

The Church's Purpose

Acts 1:1-11

This morning we begin a new preaching series in the book of Acts. Acts is the fifth book in the New Testament, right after the four Gospels. If you have been with us for a little bit, you'll know that we spent last fall up through last Sunday in the Gospels, looking at select stories and paying close attention to how Jesus loved those he encountered, and what that means for how he loves us.

And the Gospels of course are some of the most famous books in the New Testament. That's where we find the story of Jesus—his miraculous birth, his sinless life, his teaching and miracles, his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. In fact, all of that is so important that we don't just have one book telling the story of Jesus; we have *four books* telling that story. It's the cornerstone of our faith.

And it's tempting to think that with the conclusion of the Gospels, so concludes the story of Jesus. He was here for some 33 years; he died, was raised, and ascended to heaven. And then the story moves on. To a *new* story, the story of the church—its birth and growth and ministry and struggles and spread.

And Acts does tell the story of the church. But that story is not so disconnected from the story of Jesus as we might be tempted to think. And that's what we see in the opening verses of this book, that what follows, what we're going to see this winter and spring as we look at selected passages from this book, is that Jesus *continues his work on earth* by *commissioning his church* to bear witness to him and his kingdom among all nations in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that's good news for us—that Jesus is alive and he is still at work. That's good news any day, but especially as we enter into a season of transition while not just maintaining, but moving forward in our vision to see Christ treasured above all things.

The Context of Acts: Continuing the Story of Jesus (1:1-5)

If you ever watch television shows where the story builds from week to week, then you're familiar with how every new episode begins—with a recap of the previous episode, right? “Previously on the Flash...” And you need that recap, because you need the *context of what happened before* to make sense of the story you're about to be told.

That's exactly how Luke starts the book of Acts—with a recap of his first book, Luke. “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up . . .” (1:1-2).

We know that Luke and Acts were written by the same author, because both were addressed to a man named Theophilus (cf. Lk 1:3). We believe that author was Luke, the doctor Paul mentions in Colossians 4 (v. 14; cf. 2 Tim. 4:11; Phm. 1:24), because there's strong consensus of that in early church history.

And so Luke starts by reminding his readers that the story you're about to read is not a new story. It's a continuation of the story that came before—the story of Jesus. Do you remember how Matthew starts his Gospel? With a genealogy. A genealogy stretching all the way back to Abraham and David, which is his way of saying that the story of the Gospels doesn't begin in the New Testament either. It's rooted in the Old Testament story of God's creation and covenant promises to Abraham and Israel—promises now fulfilled and realized in the story of Jesus you're about to read.

In the same way, Luke anchors the book of Acts in the story of the Gospels. He reminds his readers what that Gospel was about—“all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up”—and then retells the conclusion of the story, echoing the end of Luke 24. *The story of Jesus isn't over; it's still being told.* In fact, some scholars have suggested that the traditional title of the book, “The Acts of the Apostles,” doesn't really do justice to the book's emphasis. As John Stott suggests, a better title might be “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through the Apostles.”¹ Or as Kent Hughes proposes, “The Acts of the Risen Christ through the Holy Spirit Working through the Church.”²

Not that anyone would actually change the title. But it helps to think of the book this way. And that's not just nitpicking. It's critical for understanding the context of Acts and the commission of the church—that there is an intentional continuity between Christ's work and our call. As another scholar explains, “What the early church said and did was rooted in and connected to activity in which the risen Jesus was involved. Indeed, the point is that without Jesus and his work, one cannot make sense of the church's existence and activity.”³

And so in drawing that link, notice what Luke emphasizes in his opening lines. First and foremost, he emphasizes that *Christ is risen and reigning*. Verse 3: “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Jesus is alive. The story of Jesus doesn't end in John 21; he rose bodily from the grave, having conquered death, and is right now, at this very moment and to all eternity, seated at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus is risen and reigning. He still rules his church as our living and abiding king. And the apostles were witnesses to this. They saw, over the course of forty days, Jesus demonstrate in numerous ways the fact that the man whom they all saw crucified, the man Roman officials declared dead, the man who was buried in the grave for three days, is more alive today than any of us are capable of conceiving. He *is* the resurrection and the life. And even though he accomplished the work on earth his Father sent him to do—his perfect life, sinless death, vindicating resurrection—he continues his work from heaven in ruling his church and bringing his finished work to bear through the Holy Spirit.

¹ John Stott, John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (BST; Leicester, UK: IVP, 1990), 34.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Acts* (ESV Edition) (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014). Kindle Edition.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 53.

Second, Luke emphasizes that before ascending to heaven, *Jesus commissioned his apostles*. The church has work to do. Middle of v. 2, “he was taken up, *after* he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.” Jesus planned for how to carry his story forward after his resurrection and ascension. At the beginning of his ministry, “he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach” (Mk. 3:14). Much of Jesus’ earthly ministry was devoted to training these twelve for the mission that would come when Jesus’ time on earth was complete. And in the book of Acts, it’s go time. So Luke starts by reminding us of that connection.

Third, Luke reminds readers of Jesus’ promise to equip his church for that ministry. In vv. 4-5, he reiterates what he said earlier in Luke 24:49: “And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’”

The apostles have a mission. The church has a mission. But it’s not something they can accomplish on their own. And so Luke reiterates Jesus’ promise of the Spirit—a promise that stretches not only back to the Gospels, but all the way back to the Old Testament and the promise of God to renew his people, to remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh, and put his Spirit within them, and cause them to walk in his statutes and be careful to obey his rules (see Ezek. 36:25-27).

So Luke starts by setting the context: the story we’re about to read is not a new story; it’s the next chapter of an ongoing story that began not even just in the Gospels, but in the Old Testament, that pivots on Jesus, and one in which Jesus remains a central and active player.

Verses 6-11 then launch that new chapter. Again, by retelling the conclusion of Luke, but by zeroing in on a few details that help us clarify the church’s purpose.

The Commission of the Church: Spirit-Empowered Witness to the End of the Earth (1:6-11)

What’s interesting in these verses is that we realize pretty quickly that we’re not the only ones tempted to think that because the story of Jesus recorded in the Gospels is over, that his story is now done. Verse 6 brings us to Bethany (cf. Lk. 24:50), where the disciples are gathered together with Jesus just before his ascension. And look at what they ask him: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6).

It’s a fair question. It shows that they clearly recognized that who Jesus is and what he accomplished is directly connected to the promises of God in the Old Testament. Promises like Isaiah 2, or Isaiah 60, or Jeremiah 23, to deliver Israel from her enemies and restore her former glory. Remember that Israel has been occupied territory for generations, under the oppression of Rome. If Israel’s promised king is here, then isn’t it time for the glory of Israel to be restored, as God foretold long ago?

Again—fair question. But it assumes a couple of things. First, that God is going to fulfill those promises in an exclusively nationalist way, when in fact God has in mind the renewal of all nations in a new earth (cf. Isa. 65:17ff; Rev. 21:1ff). And second, and most significant to the context here, *it assumes that the story of Jesus is done*. That it’s time for the end. The Gospels

are over, Jesus accomplished his work on the cross—let the end now come. What the apostles don't realize is that the story isn't over, it's just entering into a new chapter—one in which they are called to play a major role.

This is what Jesus redirects them to in vv. 7-8. Rather than correcting them, he simply sets aside their question—"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (v. 7). And then he focuses them on the main thing. He gives them what we often call the "Great Commission," the purpose of the church: "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" (v. 8).

Each Gospel ends with some version of this charge (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Mk. Mark 16:15⁴; Lk. 24:46-49; John 20:21). It is the church's purpose, what Jesus sends us into the world to do. Every organization, every group, every club or company has their charter—their statement of what they exist to do. This is the church's charter. But here in Acts, that commission comes at the beginning, not the end, and as such, it shapes the theme and structure of the entire book.

We can summarize what v. 8 tells us about our purpose with a series of 'm-words': the Church's *mission*, *might*, *mission field*, and *motivation*.

Mission. First, our *mission*: to bear witness to Christ. That's the charge. "You will be my witnesses," Jesus says. What does that mean?

For those who've grown up in the church, the phrase "witnessing" is often used as shorthand for telling people about Jesus, evangelism. And that's basically true. But the word comes from the context of the law court. When someone is on trial, the prosecution and defense both call *witnesses* to the stand, right? And what do those witnesses do? They offer testimony of what they saw or experienced relative to the case being tried.

To bear witness is to give a faithful account of what one has seen and heard. Jesus chose his apostles to be witnesses of his resurrection and reign—to give testimony to the watching world that Jesus Christ is risen, that he is the true Lord and Savior of the world. This is a consistent theme throughout Acts:

- When the apostles select a replacement for Judas, his job is to "become a *witness* to his resurrection" (1:22).
- Peter proclaims in ch. 2:32: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all *witnesses*." (cf. 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-43; 26:16).

And so the essential mission of the apostles, and with them the church, is to not to restore God's kingdom (as the disciples wondered about), or even to "build" his kingdom, or redeem the culture, or "join God" in his mission of radical restoration (you hear a lot of phrases like that today, none of which are actually used in Scripture to describe our work, because God is the only one who can do those things). Our mission is to *bear witness* to Christ and his kingdom, to witness to Christ and his radical redemption, witness to Christ and the power of his grace to change everything.

⁴ While the earliest manuscripts do not have Mark 16:9-20, we still see the Great Commission in Mark 13:10; 14:9.

When you look ahead at what the apostles talk about when they bear witness, there is a singular message: not what we do for God, but what he has done for us through his Son. Their message is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins for everyone who believes. In fact, the language of *preaching, proclamation, declaring* punctuates this book. When Luke summarizes the advance of the gospel, the growth of the church through people coming to Christ, he does so by saying:

- “And the *word* of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem . . .” (Acts 6:7)
- “But the *word* of God increased and multiplied.” (12:24)
- “So the *word* of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.” (19:20)

And what is that word? What is that news? Again, it’s not advice on how to fix your broken relationship with God, or even less, how to improve your life. It is an announcement of what *God* has done to redeem your life through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Listen to how Peter summarizes it in Acts 10:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree,⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (10:38-43)

Jesus is our message—repentance and faith in him.

Now does that mean that all we do in bearing witness is talk? That the church is all word and no action? Absolutely not. One of the most powerful testimonies of the church in Acts was their love for one another, their kindness and compassion (cf. 2:42-47). We bear witness to Christ in both word *and* deed, in gospel proclamation and loving service. Both are necessary. Otherwise both our love and our words are hollow. But Jesus is our message. And he changes everything.

And yet, our mission is impossible to carry out in our own strength. Notice again how, after giving them the charge to bear witness to him, he commanded the apostles to stay put in Jerusalem for ten days. To delay executing their orders. Why? Because Jesus doesn’t just send us, he equips us. And he does that through the Holy Spirit.

Might. This is the church’s *might*—the Holy Spirit. Our power and strength. Verse 8 again: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .”

The fact that Jesus’ story continues through the witness of his church doesn’t mean that we don’t still need his grace, his presence. That we’ve got it from here. As we’ll see later in the book (ch. 4), Jesus didn’t select the apostles for their natural ability and leadership talent. He didn’t hold auditions, or go around looking for the best and brightest. He chose ordinary, uneducated men

(4:13). Nor does he send us today because of what we bring to the table. The purpose of the church is not natural; it's *supernatural*. It's something that can only be accomplished by God.

And God promises the presence of his Spirit to accomplish his work. Jesus says in John 16:7 that it's actually better for us for him to go away, "for if I do not go away," he says, "the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." And we'll see that unfold next week when we look at ch. 2. But it's the *Spirit's* presence that equips and qualifies God's people for gospel witness. As one author writes, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon followers of Christ, the most unlikely people become fountains of power."⁵

And like the proclamation of God's Word, that power dominates the book. Luke goes out of his way to specify the presence, the power, and the activity of the Holy Spirit at every turn in the story.

- Acts 4:8: "Then Peter, filled with the *Holy Spirit*, said to them . . ."
- 9:31: "And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the *Holy Spirit*, [the church] multiplied."
- 13:2: "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.'"

This is a church on fire, burning with passion for God and fueled by his presence (a presence marked initially by tongues of fire over the heads of the apostles at Pentecost). And in the Spirit's power (not the people's power, but the Spirit's power), the gospel begins to spread across the known world. Which brings us to the next point . . .

Mission Field. The church's *mission field*, which is both local and global. Again, v. 8: ". . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Notice there's a concentric structure to their mission field. It begins right where they are, in Jerusalem. Then it spreads to surrounding region as they send people out. And eventually God's vision is for the gospel to spread to the end of the earth.

In fact, this geographic description supplies the structure for Luke's book. Chapters 1-7 focus on the gospel's spread in Jerusalem, then chs. 8-11 in Judea and Samaria, and chs. 12-28 toward the ends of the earth. What's interesting, though, is that it takes another kind of fire to move the church out of Jerusalem to fulfill this mission—the fires of persecution. And that fire punctuates the book as well (metaphorically speaking). Whether from Jews threatened by the claims of Christ, or Gentiles threatened by the opposition to their idolatry, Christ's messengers are regularly met with incredible obstacles—slander, imprisonment, beatings, even death.

Yet as we'll see in the weeks ahead, these fires, as painful as they are, cannot thwart the gospel's growth. Instead fuel its spread. The gospel of Jesus will prevail. It's the purpose and privilege of the church to take part in that mission.

And there's an urgency to that mission. That's the final "m": *motivation*.

⁵ Hughes.

Motivation. After Jesus finished his charge, we read in vv. 9-11 that he ascends to heaven, and the disciples kind of stand there, slack-jawed. Which again, I get. You don't see the king of the universe lifted up into heaven every day.

But as they stand there, they are visited by two angels who say to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (1:11).

Again, the story's not over. As one author explains, "Jesus may not be visibly present, but the plan moves on and the new community has a task to perform until he returns. The point [here] is really a command: do not look up and merely be idle, waiting for the return, but move out and share what God's program in Jesus is all about."⁶

There is an urgency to the church's mission. Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead (cf. 10:42; 17:30-31). "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12).

And the point of that urgency is not to panic or freak out, or puff ourselves up in pride because 'we're safe from the coming judgment.' The point is to be focused and passionate about what God has sent us into the world to do. We have something so good, so satisfying, so life-changing, so eternally significant—how dare we keep it to ourselves? Our motivation is not to win arguments or show people that we're right, but to share the love of God that we've received in Christ. A love that knows us deeply and completely, that accepts us as we are. A love that gave everything on the cross to make that acceptance possible. A love that is unwilling to leave us as we are, but graciously changes us to become more and more like Christ. That's something to be passionate about sharing. Paul expressed it this way in ch. 20:24: "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

Lesslie Newbigin, a British missionary and pastor, once wrote: "The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move—hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one."⁷ And as John Stott adds: "We have no liberty to stop until both ends have been reached."⁸

The story of Jesus is not over—not at the end of the Gospels, and not today. Rather, Jesus continues his work on earth by commissioning his church to bear witness to him and his kingdom among all nations in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And for what it's worth, neither is the story of Westgate. Yes, we're entering a season of transition. But that doesn't scare God; he's the one orchestrating it. So it need not scare us. By his grace, and with fresh faith and a deep dependence on the Holy Spirit, 2019 can be a banner year of gospel growth for this church. It *Christ's* power and *Christ's* presence through the Spirit that makes the difference.

⁶ Bock, 60.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, as cited in Stott, 44.

⁸ Stott, 44.

And so may we take this season to lean into our call. May God give us a richer understanding of that call as we work our way through Acts. May he give us a deeper dependence on the Holy Spirit within us. May he give us clarity and passion as we strengthen our outreach efforts in the months ahead. May Christ be treasured above all things throughout Metrowest Boston and in every corner of the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. If you were responsible to come up with a plan for carrying out the work Jesus started, what would it look like?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What similarities do you notice between this passage and the last few verses of Luke 24?
3. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in the opening of this book? What themes or ideas stand out?
4. What role do you think verse 8 might play in the shape of the book?
5. What role should verse 8 play in the life of the church?
6. How would you summarize the main point of 1:1-11?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. How can we discern what in the book of Acts is descriptive (i.e., a record of what happened), and what is prescriptive (i.e., what should happen today)?
8. What do you think the Lord wants us to do in response to this passage?
9. What practical steps can you take as a home group in living out Acts 1:8?