Greek form of Latin "Christianos", whose ending implies "belonging to" Christ - Christ's yins in Scots!
- Focus & attention on Jesus Christ was such that outsiders called them that!

- That's not easy!! - I often find it hard enough in a "professional" setting, when the minister is meant to talk about Jesus!
 - maybe help? why not try making a point of each day speaking to someone you know is a Christian of something concerning Jesus - relatively safe environment of fellow Christian - maybe even make a mutual pact to speak to each other of Jesus - of what he is like, of what he would have you do in a particular situation, of what a passage of Scripture about him might mean... whatever!
 - then, in time, it will seem less strange and unusual to speak to those who are not Christians of Jesus too.
- Session at Calder - Contagious Churches course - context/opportunity to talk about our faith - like folk came alive!!

- Always easier to introduce someone you know well!
 - so we'd better spend time with Jesus!
 - be doing the things he'd love to find us doing!

- (Acts 11:21) *"The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*

Conclusion

- These two things aren't the be-all and end-all of Christian witness - but they are important principles:
 - that we recognise that it is God's work we are involved in, and so seek his leading and direction at all times, his way of doing things, his prompting - and have the courage and boldness to risk telling, since he is with us!!;
 - and that the focus should be on Jesus Christ - on bringing, or adding people to him, and that that happens when we introduce them to him.

- Stand as priorities that the early church adopted throughout the chapters we've been studying.
 - they didn't just have a dependence on the Lord and a focus on Jesus for a special mission, for the holiday club, or whatever
 - it was their regular priority - maybe not easy to sustain, but it was their priority

- So, be there to be used by God - be those who live for Christ - who serve others in his name, who speak readily of him.
- Look for God's hand to work - prayer.
- And most of all, point to Jesus, your Lord, the one you know and serve and love and are getting to know better and better day by day - introduce people to Jesus!