

What Should Influence Look Like? Acts 2:47; 5:14-15; 17:1-6

Continuing our journey through the *Book of Acts*, and *What Matters in the Church*, we consider this morning, *What Should Influence Look Like?* Three statements in *Acts* capture a screen shot of what influence looks like. The first statement occurs at the end of the chapter two summation:

Acts 2:47) praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 5:14) Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers – multitudes of both men and women. 15) As a result, they would carry the sick out into the streets and lay them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them.

Acts 17:1) After they (Paul and Silas) passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2) As usual, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3) explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead: “*This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.*” 4) Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, including a large number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women. 5) But the Jews became jealous, and they brought together some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. Attacking Jason’s house, they searched for them to bring them out to the public assembly. 6) When they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials, shouting, “*These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too.*”

The Acts of the Apostles narrates the origin and birth of the first-century church, which grew numerically and exponentially from 120 Jesus followers, to over 3000 in one day during the Jewish festival of Pentecost, to 5000 added according to Acts 4:4, so that by Acts 5:14 – *Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers, multitudes of both men and women.* That, ladies and gentlemen, is what influence looks like. Influence defines the individual power to be a compelling force on the actions, behavior, and opinions of others. Everyone exerts influence. **Your influence is either positive or negative, increasing or decreasing, but it’s never staying the same.** Churches also possess influence, and like people, that influence can either be positive or negative, increasing or decreasing, but never staying the same. Churches influence the ethics and spiritual vitality of a

community – positively or negatively, increasing or decreasing, but never staying the same. Churches influence family values – positively or negatively, increasing or decreasing, but never staying the same. Churches influence other churches through example and faith ventures – positively or negatively, increasing or decreasing, but never staying the same. Acts defines influence in three dimensions.

1. The Favor Dimension. *“Having favor with all the people”* – an amazing statement! The first century Christians developed favor not with a few, not with some, not even with a majority, but with ALL the people. **Favor means good will, compassion, and mercy extended.** It’s the same Greek word in the New Testament translated *grace*. Paul confirmed in Ephesians 2:8 – *for by grace are you saved*, defining God’s merciful influence extended toward humanity. God has reached down from heaven to humanity in an act of good-will and grace, extending salvation to us in the person of His one and only Son Jesus Christ. In the Acts 2 context, favor defines the church’s influence on the city. As God extends good-will and mercy to each one of us, we then extend this Christian influence into our cities and communities.

Jesus defined this kind of Christian influence as salt (Matthew 5:13) – *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men.”*

The purpose of salt is to preserve, flavor, and create thirst. In the first century, salt preserved food as an antibacterial agent to keep it from rotting and decaying. The influence of Christianity should act like an antibacterial agent in the community – preserving the quality of life and protecting the community from rot and decay. As bad as it seems, think of how rotten and despicable of community would be without the influence of the church. Especially in our day, salt serves as a flavoring agent. So, Jesus question is appropriate: *“If the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty again?”* I agree with Tony Evans: *“Every local church needs to ask itself whether its community is better, stronger, and spiritually healthier because that church is located there.”* (Tony Evans, *God’s Glorious Church*, page. 138). In addition to its preserving and flavoring qualities, salt also creates thirst. Our quality of life as Christians should make people so thirsty for the quality of life they see in us that they are drawn to Christ like a thirsty person is drawn to water. Are people where you work, at your school, or in your neighborhood thirsty for spiritual things because of your salt influence?

2. The Shadow Dimension. When Dr. Luke arrived at chapter 5 in his narrative, Peter positions as the most influential leader in the Jerusalem church. Acts 5 described the episode with Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the whole church about their offering, and were struck dead. I’m certain that episode got

everybody's attention! We will examine that bizarre episode in a few weeks when judgment comes to church. Dr. Luke composites another summary statement in 5:14-15 regarding Peter's shadow being cast on those who were sick and afflicted.

The power of influence = casting a large shadow.

"Shadow" captures a unique function in the Bible. We are all familiar with the "valley of the shadow of death" in Psalm 23. Though death walks us through the valley of the shadow, we fear no evil, for God is with us. Psalm 91 assures us that we can rest in the "shadow of the Almighty" – referring to the awesome shadow that Almighty God casts on His created planet, and we, as finite human beings, can peacefully co-exist in the shadow of the Almighty.

All of us cast a shadow on someone. **Our shadow goes with us wherever we go.**

Our shadow is never on us - but away from us. We may never know upon whom our shadow falls. What kind of shadow do you cast?

Jesus defined this kind of Christian influence as light (Matthew 5:14-15) – *You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lamp stand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* While the function of salt changes from generation to generation, light has only one purpose – to shine in order to chase the darkness. The community around us needs light because it exists in spiritual darkness. We who are saved out of that darkness now shine the light of Christ back into that darkness. Paul affirmed in Ephesians 5:8 – "for you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." That's what Jesus meant – "Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." If enough little lights get together, it makes a huge difference. Individual Christians and individual churches may think they don't make much of a difference, but together, little lights shine the brightest. That's why we sing, "This little light of mine – I'm gonna let it shine."

3. The Radical Dimension. From having favor with all the people to casting shadows to turning the world upside down. The second half of the Book of Acts shifted from the influence of Peter to the ministry of the Apostle Paul. After Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from the Philippian prison in Acts 16, resulting in the salvation of the jailor and his family, they travelled to Thessalonica. Having no better sense, Paul preached Jesus in the Jewish synagogue, inciting a riot. Attacking Jason's house, the mob searched for Paul and Silas, and when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the Christian brothers before the city officials, shouting, "***These men who have turned***

the world upside down” = to cause trouble, stir up, or agitate. These troublemakers – these agitators have come here too, and Jason has received them as guests! They are all acting contrary to Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king – Jesus!”

We need that kind of influence in our cities and communities today! **Jesus defined this kind of Christian influence as yeast (Matthew 13:33) – The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into 50 pounds of flour until all of it was leavened.** Like salt and light, yeast is a small agent with a remarkable power of influence. Just a little salt will flavor. Just a little light will chase the darkness. Just a little yeast will leaven the dough. To leaven is *to permeate – to saturate with an altering or transforming element*. Every time I think of yeast, I think of my mother mixing flour and water into a batch of dough. Then she’d open a little red and yellow package of Fleischmann's yeast, pour in just a small amount, and knead it into the dough. She’s cover that softball sized mound of dough with a wet dishcloth, and an hour later, that small wad of dough, under the influence of the yeast, had risen and expanded into a basketball sized mound of gooey dough that my mother baked into the most wonderful homemade cinnamon rolls you’ve ever smelled or tasted!

It’s going to take more than just a sprinkle of influence to permeate and saturate the community and culture we live in. **Turning our world upside down will require much more than just casual Christianity – it will demand radical Christianity.** We must wrap our minds around what radical abandonment to Jesus really means. If there is ever a day and a time for those of us who love Jesus, the church and what America used to stand for, to turn the world upside down by living radical Christianity, TODAY is the day and NOW is the time.

In 21st century America, we – the church – have lost our home field advantage. If life can be segmented into quarters, I’m in the early 4th quarter. Regarding my vocational ministry, I’m in my 5th decade. I never thought I’d see the day in America when...

- The Name of Jesus would be profaned so widely and vehemently.
- Christian values would be so politically incorrect.
- Traditional marriage would be declared illegal.
- God’s design for male and female would be disregarded and replaced with transgender.
- Religious freedom would be threatened.
- Taking a stand for morality could cost you your job.

- Prayer, the Bible, and the 10 Commandments would be removed from the schoolroom, the courtroom and the public square.
- The Church would become irrelevant and marginalized.

But here we are, and our communities, our schools, our neighborhoods, and our workplaces need the salt, light, and yeast of the church and Christian values more than ever before. What difference does First Baptist Lafayette make to Lafayette Parish and Acadiana? If First Baptist Lafayette ceased to exist, would they miss our influence?