

## Introduction:

Imagine, for a moment, the average American conservative congregation. We will call it the Anytown church. It is imaginary in that the particular group does not exist. However, you will find it represents many churches you have known. This congregation began 60 to 70 years ago with a handful of Christians who decided to start a new work in Anytown, USA. They began by meeting in a storefront. During the 50s and 60s, they had high growth rate. In the 60s, they regrettably went through a split over the issues surrounding institutionalism. Following that dark period, they grew again. Some of the members decided to start another congregation across town in the 70s. In the 80s, they plateaued at around 100 and have bounced along for 20 years between 75 and 125 members. In 2015, there are a few new converts. However, most of the congregation's members have either been "brought up in the church" or were converted back in the growth spurts of the 50s, 60s and 70s. A handful of the membership is from other parts of the country or from other churches in town. They appointed four elders in the 1980s, but two of them have since died and one of them moved, leaving only one man the congregation considers qualified. Therefore, they don't have any elders. They have a preacher that has been working with them for two years.

The Anytown Church has taken a very close look at the past 20 stagnant years. They have baptized a few people along the way, but generally lost just as many people as they baptized either to the world or to other congregations. Having decided to do something to produce growth, spiritually, and numerically, the Anytown church started examining the Jerusalem church. They have seen keys in Jerusalem's success such as devotion to God, unity, aggressive evangelism, leadership development, close relationships with one another, and individual spiritual development. The Anytown church has realized they need to foster these keys in their congregation to have the success the Jerusalem church had. However, the Anytown church has also recognized the early Christians in Jerusalem had some natural advantages that more readily and easily produced these keys to success. The advantage was not the apostles or the miracles. The Anytown church understands that we have everything the Holy Spirit provided through the miracles and the apostles in the Bible. Jerusalem's advantages were different. So, the Anytown Church began to draw up a list of advantages that the Jerusalem Christians had, making growth easier to attain. They came up with three points of contrast.

Before looking at these points of contrast, I want to explain why I have set this lesson up in this manner. The church meeting on Livingston Avenue is not the Anytown church. However, it is not yet the Jerusalem church either. We are actually somewhere between these two very different congregations. However, we have to choose which of these congregations we want to be. We are either going to progress in maturity, becoming more and more like Jerusalem, or we will become satisfied where we are, becoming more like the Anytown church. To make this choice we have to see the advantages they had and work to purposefully accomplish what happened naturally for them.

## Discussion:

- I. The Jerusalem church had the widespread enthusiasm of something new.
  - A. In the Anytown Church, most of the members were either "brought up in the church" or converted years ago. The basic messages of the Bible are old hat to them. In fact, the great majority of them have heard the Bible stories since they were children. They know how the stories end, and very few lessons surprise them. They can often tell what the preacher is going to say next because they have heard sermons on the particular passage he is discussing over and over again. Every once in a while, a preacher or Bible class teacher will make a point that causes one of the "Aha!" moments and stirs the embers a little bit. But most of the time the church simply goes through its routine. They assemble twice on Sunday. They have Bible classes on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. They have fifth Sunday singings, two Gospel meetings a year, and a VBS every summer. The church does what it does because this is what it has always done. Excitement is low because nothing "extraordinary" is going on.
  - B. In the Jerusalem Church, even the apostles were new to Christ's church. Sometimes, the lessons they were teaching were new even to them because in some situations they were speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (**cf. Mark 13:11**). Every single one of the individuals in the church had been dealing with an old problem, the problem of sin. And every single one of them had recently experienced a new solution—forgiveness in Jesus. Nothing was humdrum because they were new at everything. No wonder they were excited. They

had just come to realize what God had truly done for them. They wanted to let everyone know. Because they wanted to let everyone know, many others kept coming in which simply increased their excitement and enthusiasm over this new found salvation. Extraordinary things were happening every day. People's sins were being forgiven without having to kill any animals. They were able to worship God without going to the temple or going through the priests.

- C. Where are we regarding enthusiasm and excitement over what Jesus has done for us? Are we more like the Anytown church or the Jerusalem church? If everyone in the congregation were like you, which one would we be? Has the gospel of Christ become old hat for us? Or is the message still as exciting as it was the very first time we heard and understood it? The Anytown church is a lot like the church at Ephesus described in **Revelation 2:1-7**. They held to doctrinal purity and would not allow error or immorality in the church. But that first love, that zeal, that excitement, that passion they had when everything was new had seeped out of the congregation as they slipped into routine of daily living, working, and worshipping. If we will be like Jerusalem, we must make sure we each maintain that first love, that zeal we had as new converts that caused us to want to be at every assembly, to talk with our friends and family, to spend time daily in Bible study and prayer. We have to realize how extraordinary what we are doing right now is. We are in God's presence worshipping Him. People are leaving the path to hell and entering the path to heaven. Is there anything more extraordinary? When we have the sense of the extraordinary and maintain the excitement we will be what Jerusalem was. If we let it become old and routine, in a few years, we will be the Anytown church.

II. The Jerusalem church was free from traditional approaches to their worship and work.

- A. The Anytown Church has been meeting at the same location, in the same building for nearly 30 years. About the only thing that has been changed in the way the congregation works and worships is who the preacher was since they have had a new preacher every three to five years. But they have always had the Lord's Supper and offering before the sermon, except for once when a new preacher did a lesson on the Lord's Supper and asked that Lord's Supper be done after the sermon. So many people complained they never allowed it again. For thirty years they have approached the work of gospel meetings, Bible classes, VBS, assemblies, and personal evangelism in the same way. Every two or three years they have had a men's training class to help young men learn how to lead the congregation in prayer and wait on the Lord's table. This church has established scriptural traditions for conducting the worship and work of the congregation. Those traditions have become unspoken laws that no one should question or propose changing. In fact, notice what happened in the Anytown congregation when the preacher once suggested a change in the way they handled one aspect of the work.
1. Since the 70's, if there was ever a benevolent need, the preacher had to investigate the situation and determine a course of action. When they had elders, he made a suggestion to them for final approval. When the eldership dissolved, he had to report to the men's business meeting for final approval. However, since this new preacher has come in, the church has grown some and has had some increased need for benevolence, so much that the preacher is no longer able to deal with it himself without cutting into his ability to study, teach, and preach. In the last men's business meeting, he asked if someone else could review benevolent needs. The phone calls he has received over the last two weeks have caused him to wish he had never said anything.
  2. One brother called to say he wasn't comfortable with someone else reviewing benevolent needs. In fact, he wasn't quite sure if it was scriptural just allowing an "ordinary" member to learn about the special needs of other members.
  3. Another called to say that in his old church, the elders always dealt with benevolent situations. If the preacher here didn't want to do it, he should quit complaining to the men and get elders appointed.
  4. One of the sisters called to let him know how outraged she was about what her husband just told her. She cannot believe that this preacher is so lazy and uncompassionate that he does not want to handle benevolent cases. "Why, the last preacher we had was always there when people were in need. Maybe you are just not the preacher we need here."
- B. Notice what happened in Jerusalem when a very similar situation arose. In **Acts 6:1-6**, because the church had grown so much, the apostles were no longer able to be at the helm making decisions and keeping up with the benevolent needs of the widows. So, they changed their approach to accomplishing that work within the congregation. They suggested that the congregation pick seven men to lead in that work. The apostles basically said they did not have time to deal with the widows' needs, so others should be given that responsibility. Did the congregation mutiny? No. According to **Acts 6:5**, the statement found approval. This church had not

had time to develop a tradition bound approach to the work and worship of the congregation. When the apostles suggested a new approach, nobody was convinced things shouldn't be changed because that is the way they had always done it. Notice, neither approach to dealing with the widows' needs was unscriptural. The members of the Jerusalem church were able to see that changing their approach did not mean turning from God's pattern for the church. It simply meant finding a more expedient way to get the work done.

- C. Where are we? Are we more like Jerusalem or more like Anytown? What if the whole congregation were just like you? Which of these two churches would we be? The Anytown church has become so enamored with the processes they established years ago they can no longer tell the difference between expedient, scriptural changes in the worship and work of the church and adulterating God's plan and pattern. They often see anything that is different from what they are used to as "liberal" or sinful. They believe they are mature because they want to hold to the standard. In fact, they are immature because they don't know what the real standard is anymore. If we will be like Jerusalem, we must realize growth means changing the way things work. If we will be like Jerusalem, we must realize that change does not necessarily mean we have turned from God's pattern or plan. In **Acts 6:1-6**, the Jerusalem church changed in two of the fundamentals of how the church worked. The apostles changed how they led the congregation, appointing leaders over a particular task. They also changed the way the needs of members in the congregation were met, making other members in the church directly responsible for meeting the needs. Yet, Jerusalem approved of the change. We must never adulterate God's plan. But we must also be mature enough to know the difference between turning from God's pattern and simply changing an approach while continuing to be in line with God's plan for His church.

III. The Christians in Jerusalem had time to spend with other Christians, worshipping, working, and simply being together.

- A. The members of the Anytown church can often be heard saying they don't seem to get together as often as they used to. In fact, over the last two years some of the members have moved to a congregation across town, because they just didn't feel at home in the Anytown church anymore. Nearly everyone feels that way and everyone wishes somebody would do something. But few people have the time. Several of the members have jobs that cause them to work all kinds of hours. Some of them have two jobs to try to stay ahead of the bills. Many of them have kids involved in several after school activities, keeping them running around most week-nights. They have a tough time making it to Wednesday night Bible class, let alone trying to get together with other Christians on some other night of the week. Additionally, there are a few mothers with small children whose husbands aren't Christians, so the effort it takes to get the kids ready for all the classes and assemblies seems too much to bear, let alone trying to meet at the one sister's house who is trying to get the young mothers together on a regular basis. Everyone wants to spend more time with other Christians, but no one has the time to do so.
- B. The members of the Jerusalem church had time to spend with one another. Not only did they meet regularly as a congregation to worship God, but they had time to spend with each other from house to house separate from the corporate worship. According to **Acts 2:46-47**, the Jerusalem Christians met in one another's homes daily. This wasn't just the occasional eating out after services or a holiday get-together. They were always spending time with one another. Notice what they were doing when they spent time together. They were taking time just to be together socially, getting to know one another, enjoying one another's company, taking their meals together with gladness. But they not only spent social time together, they spent spiritual time together. They were praising God from house to house as well. They spent time together worshipping God apart from the corporate worship. That is, they were praying and singing together, not just once in a blue moon, but daily.
- C. Where are we regarding our time together? Are we more like the Anytown church or more like the Jerusalem church? If everyone in this whole congregation were like you, which one of these churches would we be? The members of the Anytown church have gotten caught up in all the things the world has to offer to fill their time. They have become so distracted by all the things that go on down here they sometimes forget to prepare for eternity (**Colossians 3:2**). In many cases the things that fill their time are not sinful. Their lives are so cluttered they simply do not have time to be with one another. They are like Martha, who did not have time to sit at the feet of the Master because she had to clean house (**Luke 10:38-42**). Several of them do not even have time to make it to all the assemblies and classes, let alone to do something more. If we are going to be like Jerusalem, we have to be time conscious. We have to recognize that perfectly good and normal activities can so clutter our days that we are not involved in what is best and most necessary, spending time with one another. I understand that there were some special circumstances in Jerusalem. Numerous people had come

from out of town for Pentecost, had been converted and stayed. They were without jobs and connections in the city. That provided more time than perhaps we can ever have to spend with one another. However, we cannot deny that time together from house to house was one of the key issues that made success easier for Jerusalem than for Anytown.

- D. I want to share a quote with you from David Myers book, *The American Paradox*. This book was written in 2000 before the advent of texting, instant messaging, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The situation he describes has not gotten any better.

Communal socializing also appears to be on the way out. Putnam finds that Americans in 1997 were entertaining friends and acquaintances at home 40 percent less often than in 1975, attending club meetings nearly 60 percent less often, and giving half as many dinner parties. Families are also eating together less often. In 1975, 50 percent of married Americans agreed that 'our whole family usually eats dinner together'; in 1997, only 34 percent did. When we add the increasing number of single people living by themselves, 'dining alone' may have doubled in the past quarter century. What we are doing more of, to replace this communal activity, is watching TV, renting videos, and Web surfing and working on our home computers."

(Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000, p 179.)

- E. The members of the Anytown church do not have less time than they used to have. They are simply following our American culture. They are not using the time they have to communalize with their brethren. Do you realize the average American now has more discretionary time than ever before? We have far more discretionary time than the Jerusalem brethren did. It takes us less time to cook and clean. It takes us less time to travel anywhere. We live in an age of convenience and fast food. We save more time accomplishing the necessities of life than any generation before us, and yet we complain about having less time than any of them. Why? It is not because we lack discretionary time; it is what we do with it. If we will be like Jerusalem, we must redeem our time (**Ephesians 5:16**). Part of redeeming the time is spending time from house to house praising God and being together.

### **Conclusion:**

Which congregation are we closer to? The Anytown church or the Jerusalem church? Right now we are not exactly either one of these congregations but one of them is our future. Which one is it? If we maintain our first love, excitement and zeal for Christ and His message of forgiveness ... If we are able to be open to scripturally expedient change within the congregation without thinking every variation is sin... If we make time and take time to spend with one another from house to house beyond the assemblies, then all the keys we need to keep the members we have and add new members will fall into place. Let us never be the average American church. Rather, let us be extraordinary.