

**The Story / Grace Gone Viral**  
**Chapter 28: "New Beginnings"**  
**April 12, 2015**

Sometimes people just change. And sometimes the change happens so fast. Less than two months ago Jesus' disciples were kind of wusses. They heard that one of their close friends was really sick, and Jesus wanted to go heal him. But their friend lived near Jerusalem, where the authorities wanted Jesus dead. His disciples didn't want to go - it was too dangerous. I can understand their fear.

Within a week or two, it seems, Jesus was arrested, and his disciples were terrified. Peter tries to trail Jesus incognito, but when he is outed as a Jesus follower he lies and runs. The rest of the disciples just went into hiding - they were disillusioned, and broken. And when Jesus was executed only John had the guts to show his face and watch, as any vestige of hope he had left died. But sometimes people change, and sometimes the change happens so fast.

You see, something happens to a man who comes face to face with someone who used to be ... dead. Not mostly dead, or just barely dead. We're talking whipped to a bloody mess, nailed to a cross; spear through the heart, 3 days buried dead. And now Jesus is alive - more alive than they had ever seen him before. And he tells these wusses - "You guys are going to change the world! And you are going to tell the world about me. But you are not quite ready. There's one more thing you need."

And one Sunday morning God's Holy Spirit infuses these guys with an incredible courage, an amazing boldness .. and the church was born, and grace went viral. And for a lot of folks, that's just weird. Because most people I know are really impressed with Jesus, but not so much with the church. And when they discover that the church was God's plan to take Jesus into the world, that just seems weird. At least it seems weird if the earliest churches were anything like our churches.

But here's what happens in the book of Acts - which records some of the numbers of the earliest churches. In chapter 1 there are about 120 Jesus followers that we know of. (1.15) After their first public sermon there were about 3000 Jesus followers. (2.41) A pretty good day! So the authorities

throw their leaders in jail. Doesn't work. By chapter 4 there are 5000 men in the church - I don't think that counts the women and children. Maybe 15,000 +? (4.4) I'd say that pretty viral! In chapter 5 it says that even though people were afraid, "Yet more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord -- crowds of both men and women." (5.14) So in chapters 6 and 7 the authorities kick most of us out of Jerusalem. So the church goes viral in Antioch, and Ephesus, and Corinth, and Rome, and went.

One guy as researched this stuff at a pretty high level says that for 300 years the church averaged about 40% growth per decade. Guys, that's viral. And that isn't Capital City growth. I will have been here at Capital City for 20 years this June. And we have grown at 80% per decade. But most of our growth has been attractational - we have attracted Christians from other churches. Their growth was missional - they were making new Christians, growing the Kingdom at an average of 40% per decade ... for 300 years! That's grace gone viral! How'd they do it? I want to know. We need to know.

We are in the last section of The Story. We've been tracking the storyline of the Bible for 27 weeks. 4 weeks left, and we are calling this part "Grace Gone Viral" -- because it did. Today we're lasering in on the earliest description of the church. Because in this first picture of the church we get a glimpse of what God meant for us to be and do. This isn't just about them. This is about us - what God wants for us.

So if you have your Bible with you, open up to Acts 2.42. If you are following -along in The Story, you'll find it in the last paragraph of page 392. Luke, the guy who wrote Acts, says, "All the Jesus followers devoted themselves ... ". I want to stop there for just a minute. That's a strong word in the Greek. One of my dictionaries defines it like this: "to continue to do something with intense effort," even when it's hard. "To keep on," "To persevere," even when the going gets tough. This isn't about a hobby. This isn't about giving leftovers to God. This isn't about doing church when it's convenient and comfortable.

They devoted themselves to 4 things, it says.

- They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (which for us is the Word). To be devoted is not just to read it every day; it is to allow it to penetrate your life and change you. We live in a culture that

believes we can accept or reject the teachings of the Bible as it fits our agenda. To be devoted to the teaching of the apostles says God's word trumps culture.

- And they devoted themselves to fellowship. And for them, that went way beyond coffee and donuts before church or potlucks after church. It's not koinonia until it's family. They Christians took care of each other, even when it took intense effort.
- And they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, it says. Now sometimes in the Bible that just means they would share their meals together. But usually it means they would share the Lord's Supper together. They were devoted to worship, even when it wasn't convenient, or comfortable.
- And they devoted themselves to serious time with God, to prayer. Because in their world it was kind of scary to be a Jesus follower. And to keep on, to persevere required a sense of his presence.

You see, God wasn't building a community of Christians, he was building a *communitas*, and that's different. You see, you get community when you socialize with people for just about any reason. We are social critters, and we like to connect with other people. But *communitas* is forged when you go through struggle together, when you go through pain together, when you are on a quest together. And the bonds of *communitas* are far stronger than the bonds of community.

You see, in community people can be self-centered, and self-absorbed. I join a club for me, I join a team for me, and when it stops feeding me, I quit. I choose a store because it serves me; I choose a bank that serves me; I join a reading group that feeds me. But that's not what God meant for the church. Church isn't about me. *Communitas* goes way deeper than me. *Communitas* happens when we band together for something bigger than me. It happens when we do something huge together that's for way more than me.

You see, *communitas* is forged through trial, it's forged through quest, it's a camaraderie that goes way deeper than community. You see, we want a community to be a safe place. *Communitas* happens when we step out of the safe place together. *Communitas* happens when our mission, when our quest means more to us than our comfort, or our safety.

In the Lord of the Rings four hobbits, a human, a dwarf, an elf, and a wizard go on a quest together. They face danger together, they fight battles together, they face death together, and something grows between them far deeper than just community. They form a fellowship of the ring. These stories captivate us ... because we were made for something more than community. . We were made by God for *communitas*.

Well, here's what Luke goes on to say about the *communitas* of the church in Acts 2. He says, "A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity - all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved."

Be honest: Would you be willing to join a church like that? I'm serious. Would you be willing to join a church like that - if that's what they expected of you? Would you be willing to help make Capital City look more like that? @o you think God wants us to look more like that? Or how about this one: Would you like your kids or your grandkids to be part of a church like that?

Here's the problem guys: what God dreamed for the church, and what the church has become are a long ways apart. What we want from church, what we expect from church, what we give to church is quite a long ways from their devotion to the Word, and to fellowship, to worship," and to prayer. Is that mean? Jesus said that he would build a church "a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out." And he did; and his church went viral. But Satan, I think, has weakened the church from within. He has used culture, I think, to corrupt us - the church. And when we are corrupted, the church (which is us) loses its power. Let me show you. I want to show you some of the ways we approach church.

A lot of us kind of treat church like a movie theater. Now I love going to the movies. Do you? I love kind of getting away from it all for a couple of hours. I want to be entertained. I want to be inspired. I like to laugh a little. Sometime I might even tear up - though I never let anyone see. I want a -

good seat. I want some good snacks. I want the people around me to behave so I'm not distracted. And when the movie is over I go into the movie critic mode. My family scores movies from 1-10. Did it keep us engaged, or did it drag? How were the special effects? Was the plot worth hanging with? Was there some good clean killing?

Which is exactly how a lot of us treat church. We want to be entertained, we want to be inspired. We want to laugh a little, cry a little. We want a good seat, and we want the people around us to behave. And when the service is over, we go into the worship critic mode: 1-10. Did it keep us engaged, or did it drag? How were the special effects? Music too loud? Lights, haze, visuals? How was the sermon: two thumbs up, or ... not?

Listen guys: in a theater you are the audience, you are there to be entertained; in church you are not the audience, and you are not here to be entertained. God is the audience, and we are here to honor him. That's it in a nutshell. Do you buy that?

Listen to how the early church did it: "They devoted themselves to the Word." That's not about listening to a sermon; that's about a quest to discover a better way to live. They devoted themselves to fellowship." That's not about a meet and greet; that's about family. "They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread." That's a commitment to worship even when it's uncomfortable, and inconvenient, and hard. And "they devoted themselves to prayer." Which goes way beyond how most of us pray.

Maybe, guys, maybe instead of scoring the worship service today, we would do better to score ourselves today. How did I worship today? Is God pleased with me? Did I engage? Did I get distracted? Did I give God what he deserves? Did God challenge me today? Did I discover something that God wants to change in me? Am I willing to be changed? Do you think attitudes like that could infuse Capital City with an unbelievable viral power?

Other times we kind of treat church like a store. Now I don't store shop as much as I used to. I use Amazon Prime. But for the same reason: I want the best product I can get at the lowest price possible; and I don't want to spend a lot of time in the checkout line. How many of you guys always choose the wrong checkout line? I have a spiritual gift for choosing the

wrong line. And if I don't like this store, I'll go to another one till I get what I want at a price I like. We go to stores as customers.

And that mindset - that we are "customers" -- has infected how we do church, hasn't it? Any of you ever done any "church shopping"? We want to see what's on the shelf, and we want to check the prices. And I suppose a little of that is okay ... at first. But if you stay there, in that mode, you corrupt the church. You see, Capital City is not a store that I shop at; Capital City is a family I belong to.

Guys, I know that this is a weird family. There are people here I wouldn't choose to hang out with, ordinarily. There are people here with whom about the only thing I have in common ... is Jesus. But that's enough. We're both committed to serving Jesus ... and that's enough to outweigh our differences of preferences, and opinions. I know there are people in this room who are kind of like cousin Eddie. But I'm telling you guys, when I see that X® 2417 sticker on a car, or discover that someone I meet at Kroger is part of this family - it stirs something deep inside me.

In Acts, these church people were actually putting each other's needs before their own. They weren't trying to get from; they were trying to be there for each other. And it was powerful; it went viral. Some of you guys are afraid to commit to a church family; you are afraid of what it will cost... You are missing so much.

Other folks kind of treat church like a restaurant. When we go to a restaurant, we expect to be served; we expect to be waited on. What would happen if the next time you went to Cracker Barrel they handed you a dishcloth and said, "Before you sit down, would you mind cleaning a couple of those tables over there." Or, "Before you sit down, do you mind stepping into the kitchen and dishing up a few plates." Or, "Before you go, would you mind seating a few of our guests?" Would you go back? Julie would; I'd probably have some second thoughts.

But that's how a lot of folks treat church. We are seated, we are served, we are there to get fed. But there's a big difference. At Cracker Barrel we are fed when we eat. At Capital City we are fed more when we serve. If you tell me, "I want to get fed here at Capital City," my answer will be, "Then find a place to serve." We you read about the early church, to us they were out of control serving each other. They were actually selling

their stuff if necessary to help take care of each other. Which means that they were willing to do whatever it takes to serve.

That's hard idea for a lot of people, who have drifted away from the heart of God because of the allure of our self-absorbed culture. Listen guys, church was never about hiring a few professionals to do your serving for you. God's dream was a priesthood of all believers. All of us are gifted to serve each other. It's not y job to take care of you. It's my job to help you take care of each other. You buy that?

Two more. Some folks pull into church like it's a gas station. Most folks don't hang out at a gas stations any more ® unless maybe it's a Speedway. We just kind of pull in occasionally for a fill up, and then head back out to real life. When the gauge reads a little low again, we pop in for some more gas in the tank.

Which is how a lot of folks do church. When the gauge is getting empty, we pull in for a fill up. Then we head back out to real life until the gauge is nearing empty again. In between we don't give a lot of thought to church.

Which is not the way these early Christians were doing it. It says, "They worshiped together at the Temple each day (that's kind of weird), (they) met in homes for the Lord's Supper (maybe even more than once a week, at first), and (they) shared their meals with great joy and generosity." You see, church for them wasn't something they went to from time to time when they needed an energy boost; church for them was ... them. It was who they were; it was what they did. It was 24/7. Do you think that kind of attitude could change this place, for the better?

Last one. A lot of folks kind of look at the church like a fitness center. But here's the weird thing about fitness centers: most people who work out at most fitness centers already look pretty good. Fitness centers are more about helping fit people stay in shape than helping unfit people get in shape. You ever think about joining a fitness center, and then realize you'll probably have to get in shape first? Because you are going to be in there looking either tubby or wussy when you are surrounded by all these people who really look good in those muscle shirts and yoga pants.

Well, some folks are kind of afraid of churches for the same reason. They think they'll look out of place. Believe it or not, they think we kind of look

good in our spiritual muscle shirts and yoga pants. They think most of us kind of have it together in our marriages, in our morals, in our life with God.

Have you ever heard of the "Downsize Fitness Center"? They started in Chicago, but they are spreading out (no pun intended). They claim they are the first fitness center that is specifically for people who actually need it. You have to be at least 50 pounds overweight to join. I think I could fit in there. Well, that's what Capital City is all about. Most all of us here at Capital City are either spiritual wusses, or at least 50 pounds overweight spiritually. Some of us try to suck in our spiritual guts, put on these muscle shirts and yoga pants - but we know we're a mess. We are on a journey together. We are working on our life with God together. We are working on our marriages, and our morals, and our friendships together. We are working for God together because we know none of us is good enough, or strong enough, or smart enough to do it alone.

Which is the way they did it in the early church. It says, "Each day the Lord was adding to their fellowship those who were being saved." Which means, every day there were more newbies. Which means, every day there are messes to clean up; every day people who looked terrible in muscle shirts and yoga pants jumped in. Isn't that cool! Wouldn't you love it if that's how people treated Capital City - as a spiritual "Downsize Fitness Center," a place for real people with real issues?

You see, the church went viral, because they weren't about community, they were about *communitas*. Do you remember: *communitas* is forged when you go through struggle together, when you go through pain together, when you are on a quest together. And the bonds of *communitas* are far stronger than the bonds of community. And that's exactly what happens in Acts.

Right before Jesus left earth and went back to heaven, he gave us a mission from God. He says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you (and you are going to need it! Because the mission I am giving you will take more strength, and more courage, and more wisdom than you've got). And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere -- in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You are going viral! Guys, that was their mission from

God, and they were to get it done no matter what the cost. That mission jumped up to 1 on their to-do list, and it stayed there their whole life.

You begin to sense that these guys are on an incredible adventure. You begin to realize that they will have to pass through some really tough places, some really tough times to carry out their mission from God. It will cost them financially, it will cost them boatloads of time, it will cost them some very real physical danger, many would die.

Be honest, if you were church shopping, would you join the Jerusalem Christian church?

- These guys are selling property to take care of each other. Would you?
- These guys are immersing themselves in each other's lives, a serious investment of energy and time. Would you?
- These guys are going out fearlessly preaching Jesus, and it's getting some of them arrested. Would you, go with them?
- When a couple of these Christians started playing games with God, God killed them - he literally made them drop dead. Would you join a church where you don't dare play games with God?

Well ... I think I would, want to join a church like that. I hope. I think I would want to be part of a band of brothers who put our mission above our own comfort and our own security, and our own safety. I think I would want to be part of a movement that fearless, that driven, that consumed with God. And I think a church like that would experience such a powerful *communitas*.

We settle for too little. We settle for a play it safe Christianity. We settle for a huddle and cuddle church. We want worship services that please me, Bible studies that feed me, events that excite me, prayers that take care of me, and mine. I don't want that for Capital City. You don't want that for Capital City.

Most of you know that I have a preaching partner. Randy and I prepare sermons together. He is preaching pretty much the same stuff this morning in Corydon Indiana. But his paragraph is different, because he has two grown boys who have no real relationship with Jesus, or the church, right now. And his grandkids are not growing up loving Jesus. Here's what he writes. He says,

"I need to be honest with you. I don't love the people of Harrison County, Indiana, as much as I should. But I love my two boys more than you can know. My boys don't live here. They live in northwest Illinois. My boys don't have a healthy active relationship with Jesus Christ right now. But I wish more than anything they did. (It breaks his heart) So I will love on people in Harrison County... because they are someone's sons and daughters. And I hope someone in Illinois will love on my boys... so they will come back to Jesus. That's my mission. Will you help me love on people so that we can be in a position to share what we have found in Jesus Christ? Who do you love that has not yet found Christ? Let's be that for someone else."

What do you want for your kids: community, or communitas? What do you want for your grandkids: community, or communitas? Maybe your kids aren't with you. If they are not, I'll bet you've got this hope in you they'll find it somewhere. Well, there are some parents out there, there are some grandparents out there that are counting on us to provide communitas for their kids here at Capital City.

I guarantee you that's what God wants for his kids here. Guys, we were not meant for community, we were meant for communitas. Settling for less will never satisfy. You'll always realize that there is something more, you'll always ache for that something more. To be honest, the most dangerous thing we can do is play it safe, spiritually; to settle for a huddle and cuddle church. If we allow Capital City to become a huddle and cuddle church, our faith may survive, but it will not thrive. Over time our life with God will grow boring, and brittle, and it may even die. We will never experience the life God made us for; we will never grow into the magnificent creatures God made us to be. And people out there, people we care about, people God adores, may never come face to face with our Jesus... Let's try. Let's try to try. Let's let God do something special here.