

Hearts Aflame: A Passion for People ... Acts 9:32-43

When it comes to church in the twenty-first century, we need to get back to basics ... that reminds me of a story I read about the coach, Vince Lombardi. At one game the Green Bay Packers were humiliated by the opposition - the Packers did everything wrong. Next day at practice, Coach Lombardi stood up with a football and said, 'Gentlemen, I've seen enough. We're going to start over, right at the very beginning. The object I have in my hand is a football!'

Back to basics! There's a pressing need for us to listen to the exhortation from Jeremiah, and once again walk down the old paths – let's get back to the Bible, let's get back to prayer, let's get back to real worship – worship where God is the focus of our adoration, let's get back to mission – where we fulfil our responsibility to reach our world for Jesus, let's get back to putting God first and doing 'church' his way.

The early church had so much going for her, there were golden times when she was riding on the crest of the wave, but there were other times when she was less buoyant and in very grave danger of imploding. I suppose the obvious example of that is Acts 15 and the incident surrounding the Council of Jerusalem. They had their hang-ups, some of

them were blinkered big time – but, bless their hearts, they worked at it, they prayed through, and the church took a giant step forward.

Like so much in life, it's not just how we handle the problems, or confront the crisis, or rise to the challenge, it's how we deal with people. It's all down to man management. It's how we relate to one another. There's no point in banging heads, you are much better to join hands. The right hand of fellowship is a better alternative to the right fist of fellowship.

So many Christians are like porcupines, they have many good points, but they're hard to get close to. The main reason is their prickly personalities keep needling each other. We can be so tetchy and so defensive. We desperately need each other, but, sadly, we end up needling one another.

It's you and I getting along with our brothers and sisters in the global family of God – we are an international community of believers, we're all as different as chalk and cheese, and that's fine; we need to realise, we're not all the same for we're not spiritual clones, but we are all one! That's what so characterised the young church in the first century – they were one in heart and mind.

It's all about people, and us having a passion for people, a love for each other, a desire to bless each other. If we want to work together, it's a matter of us being willing to move out of our comfort zone, to live our life on the cutting edge of faith, to go on beyond the second mile; and we do it because we have an expansive heart for people. In God's great scheme of things, people really do matter. The individual is important. I think we see evidence of that in the life of Peter.

Sure, he preached to vast crowds, he ministered to thousands around Pentecost; however, he never lost the thrill of going one-on-one with some needy soul. Paul was exactly the same – there's a man who rocked his world for Jesus, he was the greatest missionary of all time, he held citywide gospel campaigns – yet, read his books, and what do you find? Time after time he sends his greetings to various individuals here and there. Names that mean nothing to us, but they were valuable friends to him.

That tells me, Paul and Peter have something in common: they are people orientated. The same is certainly true for Jesus – if you read the narrative you will be staggered at the many times Jesus singled out an individual for his special attention: the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, etc. The Lord knew the value of one precious soul. Jesus was a people person!

If your church and mine is to recapture the spirit and passion of the early church, this is one area where we must excel. People are mega important. We see it in this chapter, not so much in what the preacher man says, more in what he does – it's his attitude and his actions that speak far louder than his words. I believe Peter was hugely effective in his personal ministry for six reasons:

One, he was involved, we see that in verses 32-33. Peter was all over the place as an itinerant preacher – here a day, there a day, somewhere else another day! He was always on the path; from dawn to dusk he was out there doing his bit for Jesus. A ministry on the road brings its own pressures and demands, it's not all sunshine. Living out of a suitcase is not as glamorous as some would have you believe! I know!

But I also know that such a peripatetic ministry has wonderful bonuses – you meet some great people en route, you get to see what God is doing on a wider scale, you have some tremendous ministry opportunities.

The key to Peter's success was his high level of flexibility – he was on-call 24/7. He was mobile in a day when it wasn't so easy getting from A to B. If he heard the voice of God to go here or there, he was willing and ready.

Somehow that's easier to do when you're not settled in any one place.

Look at his daily routine, his travel schedule, and you quickly realise this guy is up to his neck in ministry. He's immersed in serving Jesus and his people. He doesn't have too much time to chill out, there's not much margin in his life for looking after number one – he's on fire and he has the mindset that says, all or nothing. One of the lessons we learn is that God entrusts his richest ministries to his busiest saints. If you want the job done well, the Lord reckons, give it to a busy man! He'll carve out time to do the task in hand!

Luke tells us that he ended up in a wee place called Lydda. On today's map, this is the location of Israel's international airport. His prime objective was to 'visit the saints' in that town. He felt the need to pop in, say hello, brighten their day, strengthen their faith, teach them some truth, and then move on to the next place. You see, he had a passion for people – he can't resist the opportunity to get alongside the people of God.

But, when he gets there and knocks on the front door, he gets more than he bargained for: he meets a poor soul who hasn't been out of bed for eight years, he's paralysed for some reason – maybe polio, or a stroke, or some injury. Whatever, the days are long, and his future is grim.

There's no doubt about it, Peter was in the right place at the right time – he was God's man for the hour. Because he was where he was, the Lord used him in a sensational way – the miracle of this man's healing resulted in vast numbers of people trusting in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. That's what takes place when you take time to deal with one other person made in the image of God.

Number two, Peter was Christ-exalting, we see that in verses 34 and 35. Peter had learned the lesson well, if you want to see the Lord's hand of blessing, you have to be willing to give him all the glory. He wasn't there to promote himself, or to tell the sick man how great a preacher had come to see him! He was in that room to lift Jesus high, to magnify his name.

It seems to me that Peter is selfless in what he does – he's truly humble. He has no airs or graces. Peter wasn't in it to line his own pocket or to add another feather to his cap. He wasn't in it for what he could get out of it. There was no hype or emotion in the room, no razzmatazz, no band playing; his prime concern was the dazzling glory of God. And God knew his heart.

The man's healing was instantaneous. It was total. God did it! A miracle of grace, a demonstration of God's awesome ability. The repercussions were felt for miles around –

people saw the difference with their own two eyes and they turned in their droves to the Lord. This was God doing what he does best – transforming lives of ordinary people. And, in the process, he used an old clay pot called Peter. Peter's willingness to be involved with people made him a useful instrument in the hand of the Lord; God could use him to gather in a rich harvest for the kingdom.

A passion for people means I'm willing to invest my life in the service of others, it means I'm keen to make much of the Lord Jesus, it also means that I will be available – that's in verses 36-39. This is incredible, the stakes are raised – for here is an even more astounding opportunity. Aeneas, the paralytic man, was healed by the power of God; but Dorcas was raised from the dead.

The folks in the church in Joppa were on a real downer, they were emotionally distraught because one of their most-loved women had died. Dorcas was a wonderful lady; the epitaph on her life said: 'she was always doing good and helping the poor.' Again, here is someone who appreciated the value of people; she was willing to minister into their lives in the bad times, she was there for them when the going was tough and life took a turn for the worse. She was happy to use the gifts that God had given to her – she wasn't a preacher, she wasn't an up-front

kind of person, we know from verse 39 that she was talented as a dressmaker, so she made a lot of clothes for the folks in the church and outside. She had two hands and a big heart and she surrendered them to God. Here was a lady who fulfilled her potential in God – she did what he wanted her to do! She lived the dream, this was her passion, this was her ministry, this was her role in life. At the same time, her loss was a massive blow to the little church in that part of the world. Churches can't afford to lose people of the ilk of Dorcas.

Number four, it also means that I will be a man of prayer, we see that in verses 40 and 41. The apostle believed in prayer, he knew something of its power in his own life, he had seen it in the lives of others – he also recognised his total dependence on the Lord as he knelt down and sought the Lord's help. He was conscious of the fact that his God could do far more than he could even ask or think – a God whose power is incomparable. He was willing to trust God in this situation. When he said his last 'Amen', he turned towards Dorcas who was as dead as a dodo and called on her to 'get up'. And, guess what! She did! Alive and kicking! The joy must have been inexpressible, people would break out in spontaneous praise to the mighty name of Jesus, they would be dancing in

exuberant worship to a God who specialises in solving problems. There is passion in their praise because there was a lot of passion in his prayer! They're on fire!

Verse 42 indicates another trait when we note that Peter was fruitful in his ministry – this is one of those God-moments. It was inevitable, the news travelled like wildfire and, yet again, 'many people believed in the Lord.' You see, God can turn the worst of times into the best of times. God used what happened to Dorcas to light a fire in that city – there was an outbreak of blessing like a spiritual downpour. Here was a people saturated with the presence and power of God – they were soaked with a God-consciousness. God was doing a new thing in their midst.

And, as a consequence, men saw the value that God places in a single person – he doesn't deal with us en-masse or treat us like components on an assembly line ... God deals with us man-to-man. He has a heart for people, so should we!

Before we move on, let me highlight three lessons learned at a funeral – one, if you want your influence to last, put Jesus first, other people second, and yourself last; two, people will not remember you in the future for something you are not now; and three, live so that when death comes, the mourners

outnumber those who cheer! That's what happened Dorcas!

The final quality in Peter's life is reflected in verse 43, he was free from prejudice. This is front page news, this is fantastic! Here was a guy who was so bigoted, so hot-headed, so brash, so opinionated, so jaundiced – yet see him right here! He is enjoying hospitality with Simon the tanner.

For Peter, one by one the walls of his prejudice are tumbling. This is God at work in one man ... why? So he can go out there and be a brighter light to the Gentiles and a guiding light to the Jews!

You're maybe wondering, what's the big deal! Tanners were despised in first-century Jewish society. I mean, the Jews had no time for them at all. These guys were in touch with the skins of dead animals and, for a Jew, that was not kosher, it was a huge taboo. One of those no-no things!

Like Peter, if we are going to impact our world for Jesus, if we are going to make our lives count for God, then we have to get rid of our prejudices. A bigoted mindset is devastating to any local church; in far too many Christian circles, those who do not fit the mould are rejected. Any prejudice undermines the grace of God, it pulls the rug from under the love of God who is no respecter of persons. Even the zealous Paul learned that lesson!

You see, when it comes to a biblical ministry, when it comes to discovering what made the early church tick, we need to fully understand that it's all about people and it's all about Jesus. A passion for God, a passion for others, a passion for just one. If you had been the only sinner in the world, Jesus still would've come and died for you. He loved me, he died for me, he saved me, he prays for me, he's coming back again for me – yes, it's as personal as that. One man and his God!

Recall Luke 15: It was the one sheep that the loving shepherd went after, it was the one son that the father longed to see, it was the one silver coin that the lady diligently searched for.

A passion for people! I can't think of a better way to influence our generation for Christ. In reaching our community for Jesus, it's one person at a time! Each one reaching one makes another one; one plus one makes two, simple arithmetic – but it's God's way of growing his church. Remember: it only takes one spark to start a forest blaze! Why don't you be that spark!