

I. Message

Good morning! Last week, we finished our journey through Acts. But before we move on, let's look back at a few things. First of all, **Acts 1:1-2** points back toward the Gospel of Luke, **"In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen."**

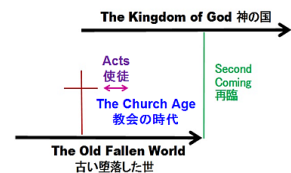
As these words reflect, the Gospel of Luke records the life of Jesus. Acts follows Luke's gospel as a continuation of the history of the Good News of salvation. Both books were addressed to Theophilus, possibly a Roman official involved in Paul's appeal to Caesar. But when translated, Theophilus means, *"friend of God."* So, Luke is writing to all who desire a close relationship with God. The opening words of Luke stress that his reliance on eyewitness testimony and careful investigation. In **Luke 1:4**, Luke states his purpose, **"so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."**

Luke's gospel focuses on showing us the truth about Jesus birth, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension so that we can believe in Jesus and follow Him with confidence. Acts continues the story by telling us how the Good News spread after Jesus' return to heaven. At first glance, the ministry of the apostles may seem to be the center of attention in Acts, but a closer look reveals that the focus is really on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The ministry is done through the apostles and disciples, but it is empowered by the Spirit.



The theme of Acts is set forth in **Acts 1:8**, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** The apostles and disciples will take the Good News of Jesus to the ends of the earth, but they will do so only by the power of the Holy Spirit. So, we can say that Luke's gospel records the ministry of Jesus and Acts records the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

If we consider the theology of the cross of Christ, we know that God judged the sins of the world on the cross. We often think of God's judgment as coming at the end of history, but for all who trust in Jesus, our sins have already been judged and paid for in full by Jesus on the cross. Because of this, the believer is washed clean and is made a citizen of heaven. This brings the Kingdom of God into the world in an invisible, but very real way.



The old fallen world of sin, suffering, and death, still continues and will continue until the Second Coming. But a new thing has begun. Through the power of the Spirit, God is establishing His Kingdom, in our hearts. When we walk by the Spirit and have the fruit and power of the Spirit in our lives, we can experience many of the blessings of the Kingdom of God in this life. This experience of God's rule is a blessing and encouragement to us and a witness to the world.

The time between the first coming of Jesus and His second coming is called the church age. During this time period, God's love is revealed and demonstrated to the world primarily through us, the church. The Book of Acts records the history of the birth and growth of the church in the early years.

In the Jewish culture of Bible times, a young person was not considered an adult until they reached 30 years of age. When we consider that Acts covers just over 30 years of history, we might say that Acts covers the time from the birth of the church, through its adolescence and youth, and into the first days of its adulthood. Like the diary of a young girl growing up, Acts is the story of the church growing in size and maturity, on the way to become the bride of Christ.

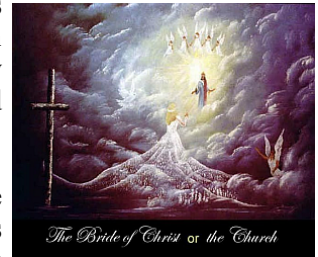


This description of the church speaks of the deep love, joy, and unity that can be found in our relationship with Jesus. The plan of God to unite the church with Jesus, God the Son, was made before the heavens and the earth were created.



So, we can see that God created men and women so that the very best moments in the very best marriages can be a small foretaste of heaven.

Together, the church and the Spirit of God invite people into relationship with Jesus. **Revelation 22:17** says, **"The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."** This invitation is for all who are thirsty for love, joy, and peace. In relationship with Christ Jesus, our thirst is quenched and we can find satisfaction in life.



The story of the church will be complete when Christ and His bride become one at the great marriage feast. **Revelation 19:7** encourages us, **"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."** Before the wedding can take place, the bride, the church, needs to be ready, complete and mature. Acts tells how the church was born by the power of the Spirit and how it grows by the power of the Spirit. The numerical and geographical growth of the church is part of the story. But the formation of foundational theology and models for church life and ministry are even more important.

Last week we noted that Acts ends rather suddenly, as if Luke had stopped writing before the story was finished. There are historical reasons for that. But the unfinished ending also reflects how the story is still continuing. Churches continue to add new chapters to Acts. The church will continue growing until Jesus comes to take His bride home. We need to make ourselves, the church, ready for that day.

The church was born when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with power. **Acts 2:4**, **"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."** The prophecy of Joel was fulfilled, Peter gave a powerful message, and three thousand people were added to the church.



Peter's message focused on Jesus and on His death and resurrection. **Acts 2:22-24**, **"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."**



Peter's message set the pattern for Christian preaching. From this time forward, the coming of Jesus, His death on the cross, and His resurrection form the core of the evangelistic message of the church. This pattern continues throughout Acts and still today. Christian faith centers on Jesus and on His death and resurrection. Without Jesus there can be no Christian faith; with Jesus there cannot be anything else.

This emphasis on Christ alone continues in Acts and in all of Scripture. **Acts 4:12** states it clearly, **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."** Many people struggle with this teaching because human society has taught them to think that there should be many ways to be saved. And in every culture people do try to find ways to heaven and mankind creates many different philosophies and religions hoping to build a bridge to heaven.

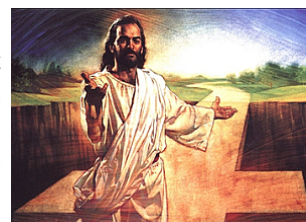


But the Bible does not teach a religion or philosophy made by man. The Bible is the Word of God and the salvation offered by Jesus comes from God, not from man. Take a look at this photo. Was the bridge built from the island to the mainland? No. It could not have been built that way; there is not enough wood on the island. The bridge had to be built from the mainland to the island.



Now consider this analogy. Heaven is a vast continent and earth is a small island. Mankind cannot build a bridge to heaven; there is not enough suitable material on earth. For a bridge between heaven and earth, the material needed is holiness and perfect righteousness. These are very rare in this fallen world of sin and death. The holiness and righteousness to build the bridge must come from heaven and the bridge must be built from there.

Jesus came down from heaven to be the sinless sacrifice for the sins of the world. God built this bridge at the cross of Christ. The holiness and perfect righteousness needed to build the bridge were found in Jesus. Jesus offered His life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins and in doing so He built the bridge. Now Jesus invites us to cross over to eternal life. **Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”**



On the cross, God paid a great price to provide one perfect bridge that allows us to cross from this island of sin and suffering into heaven. How could there another bridge? Man cannot build it; there is no storehouse of holiness and righteousness on earth for use in building such a bridge. And there is no reason for God to build a second bridge when the one bridge of the cross is sufficient for all of our needs.

The salvation offered by Jesus is absolutely unique and there is no salvation apart from Jesus. This was one of the first foundational doctrines settled by the early church. The apostles had seen the proof of God’s love at the cross and they had met the resurrected Jesus. So, throughout Acts, Jesus is always presented as the only Savior by whom we may be saved. This strong conviction motivated them to preach Jesus everywhere they went.

However, widespread preaching soon brought new questions. The decision to share the Good News with all people had to be made and then made again. First, Philip decided to proclaim the Name of Jesus to the people of Samaria. Many came to faith were baptized. The Jews had been prejudiced against the Samaritan people for centuries, so Philip’s decision to preach in Samaria shows how the Holy Spirit changed the hearts of the followers of Jesus.



The Spirit also led Philip to preach to the Ethiopian eunuch. When he saw the man reading Isaiah, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. The man said no. **Acts 8:35**, tells us, **“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”** Philip’s love for this foreigner opened the way for the gospel to spread to all of Ethiopia. Philip’s sharing in Samaria and with the Ethiopian man started the flow of the gospel to people beyond the Jews. But the Ethiopian and the Samaritans were people who believed in the God of the Bible. The wall dividing the Jews and the gentiles had not yet been fully breached.



Another step in affirming that Jesus is Savior for all was when God gave Peter a vision of unclean animals and told him to kill and eat. At first Peter refused, but the Lord replied in **Acts 10:15**, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”** The vision taught that the ceremonial food laws of the Jews did not apply to the Christian community, but more importantly, the vision showed that the apostles should open their hearts to the Gentiles.



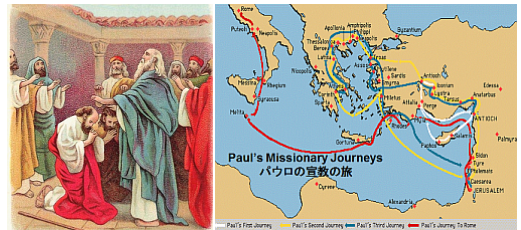
Immediately after this, Peter was invited to the home of Cornelius to share about Jesus. Peter went, and the Holy Spirit came upon all who were present. When Peter explained to the other apostles what had happened, he said (**Acts 11:17**), **“So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”** The others responded (**Acts 11:18**), **“When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.’”**



Today, it is obvious to us that the Good News of Jesus is for all nations and peoples. So it is easy for us to miss the significance of what the apostles decided here. In the history of Israel, the Jews had always

thought that the nations could be saved only by accepting circumcision and the Law of Moses and becoming Jewish. Now the church is recognizing that God is saving Gentiles without their having to become Jews first. Soon after this, the gospel was preached to the Gentiles in Antioch and many came to faith.

With this, the stage is set for the Antioch Church to begin sending missionaries to the nations and the Lord soon directed that Barnabas and Saul be sent out. This is after the Lord appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road, but Saul truly becomes Paul the apostle only after being sent. I won't attempt to review Paul's ministry today, but we know that during his three missionary journeys and on his trip to Rome he made a huge contribution to the growth of the young church.



Although the apostles had already recognized that God was bringing salvation to the Gentiles, the question of the relationship between the gospel and the Law of Moses continued to be raised and was really only settled in Acts 15. At the Council of Jerusalem in **Acts 15:11**, Peter responded to the suggestion that the Gentiles be required to submit to the law by saying, **“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”**



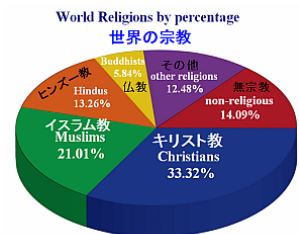
After this, the Council firmly decided that Christians are not under the Law of Moses. The three foundational doctrines that we have just discussed were and are essential to the growth of the church. (1) Jesus is the only Savior, (2) The Gospel is for all people, and (3) Christians are free from the Law of Moses.



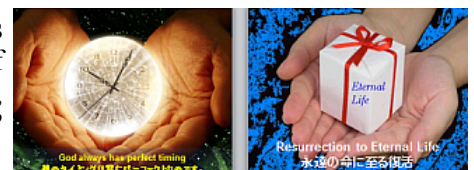
In reading Acts, the external growth of the church in reaching new lands may be what we notice first. But growth in doctrine and practice was also essential for the maturity of the church. Doctrines concerning the work of the Holy Spirit, the nature of the cross and resurrection, and practices such as the appointment of elders and deacons, are also developed in Acts, along with many other foundational teachings. But the proclamation of salvation for all, through faith in Christ alone, and with freedom from the law formed a core doctrine early in the growth of the church.

## II. Conclusion

All of this rests on the historical facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Since the time of Acts the church has grown so much that about a third of all people alive today identify themselves as Christians. This growth of the church continues every day. What about us? Most of us here this morning are Christians. But I pray that all of us, and all of people we influence, might believe the Good News of Jesus and be saved.



If you have not yet made the decision to believe, perhaps today is God's perfect timing for you to accept the free gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In **Acts 2:21**, Peter declared, **“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** The invitation is for you. Let's pray.



## III. Prayer