

Episode: Other Letters Series No. 01

Narrator: Barnabas

Primary Scriptures: 2 Timothy 1:15-18, 4:9-22; Hebrews 1

Story Summary: Gaining a realistic view of the growth of the early Church

Location: Roman Empire

Time: AD 30 Jesus crucified and resurrected; Pentecost; Holy Spirit arrives
AD 48 Paul's "famine visit" to Jerusalem; First Missionary Journey starts
AD 50 Council at Jerusalem; Start of Second Missionary Journey.
AD 53 Start of Third Missionary Journey
AD 67/68 Paul probably killed in Rome

Suggested Memory Scriptures: 2 Timothy 4:2, 4:10

Parts of this video are extremely satirical in order to make a point. It is easy to believe the Church grew at a smooth, rapid pace, resulting in millions and millions of Christians by the end of New Testament times. Acts 2:41 says 3,000 were baptized on the first day, and Acts 2:47 says the Lord added people daily to the early church. At some point later (we do not know whether it was weeks, months, or longer), the number of Christian men was about five thousand, so the total number of Christians was much larger.

The book of *Acts* is full of stories of the successful establishment of churches and conversions of people. It is natural to blithely assume a huge growth rate during the Church's early years, but that may not be true. How many churches are mentioned in the New Testament? Can you name thirty? How many Christians were in each church? Thirty? One hundred?

Upon reflection, you might conclude there were maybe a few tens of thousands of Christians when Paul finished his ministry. If that's the case, then why weren't there more?

The Parable of the Sower has always described reality. When times get hard, people walk away from Jesus. When times are affluent, people become distracted from Jesus. When people get bored, they find something more entertaining than Jesus. When people are born into cultures without Christianity, they are not easily swayed from their early beliefs. Other people are easily swayed by false teachers. The exit doors of churches are as large as the entrances, and just as busy.

Nonetheless, God had a different vision for the early Church than a quick demise. The early apostles and leaders established a very firm base of true believers who were intent on making more true believers. History shows that, by the early 300s, a great number of the citizens of the Roman Empire were Christians.

That is good news for modern Christians. If we make disciples who make disciples who make disciples, Christianity will spread across the world once again.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you perceive the Church grew in its first fifty years? What factors helped it grow? What factors worked against it?
 2. Christianity seems to be in retreat in North America. Why do you think that is? Can that trend be reversed?
 3. According to statistics, the larger, traditional denominations in America are declining in attendance, while community and evangelical churches are growing. Why is that?
 4. According to polls, increasingly more Americans believe it is not important to attend church. Do you and your friends feel the same way? Why?
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1. The Church grew quickly in Jerusalem early on, but that church body declined and was essentially eliminated in 70 AD by the Romans. Churches grew in Antioch, Rome, Ephesus, and other population centers throughout the Roman Empire. The rapid growth of the Church began after New Testament writings began spreading. Other helpful factors were the Roman highways, the common Greek language, and the Pax Romana. Persecution both inhibited the growth of the church and helped it spread. Lack of commitment and false teachings were big inhibitors.

Application Questions:

1. How can you help your church make more dedicated disciples? How can you be more dedicated yourself?
2. What questions would you ask someone to see if they are growing as a disciple?
3. How important is it to attend church regularly? Are you penalizing other people at your church when you do not attend?
4. How do you know if you are a dedicated Christian or if you are just going through the motions of being one?
5. Should a focus on growth be an important part of a church's mission? If so, why? If not, what should?

Application Questions for Teens:

1. Do you think it is more important to convert people to Christianity or to work with them to be highly dedicated to Jesus? How does your theology impact your answer?
2. How can you tell if someone is a dedicated Christian? Is that even up to you to decide?
3. What is one thing you could do to help the Kingdom of God grow?
4. Name some things to do that are more important than going to church.
5. Should a focus on growth be an important part of a church's mission? If so, why? If not, what should?