

11/29/15

Acts 9:26-31

The Church – Strong and Healthy

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

(Pastor Prays)

The man named Saul was a terrorist, fueled by hatred and ambition, that is, until Jesus Christ confronted him and converted him, reminding us that no person is beyond the long arm of grace. Saul is now a Christian zealot. In our passage, he has barely escaped being killed in Damascus, so he heads to Jerusalem to be with the Apostles and other scattered believers. When he gets there, he has a hard time getting into the church, a hard time feeling like he is a part of it. You can't completely blame the church. Saul has a terrible reputation and he really doesn't fit in the Apostle "box" so to speak, but he is a sinner saved by grace through faith in Christ. He's even undergone Believer's Baptism and yet he can't quite break into the life of the church. I mean everybody is glad he's now a believer, but not so excited about him being on the inside. That is, until one brave soul -- Barnabas -- reaches out to him and takes what he believes and puts it into action.

Today I think we can look at Saul and learn something, then look at Barnabas and learn something, and then look at the church and learn something. The message is for potential members and for new members and for veteran members alike as we seek to follow Jesus and build the body of Christ. The truth is...

In Christ, WE are a Family and Family Takes Work

The Church Grows Through Personal Effort

I first want to call your attention to Saul. He's the new guy in town. He shows up at church and the church does not act like they are happy to see him. They aren't asking him to fill out a visitor card or trying to get an email address. They don't know what to do with him.

Notice what Luke tells us in v. 26: *And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.*

They were afraid of him. They didn't understand what he had been through and certainly didn't believe he was a Christian. But let's not look at the church and its obvious deficiencies. Let's look at Saul.

The text tells us in v. 26 that when he came to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. Stop there. That's written in the imperfect tense. It conveys this continuous action. It's not a one-time effort; he keeps trying. Once he was converted, he put his pride aside and pretty much made it his business to be in the group. He didn't visit Sunday School one time and not go back because no one spoke to him or didn't call him. Look, the church was wrestling with its own twisted prejudices.

They would get there, but Saul was going to have to make a personal effort and so will you. A cultivated passivity will paralyze Christian relationships in the church and there is far too much at stake. Learn from Saul and graciously press the issue. In Christ we are family, and family takes work. The church grows through personal effort.

The Church Grows Through Real Investment

We've looked at Saul so let's drop down to v. 27 and take a quick look at a man named Barnabas. V. 27: *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.*

I thank the Lord for Barnabas. Notice the words to describe what Barnabas (an insider) did with Saul (an outsider). Barnabas took him and brought him and declared to the insiders "This man is one of us." Do you see what Barnabas did? He made this new convert, this new church member, his ministry. He attached himself to Saul. He became his friend and his advocate. Barnabas was an insider and he took Saul with him into the fellowship and introduced him to everybody and vouched for him. This is a real investment and this is what we do with and for one another.

By God's grace, you ought to crucify your selfishness or laziness or prejudice or whatever it is that's keeping you from reaching out to someone new and pulling them in. Listen, Brother or Sister, our very survival depends on us getting over our racial prejudices and cultural barriers for the sake of Christ and the health of this church. We must fight against focusing inward and grouping up with people "just like you." We must focus outward and build the body through real investment.

How do you do that? Here are a couple of suggestions:

1. Share a meal with someone at Hickory Grove – someone with a different skin color or in a different age bracket.

2. Develop an accountability group. Follow the church reading plan to read through the Bible in 2016.
3. Sit somewhere else in church and meet 5 to 6 people and get their contact information

In Christ we are a family and family takes work. Personal Effort and Real Investment...

The Church Grows Through Gospel Focus

To see this you have to read v. 27 & 28 together: *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.*

Barnabas tells the church how Saul preached boldly in the name of Jesus and v. 28 indicates they worked through whatever prejudices they had and he was boldly preaching Christ. He's now a part of the church – Saul, that is. He's not the Lone Ranger. He had friends in Damascus and now a family in Jerusalem. In v. 28, the Gospel goes forward and in v. 29, By God's grace, Saul effectively defends the faith for a second time in his young Christian life; he has to leave town because of his Gospel efforts.

It's worth noting that in v. 26 the church wouldn't get close to him but by v. 30, he had brothers. In fact, because of this union of Saul and the early disciples, because they were able to crucify their prejudices and cultural upbringing, Saul became the greatest missionary the New Testament church ever knew. Saul succeeded largely because the church had a Gospel focus. The church – we talked about Barnabas but in v. 31, Luke gives us a quick summary statement about the church. I think it is worth looking at. In Christ we are a family and family takes work. The church grows through personal effort. The church grows through Gospel focus.

The Church Grows Through True Obedience

The truth is that v. 31 could be a sermon by itself and probably should be because Luke gives us an update before he moves on to another topic. Let's look at it.

1. Obey Jesus's command for Acts 1:8 – my witnesses.

2. They had peace – a break before new persecutions. The Lord knows we are dust. He gives us breaks here and there as we struggle. V. 31, The church was being built up. It was consolidating its position, theologically strong and etching out an identity that's not defined by emotions, trends or an entertainment valve. The church was building up an identity that is inextricably bound to the Cross of Christ. It's the Cross that identifies us, and each person here is eternally defined by how we view the cross and, more specifically, what Jesus accomplished at the cross.

That's part of what Luke means when he says in v. 31, "the church was walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit." We must see the two together. The fear of the Lord. We understand God as a Righteous Judge who is also loving and kind. He will bring eternal punishment on those that reject the work of Christ on the Cross, but once your life is defined by Christ, the *fear* of God is not the *dread* of God. It is the daily acknowledgement that this is my Father's world and I will live under his Lordship, and the fear of God colors my every action and attitude and, according to v. 31, when Christ is Lord, that fear of God is coupled with the comfort of the Holy Spirit, the encouraging, enabling presence of the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, we are not saved.

God the Father plans Salvation, God the Son purchases sinner to be saved, God the Spirit empowers sinners to believe and it's the Spirit that gives life. When we pray for lost people, we pray believing that God the Holy Spirit can awaken people to love Christ and become a part of the family of God. Because in Christ, we are family, purchased by the Cross of Christ, adopted and chosen by His grace and sealed by his Spirit.

Hebrews 3:7-8, says: *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,*

Come give your life to Christ and be a part of the family of God.

(Pastor Prays)