

"ACTS, WALK THRU THE BIBLE."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Acts 1:1-11; 2:1-4

Introduction.

There are about 2.5 billion people who identify as Christian in the world today. Or about one third of the world's population, making Christianity the world's largest religion. There are around 4-8 million churches in the world, about 400,000 in the US.

How did we get here? How did Christianity start in a small outpost of the Roman Empire and become a worldwide religion that is still growing and spreading?

How did the church of Jesus Christ grow and become so bold from such humble, small and fearful beginning? How did it spread to the ends of the earth and turn the world upside down in the process?

If we wanted to trace our spiritual genealogy as a Christian we can all trace our Christian heritage all the way back to Acts. We can trace our faith family tree all the way back to Peter's and Paul's preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. God knows the name of the Gentile who became a born-again believer and is our spiritual great great grandfather.

Acts.

The book is called The Acts of the Apostles. But most commentators like to suggest better titles, like Some of the Acts of Some of the Apostles, or Some of the Acts of Peter and Paul, maybe better yet, The Acts of the Holy Spirit.

It is clear from the introduction Acts picks up where the Gospel of Luke ends. This is volume two of Luke's writing. Luke is the longest book in

the NT and Acts is the second longest, so Luke's writings make up 25% of the NT, much more than all of Paul's writings.

Remember Luke is the beloved physician and traveling companion of Paul (see Acts 16).

The Gospels started with the birth of Jesus. Acts starts with the birth of the church.

It is a pivotal book, the hinge book, the bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles.

As the Gospel were a major turning point in the Bible from the OT to the NT, so the book of Acts is another major turning point, as God pivots from Jerusalem and the Jewish nation to the Gentile world, to the nations. It starts in Jerusalem and ends in Rome the center of the Roman Empire.

In the previous book, Luke says we read about all Jesus had begun to do and to teach (Acts 1:1). The implication is here, in this second book, we will see what Jesus will continue to do and to teach by means of His Holy Spirit through His church in the world.

It is a unique book in the NT.

Acts is invaluable as the only book in the Bible that gives is the chronological history of the church from the ascension forward.

Without Acts, there would be no account of fire and wind at Pentecost. No description of Peter's encounter with Cornelius. No narrative of the rise of the multiethnic church in Antioch. No story of Paul's visit to Philippi, Corinth, or Ephesus, or of Paul's trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea. (Patrick Schreiner).

Acts covers a period of about 30-35 years. Acts shows the step by step unprecedented expansion of the Christian Gospel and the Christian church across the then known world of the vast Roman Empire.

In only three decades, a small group of frightened believers in Jerusalem transformed into an empire-wide movement of people who had committed their lives to Jesus Christ.

History is God's story, God's purpose and plan to bring salvation to the nations.

In the NT the Gospels and Acts trace the path of God's continuing redemptive history in the NT. But the purpose of Acts is not just to give us the history of the early church. It isn't about the facts/details. Acts is a record of events that have been selected and arranged to present the message of the gospel.

Nothing is more prominent in Acts than the spread of the gospel through the preaching of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Greek verb for "preach the gospel" occurs more in this book than in any other in the New Testament. (Justin S. Holcomb).

30% of Acts is the preaching of sermons by Peter and Paul that explain the Gospel, salvation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to spread their witness on Christ's behalf to the Gentile world despite barriers of geography, ethnicity, culture, gender, and wealth.

In Acts, the gospel expands not through human strength, but through weakness, opposition, and persecution. Demonic forces, worldly powers and authorities, governmental opposition, language and cultural barriers, intense suffering and bloody persecution, unjust imprisonment, unbelief, internal disunity, and even shipwrecks and snakes all threaten to slow down the gospel's advance. But opposition and suffering do not thwart the spread of Jesus' grace; rather, they fuel it. (Justin S. Holcomb).

In the midst of so much suffering, we see the sovereign purposes of God. Nothing is out of His control, or beyond His God-glorifying purposes.

God is on the move, and the gates of hell, try as they might cannot prevail against it.

Acts 1:8

This is the key verse. This is the last recorded words of Jesus on earth.

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Jesus announces a promise, two things, the coming of the Holy Spirit and they will be witnesses. Jesus announces He is the ruler working through the power of His Holy Spirit, and the entire world is His realm.

This verse is the table of contents for the expansion of the gospel through the rest of the book of Acts. First Jerusalem (Acts 2:14), then Judea (Acts 2:14), then Samaria (Acts 8:5), and then out to uttermost part of the earth (Acts 28:16).

Acts 1-12, Jerusalem and Samaria, Jews, Peter.

Paul's conversion in 9

Peter's conversion in 10

Acts 13-28 the ends of the earth, Gentiles, Paul.

God used the persecution of Stephen and the saints in Acts 7 to propel the Gospel into Samaria

Acts 8:1 There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Then God used a vision to a Roman centurion and Peter to propel the Gospel out to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Jesus

What Jesus began to do and now what Jesus continued to do.

God promised in eternity to give His Son a kingdom, a church. Acts is the beginning of the fulfilment of that promise.

Luke's concern from the beginning of volume 1 to the end of volume 2 is the saving ministry of Jesus Christ. Man's sin and hopelessness, the need for repentance and the offer of divine forgiveness.

The message to Athens is the message to the whole world.

Acts 17:30-31 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Holy Spirit.

The Acts of the Holy Spirit. Beginning with Acts 1:8 "and you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come" there are 55 references to the Holy Spirit in Acts, more than all the Gospels combined (50).

The Holy Spirit appears at every significant development or turning point in Acts.

Acts 1 – the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2 – the descent of the Holy Spirit, poured out at Pentecost at the founding of the church, in power.

Acts 3-28 – the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the church.

Acts 6:5-7:55 the preaching of Stephen

Acts 8:12-25, 29 the preaching of Philip in Samaria and being sent to the Ethiopian eunuch

Acts 9:17 the filling and healing of Paul

Acts 10:44-45, 11:15 the conversion of Cornelius and the Gentiles

Pentecost.

Acts 13:4-10 the ordination of Paul and Barnabas on first missionary journey

The launching point for going to the ends of the earth.

Acts 13:2-4 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, *the Holy Spirit said*, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. 4 So, *being sent out by the Holy Spirit*, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

The Holy Spirit is the moving force behind the launching of the great missionary movement into Asia and Europe and the conversion of Gentiles

The spread of the Gospel and the massive growth of the church across the whole world can only be attributed to the supernatural work and sovereign power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel.

All of this was done in the face of impossible odds. What was humanly impossible was made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Despite every possible obstacle, the Gospel progressed unhindered all the way to Rome. This is nothing less than a miracle of God’s grace. The story that began in Jerusalem with 120 believers huddled in an upper room, now numbers tens of thousands scattered all around the Mediterranean. The Gospel concerning a humble Jesus of Nazareth is sweeping across the world and is now being preached in the capital of the Roman Empire, in the center of the world, by the man who at first violently and murderously opposed it.

Christianity has been carried from its cradle in Jerusalem to the imperial city of Rome. And one day Rome will fall, but Christianity will continue unhinderedly.

In Acts 28 Luke’s history is complete. His outline in Acts 1:8 is finished. The Gospel has spread to the ends of the earth, to Rome, the center of the Roman universe and the hub of humanity, of men from every race and nation.

The last word of the book of Acts is unhindered.

What a victorious picture, what a triumph of God over Satan. Jesus is spreading the Gospel until the ends of the earth become His possession, until all the nations are His, until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess.

Luke has reached the conclusion of his history, he has accomplished his task which was to show the objective has been reached.

God has staked His claim in the heart of the Roman empire and from there the salvation of God has grown into the largest religion in the world, reaching all cultures and crossing all boundaries, spreading to the ends of the earth.

Implications and application.

Acts, a radical challenge to today's contemporary culture and the contemporary church that has followed the culture.

To a culture of selfish individualism, Acts shows us a Christian community that held all things in common and sacrificed their own desires for the good of others.

To a culture where pluralism defines all truth as subjective, Acts shows us a Christian community certain of the objective facts about God and Jesus as universally true for all people. Jesus is the supreme Lord, apart from whom there is no salvation.

We see it in the church's boldness — that is, the church's outspoken clarity about the identity and significance of Jesus.

Acts 4:12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

To a culture that looks to techniques and methods, programs and marketing for success, Acts shows the Churches dependence on the Holy Spirit and prayer, on the power of a sovereign God.

In a culture that shuns and avoids suffering at all costs, Acts shows us a Christian community that willingly suffered for the cause of Christ and considered suffering a basic reality of discipleship, spiritual growth and maturity.

Acts 29.

The book of Acts is the only unfinished book in the Bible. It is still continuing.

Acts is not the end but the beginning of the rest of the story. The Gospel is still spreading, enduring defeats and enjoying triumph. It is a great story still being written and you and I have the immense privilege of being part of it.

Acts is about God, the God who continues his mission to glorify himself by blessing the nations through his chosen people according to the promise made to Abraham.

The coming of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the last days, the end times. We are living in the age of Spirit, the final period of God's redemptive plan until Jesus returns.

Here we are in Acts 29. We are another church planted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. May we always be by God's grace the twenty-ninth chapter of Acts. What part are you playing?

I want to conclude by reading one man's experience as he encountered the book of Acts. I first read this 40 years ago and have never forgotten it. A pastor by the name of J.B. Phillips set out to translate the NT into a modern paraphrase. Here is what he wrote after he finished translating Acts.

The Young Church in Action, Translator's Preface, by JB Phillips

“It is impossible to spend several months in close study of the remarkable short book, conventionally known as the Acts of the Apostles, without being profoundly *stirred* and, to be honest, *disturbed*. The reader is *stirred* because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. The newborn Church, as vulnerable as any human child, having neither money, influence nor power in the ordinary sense, is setting forth joyfully and courageously to win the pagan world for God through Christ. The young Church, like all young creatures, is appealing in its simplicity and singleheartedness. Here we are seeing the Church in its first youth, valiant and unspoiled – a body of ordinary men and women joined in an unconquerable fellowship never before seen on this earth.

“Yet we cannot help feeling *disturbed* as well as moved, for this surely is the Church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over-organization. These men did not make “acts of faith,” they believed; they did not “say their prayers,” they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they were uncomplicated and naïve by modern standards, we have ruefully to admit that they were open on the God-ward side in a way that is almost unknown today.

“No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings. Perhaps because of their very simplicity, perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be to die, the Spirit of God found what surely He must always be seeking – a fellowship of men and women so united in love and faith that He can work in them and through them with the minimum of let or hindrance. Consequently it is a matter of sober historical fact that never before has any small body of ordinary people so moved the world that their enemies could say, with tears of rage in their eyes, that *these men “have turned the world upside down!”*”

Prayer: Holy Father, by the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the inner working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, you have brought your glorious salvation to light in us. Would you cause the glorious light of the Gospel to continue to shine in our hearts, our homes, our church and in the world. And would you be pleased to make us effective witnesses through our love and good works bearing good fruit in our hearts and homes and church, for your glory. Do this by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and is now at work in us. In His strong name we pray, Amen.