

+ + Living in the Season of Pentecost + +

THE SPIRIT LIFE IN ACTS

Lesson Three: What the Church in Acts *Said* through the Spirit

(1) Review Lesson 2: What the Church in Acts *Did* through the Spirit

Continued the Work of Jesus. From the very first verse in Acts it is clear that the early church sets out to continue the work Jesus began. Like Jesus, they healed the sick, cast out demons, proclaimed the kingdom of God, announced that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the world's true king, and devoted themselves to prayer.

Empowered by the Spirit. And also as with Jesus, the early church in Acts was empowered by the Holy Spirit to do this work. Though Luke reports a wide variety of experiences the church had with the Spirit, these experiences always sought to unify and build up the church, and emboldened them to give a powerful witness in both word and deed that Jesus is Lord.

Working Together in Unity and Love. Such Spirit-empowered work was never given to lone rangers to accomplish on their own; it is the work of a unified and loving community. This communal life is presented as the fruit of the Spirit's work pointing toward the reconstituting of God's Temple over all creation.

REVIEW HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Read the entire book of Acts again in one sitting. As you do, reflect on the passages below with this question in mind: What did the church in Acts *say* through the Spirit, that is, what was the essence of their message? Be prepared to discuss.

Acts 2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31.

Questions to Consider

- What surprised you the most about these seven sermons?
- What was missing in these sermons that you expected to find?
- What did the early church make primary in its preaching?
- What prominent themes do these seven sermons share?
- How do these sermons differ from the message Jesus preached?
- How do these sermons differ from contemporary proclamations of Jesus?

(2) What Did the Church in Acts *Say* through the Spirit?

The Seven Sermons of Acts. Without a doubt, of all the things the early church did to continue the work of Jesus, they had a message to proclaim. Luke makes it clear that even and especially in their proclamations, as in their other actions, they were empowered by the Spirit to accomplish this task. But was the essence of their message? What did the early church actually *say* through the Spirit?

While there are numerous places throughout the book of Acts in which Luke records the gist of certain exchanges or provides summary reports of the church “speaking the word of God,” there are seven specific sermons made to gathered crowds in which Peter or Paul proclaim God’s message (2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31). Together, these seven sermons serve as a helpful guide in answering our question. What, then, do these sermons reveal?

That the early church proclaimed...

the whole story of Jesus... as the climax to Israel’s story

emphasizing his resurrection

declaring him both Lord and Messiah

calling everyone to give allegiance to him

(a) The Whole Story of Jesus

The preaching of Peter and Paul told the whole story of Jesus, not just one aspect of it. While certain aspects of Jesus’ life were highlighted more than others, particularly the resurrection, the entire story of Jesus was important for the early church—especially how that story connected to their story (see the next point).

- 2:22–33 *Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among us... killed by the hands of those outside the law... This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the father the promise of the Holy Spirit...*
- 10:36–43 *The message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ... That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil... They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear...*

The Four Books of the One Gospel. This observation coincides with the early church calling Matthew, Mark, Luke and John “the Gospel.” The early Christians weren’t describing these four books as a kind of literature, as if *gospel* was a genre. In fact, they didn’t even call these books “Gospels.” Instead, each book was called “the Gospel.” There is one Gospel according to four authors, and they were referred to as such because they each recounted the very good news that the early church proclaimed, which is the whole story of Jesus (Mark 1:1).

In the four Gospels, or better in the four books of the one Gospel...

—St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John* 36.1

The Gospel in Our Liturgy. Such an emphasis has been carried throughout history into our liturgy today. When the Gospel lesson is read, the reader says, “The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to...” And then an excerpt from the Gospel is read. These are the stories the early church proclaimed; together this is the good news, the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Keeping Focus on Jesus. In light of this, it is important to highlight a fairly obvious fact: the main subject of the early church’s preaching was Jesus, not the individual and his or her spiritual condition. Yes, the story of Jesus had huge implications for the individual, but the preaching of the early church focused primarily on Jesus, who he is and what he did.

(b) As the Climax to Israel’s Story

But the story of Jesus was never told in isolation, as if it could stand alone. It was told in the context of another story—the story of the Old Testament. The basic shape of the preaching in Acts is the story of Israel finding its climax and coming to its fulfillment in the story of Jesus.

- In Acts 2:14–29, Peter quotes Joel 2:28–32 to explain the giving of the Spirit, that the promised age of renewal is now here. This is happening, he says, because of the story of Jesus. He then quotes from Psalms 16 and 110 to show that Jesus is the promised Davidic king, proven by his resurrection, and that he is now reigning as the world’s true Lord. Peter pulls from the depths of Israel’s story to show that it all culminates in Jesus and the Spirit.
- Peter’s sermon in Acts 3:12–26, especially verses 18–26, connects the story of Jesus with the promises God made to Moses to raise up a prophet who would bring “universal restoration,” that is, God’s kingdom to earth. This is further connected to the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12 that through Israel God would bless all peoples on earth.

- Paul’s famous and lengthy sermon in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:16–41) proceeds straight through Israel’s story until he gets to Jesus, where he declares, “Of [David’s] posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (v 23). And then he sums up his message with this: “We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus” (vv 32–33).

Beyond the Book of Acts. Evidence that the primary message of the early church was the story of Jesus as the climax to Israel’s story is not confined to the sermons of Acts; it is the message of the entire New Testament. It is the gospel, the good news of Christianity.

- The four books of the one Gospel—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—emphasize this same theme of fulfillment. Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel sent to inaugurate the long-awaited kingdom of God on earth (e.g., Luke 1:46–55, 67–79; 2:11, 25–32, 38; 3:3–6; 4:14–21, 42–44; etc.).
- Throughout the New Testament, the phrase “according to the Scriptures” or something similar is used, not because there are a few verses in the Old Testament worth quoting that point to Jesus, but because the story of Jesus actually brings the entire story of Israel to its ultimate climax (Luke 24:27, 44–49; Romans 1:1–6; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11).

What about the Sermons to the Gentiles? When Peter and Paul are preaching to the Gentiles, as in Acts 10:34–43, 14:15–17, and 17:22–31, the story of Israel isn’t near as pronounced. In fact, some might argue that Israel’s story has disappeared altogether. So what’s going on? What becomes the context for Peter and Paul proclamation of Jesus in these cases? Answer: Israel’s story is still there.

The story of Israel is the sweep of how the Bible’s plot unfolds from creation to the fall, and from the election of Abraham and the covenant of Israel to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God’s people. One must remember that Israel’s story has a context too—the story of creation. God chose Israel to be the solution to the problem of the story of creation.

Remember that at creation, God gave humankind the task of ruling God’s world on his behalf and in his way. This task was radically distorted when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, bringing brokenness and death to all creation. The story of Israel is meant to get God’s creation project back on track. And so when Peter or Paul proclaim Jesus to non-Jewish audiences, they pull back and speak of God’s intentions for all creation, and that Jesus is the one God has appointed ultimately to sort out the mess, to “have the world judged in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

(c) Emphasizing His Resurrection

The sermons in Acts are one-sidedly focused on the resurrection. Even in Paul's famous sermon in Athens, the resurrection is mentioned while nothing is said of the death of Jesus on the cross. Interestingly, even when his death is mentioned in Acts, the sermons mostly emphasize the unjust nature of Jesus' death, and then quickly move on to the fact that God overturned Jesus' death by raising him from the dead (Acts 2:23–24, 3:14–15; 4:10–11; 10:39–40; 13:28–30).

THE CENTRALITY OF THE RESURRECTION IN ACTS

○ Resurrection	100%
○ OT Fulfillment	88%
○ Death/Suffering	88%
○ Christ/Lord	63%
○ Forgiveness	63%
○ Witness	50%
○ Repentance	50%
○ Judgment	38%

Paul's Defense Speeches. Beyond the seven sermons in Acts, after Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, he appears before a number of governors and officials to give a defense of his ministry and preaching. For each of his trials, the subject of resurrection keeps coming to the surface.

- On trial before Felix (Acts 24:21): *It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.*
- Festus' report about Paul to King Agrippa (Acts 25:19): *Instead [the Jewish leaders] had certain points of disagreement with [Paul] about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.*
- On trial before Agrippa (Acts 26:6–8): *And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors... It is for this hope, your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?*

Why is there such an emphasis placed on the resurrection in the preaching of Acts? What role does the resurrection play in the message of the early church?

(d) Declaring Him Both Lord and Messiah

The gospel is an announcement of something that is true, of something that has already happened. In the Roman world, when a new Caesar rose to power, a proclamation was sent throughout the entire declaring something like this: “We have good news. So-and-so is our new Emperor, and he will defend us and spread peace and justice throughout the land.” The word *gospel* was used in the Roman world for announcements like this. It wasn’t about persuading people; it was about stating a reality (and therefore, for Rome, demanding allegiance).

Similarly, the early church had its own announcement: God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah by raising him from the dead. That is why the resurrection is so important in the preaching of the early Christians. The promised Jewish king (Messiah) has come, and as promised in the Old Testament, he rules all nations (Lord). Fundamental to the early church is the announcement that Jesus, the one crucified and raised, is the Lord and the Messiah.

- Acts 2:36—*Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*
- Acts 10:36—*You know the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.*
- Acts 13:33—*He has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”* This psalm is a celebration of God’s Son, the Messiah, ruling over all nations.
- The most-quoted Old Testament verse in the entire New Testament is Psalm 110:1, which says, *The LORD says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”* This is another royal psalm proclaiming that Israel’s king (Messiah) will rule all the nations (Lord).
- Paul begins his famous letter to the Romans by saying that he has been called to preach the gospel about God’s Son, descended from David, declared by the resurrection to be Jesus Christ our Lord (1:1–5).
- When we say today “our Lord Jesus Christ,” we are affirming the same thing, that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth, who is alive today, is both Lord and Messiah.

(e) Calling Everyone to Give Allegiance to Him

When the story of Jesus is proclaimed as the climax of Israel's story, and when the crucified and risen Jesus is announced as Israel's Messiah and therefore the world's true Lord, then it inevitably calls people to either give allegiance to Jesus or not, to either make his story your own or not (Acts 2:37–41).

According to the book of Acts, giving allegiance to Jesus means binding oneself to a community of people who are doing the same, which is why both repentance and baptism are emphasized throughout the book of Acts. Repentance is the turning away from all other allegiances and alliances, and baptism is both publically identifying with Jesus and joining a new community of faith.

In this context, promises of renewal and forgiveness are offered, as well as the promised gift of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to and extend the reign of Jesus on earth. As the story moves forward and the church grows, glimpses of new creation begin to appear, pointing to the day when God's Temple will finally fill and restore all creation.

(3) Questions for Today's Church

Acts and Its Contemporary Application. It's common to hear expositors of Scripture caution folks not to apply wholesale the book of Acts to contemporary church situations. Often people are encouraged first to determine whether a passage in Acts is intended to be *descriptive* or *prescriptive* before moving toward contemporary application. However, while such an approach is better than nothing, it still creates the impression that portions of the Bible were written *to us* as modern-day readers. It is important to realize that the Bible, though *for* the church of every generation, is not written *to us*.

In that regard, it is wise to view the entire Bible as *descriptive*, not only narrative books like Acts, but also more *prescriptive*-feeling books like Proverbs. Though we live in age of the church, our situation and the situation of the early church are drastically different. So perhaps instead of asking which portions of Acts we are to imitate, we can ask how the entire story of Acts should inform us as we listen to the Holy Spirit today to continue the work of Jesus in our own unique context.

- What should be the signs of a church in Jackson filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit?
- If a church today finds the common life of the early church as described in Acts elusive, what might that church do to seek to remedy that?

- Is it fair to assume that the more Christians live a Spirit-filled life, the more we can expect signs and wonders of all kinds to take place among us?
- Should the Holy Spirit's coming on believers today be something observable, even dramatic?
- What are some ways the church today can practice radical generosity? ...can build up unity? ... can proclaim the lordship of Jesus?
- What role should the resurrection of Jesus play in how the church today shares the good news of Jesus with others?
- Does allegiance to Jesus as Lord factor into your understanding of what it means to be a Christian?
- What would be another challenging question to ask today's church based on the book of Acts?

Recommended Resources

Dawkins, Robby. *Do What Jesus Did: A Real-Life Field Guide to Healing the Sick, Routing Demons and Changing Lives Forever*. Minneapolis: Chosen, 2013.

Kurz, William S. *Acts of the Apostles*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013.

McKnight, Scot. *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Seng, Jordan. *Miracle Work: A Down-to-Earth Guide to Supernatural Ministries*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013.

Walton, John. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009.

Wright, N. T. *Acts for Everyone*. Two volumes. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.