

So much we could say from this passage. So much going on, but I'm going to take my start-point from the line in v.32 – “the full number”. The church was growing explosively. Like the Big Bang, with mind-bending figures, this growth was like nothing else before or since. It was a unique period. Nonetheless, what might we learn from this about what makes churches grow? Because we want to grow.

In vv.23-31, we find the word “Boldness” comes twice. You'll perhaps remember from last week that God has healed a lame man through Peter and John. In chapter 4, they are arrested, and then released, because the authorities didn't really know what to do. V.23, they go back to their friends, and all the Jesus-followers turn to prayer. They pray for grace to speak with boldness (29), and the result of their prayers is that they are filled with the Spirit and do indeed speak the word of God with boldness (31). Boldness is a theme – How? Why?

Well, the content of their prayer is a clue. V.24, they are praying to the “Sovereign Lord”. The original word in Greek is “Despotes”, from which the word “despot” and “despoot” both come. Not a “nice” word, but a word of absolute authority.

And who is this absolute Lord? V.24 “you made” everything. V.25 “you said/spoke” by the Spirit. V.27 “you anointed” your servant Jesus. V.28 – you predestined everything. That's his absolute power – you made, you spoke, you anointed, you directed.

Or look at the word “servant” here. In v.27, it's the word “παιδα” for Jesus – it's a word meaning a boy or girl in a family, one not yet of maturity, but still obliged to serve the family. It's a gentle word. But, in v.29, “grant to your servants” is the much more dramatic word “δουλος”, slave or servant absolutely bound to obey a master.

And that's just the words. Consider the argument of the prayer. You made, you spoke, you anointed, you directed. And you predicted that the Gentiles and the foreign rulers would plot and rage (which is exactly what happened – 27), but you are the sovereign one over all, so give the words, and grant the wonders, and do it through your servant Jesus. The whole emphasis of this prayer is not “oh no, we're in a bit of a mess”; the whole emphasis in response to the threats is “You, Lord, are completely sovereign and we are completely your servants”. And to make everything clear, the place they are praying is shaken and all are filled with the Spirit – again.

They are bold because they know there is a contrast between the kings of the earth, and the king who made the earth, whom they serve.

Now, hold that thought while we move on.

In v.32, we catch the sense of astonishment here. There is a kind of voluntary communism going on, and it's driven by a unity of “one heart and soul” – it's beautiful, and amazing. V.33 - the apostles gave their testimony with “great power” and “great grace” was upon the community. The testimony is not about God in creation, neither is it about “Jesus my friend”; the testimony is what we know about if we were attending to chapter 3 – the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Notice that. Not “servant” here. Luke is careful to make clear that Jesus is called “lord”. And the effect of this great power and great grace is that they enter into this sharing of goods. Now I won't say too much about this, because much of it will come up next week. Just a contrast. Barnabas is set before us as a good example of sharing, just as there will be others set before us next week as a terrible example.

But the tone of the section is clearly one of astonishment – there was not a needy person among them. The power of the Lord Jesus produces a contrast between the unity of the church, and the greed of the world.

Now – let me repeat. This is like the Big Bang. We don't complain that the universe is no longer expanding at the rate of the first nano-second, and we shouldn't complain that we don't have everything here and now that they had. The church is needing to explode out of its home setting, on its way to moving across the known world. This is unique.

But, but, but. There are things we can notice for now.

The church grows, to the extent that it is different from the world around. The power of God is not in any way like the power of the kings of the earth. The unity of the church is not in any way like the greed of the world.

Now this is not always what we expect. In any big mainstream church – the PKN, the Anglican Church – there will always be those who say, "Get your message across by being as like the world as possible, but with a bit of a twist". Not according to Acts. Not according to Scripture. The church is effective to the extent that it is different.

Timothy Keller, the American pastor came out with something good on this a while back. He analysed what made the early church different from the world around it, and he came up with these five features. The church was:

- Multi-racial and multi-ethnic - in contrast to the tribes of the old order. This church is still the church of Acts 2 – Elamites, Parthians etc.
- Committed to caring for the poor and marginalized - - - re. the man
- Non-retaliatory, marked by a commitment to forgiveness - - - NOT ag. Herod/P/Gent
- Strongly and practically against abortion and infanticide (not in this text)
- Revolutionary regarding the ethics of sex.

Now – it might seem that the ethics of sex have no part to play here. But that would be wrong. It's only our world that thinks this is about romance. The ancient world had very strict rules of inheritance. Sex was for passing on family ties and passing on property. Not by rule, but, once people are selling houses and lands, how did their kids feel? This breaks completely with the practice of sex as passing on property.

But what Keller goes on to say is most interesting of all. If you look at that list, and map it onto our current world, then it is not possible to map political positions onto the church. Those on the left are going to love multiracialism and caring for the poor, but be much less likely to be anti-abortion and pro-faithfulness in sex. Those on the right are going to love the abortion and sex-ethics aspects, and be less keen on multi-racialism and social caring. But the early church covered all of these bases. And was content not to fit.

The point remains the same; we are to be those who don't fit, who stand out, who are different. That's not always easy in a Western society, where so much of the heritage is already Christian in origin. It's easier to stand against a government if it's tyrannical than if it's suggesting that we might protect the vulnerable! But the same government that wants us to keep social distance also now wants to enable the killing of young children by euthanasia. There's something there in which we can look different.

The danger is that we look at these passages and despair that "we won't ever have that boldness; we won't ever be that generous". I don't know. But there will be challenges just as big in every generation – just don't align with the world's parties, but remain the church of the Sovereign Lord, who raised the Lord Jesus. Remain his first. Go find the ways for you to be different in this generation.