

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Introduction to Acts, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 44-1

I have been telling you for a number of weeks that we wanted to study together the book of Acts, and I do want to do that. But I want to wait till the first of the year when everything sort of gets back to a little more normal pace and everybody can kind of get us started together. But in anticipation of that, I want to direct your attention tonight, and probably next week, because I'm not going to be able to get through everything I want to say to you, to essentially what is going to be an introduction to the book of Acts, okay? So get your Bible and open it to the book of Acts and we may actually get to the book of Acts in a little while. But you can have it there.

The book of Acts begins with this statement, chapter 1 verse 1, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach." And that introduces us to the fact that the writer of the book of Acts has written something else. In fact, the writer is no other than Luke. Luke is the historian who wrote the gospel of Luke and directed it to the same person, Theophilus. The gospel of Luke includes in the opening verses this statement, "It seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the exact truth about the things you've been taught."

So, Luke, the beloved physician companion of the Apostle Paul, wrote the gospel of Luke and by that opening statement in the book of Acts, we note that he also wrote the book of Acts. For him, it was one long, long history that engulfs a huge chunk of the New Testament; the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. So just to establish in your mind that Luke is the writer. And I'm not going to go further than that into detail, that's enough for us to know tonight.

While you have one writer and essentially one history starting with the beginning of the gospel of Luke and ending with the end of the book of Acts, one great sweeping history, it is clear that it is the Holy Spirit's design to split these into two volumes because there is such a dramatic change between the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. And that dramatic change primarily occurs in the transformation of the Apostles, the transformation of the Apostles. What strikes you is that the gospel of Luke concludes with bewildered Apostles, a fearing Apostles, hiding Apostles, confused Apostles, reluctant preachers of Christ. Yes, the resurrection, of course, energizes them and yes early in the book of Acts we read the history of the coming of the Holy Spirit, that explains, of course, a great measure of the transformation of these Apostles. But when you shut down the gospels, you still wonder what the future of these men will be, whether they will be bold, or whether they will be cowards.

But as soon as you get into the book of Acts, you find that they are not only bold, they are downright courageous, something dramatic has happened in their lives. It could be explained by...by the resurrection, certainly that's part of it. It could be explained, as we will find out in chapter 2, by the coming of the Holy Spirit who empowers them. But there's another element to this transformation that is very often overlooked and I think it plays an equally critical role in the transformation of these men from cowards who were hiding in fear of their lives, to bold preaching of the gospel of Christ in the city of Jerusalem, in the open streets, and even in the temple, the very domain of the leaders of Israel who had killed Jesus. Not only did they preach Jesus and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, but they indicted the rulers of Israel for murdering their own Messiah.

The dramatic transformation of these men from the "O you of little faith" association, from the struggling, fearful disciples that we're so familiar with, to these emboldened, empowered, courageous preachers who hold back nothing, has occurred because of one other critical reality. And it is this, for the first time they now understand the Old Testament. They understand the big picture. They understand that the plan of redemption that God has set in motion, all the way back at the beginning of the Old Testament after the Fall of man is working out through Jesus Christ. We could say, "Yes, the resurrection emboldened them, yes, the coming of the Holy Spirit empowered them." But it was also this grasp of the reality of redemption history and the understanding of the Old Testament. It wasn't until after the resurrection that they understood the Old Testament, and by that I mean that they understood that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

In fact, if you go back into the gospel of Luke, you are made very much aware of the fact that they were confused even about that. They were confused about who Jesus was because they were confused about the Old Testament. In chapter 9 of Luke, verse 43, "Everyone was marveling at all that He was doing, so He said to His disciples, 'Let these words sink into your ears for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.'" That is to say to be killed. "But they did not understand this statement. They did not understand this statement." That could be said pretty much most of the time.

When Jesus spoke about His death, they never did understand that. Later on in chapter 18 and verse 31, "He took the Twelve aside and said to them, 'Behold, we're going up to Jerusalem and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished, for He will be handed over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and mistreated, and spit upon and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him and the third day He will rise again,'" then verse 34 says, "But the disciples understood none of these things and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them and they did not comprehend the things that were said."

They didn't understand the suffering of the Messiah because they couldn't connect it to the Old Testament. They had a truncated view of the Old Testament that had been filtered by their traditional

Judaism which left out the most important elements, the suffering and atoning death of the Messiah and His subsequent resurrection. They didn't grasp the Old Testament, so they were struggling...whatever Jesus was doing and whatever He was saying, to connect it with their expectation because their sense of Messiah didn't come purely from the Old Testament, but rather from their tradition.

However, after His death and after His resurrection, there was an incident that happened back in Luke 24. Turn back to Luke 24 and the last chapter of volume 1 of Luke's history, and you remember some of the disciples were on the road to Emmaus, they didn't know that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They were very sad because they had hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah. They believed Him, they say, to be a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people. But in verse 20 they recognized the chief priests and rulers, delivered Him to the sentence of death and crucified Him and we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel.

Well, if they knew the Old Testament, they would have known that when He was put to death, that was what God intended to be the redemptive work for Israel and the world, but they were confused about what the Old Testament taught regarding Messiah until they met the risen Christ and in verse 25, "He said to them, 'O foolish men and slow of heart, to believe in all that the prophets have spoken.' Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and to enter into His glory? And then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." Meaning the Old Testament. So on the road to Emmaus, He gave them really for the first time an understanding of the Old testament that encompassed His suffering, His death, the atonement and His resurrection. For the first time then, they began to understand the Old Testament. That was the few on the road to Emmaus. Later that evening He met with all the rest of the disciples in the Upper Room and verse 45 of Luke 24 says, "He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures," meaning the Old Testament, "and He said to them, 'Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem.'"

Jesus explained to them from the Old Testament when they were all gathered together that Messiah would suffer and die and rise again and then that the gospel concerning Him would be preached, the message of repentance, the promise of forgiveness of sins, to all the nations beginning at Jerusalem and extending across the globe. Jesus then says in verse 49, "I'm sending forth the promise of My Father upon you," meaning the Holy Spirit, "to enable you to do that, Acts begins, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the earth." They weren't sent out until the Spirit came. The Spirit didn't come until they had come to understand the Old Testament teaching regarding Messiah.

So what empowered them, yes the reality of the resurrection, yes the coming of the Holy Spirit, but I think overall what liberated them to preach with power was the sense that Jesus indeed was the

fulfillment of the Old Testament that God's redemptive plan was on schedule and being fulfilled through Him. So when you come to the book of Acts, you begin to notice right away, when you look at your Bible, just drop your eyes down to the first couple of pages of the book of Acts, and I don't know how it's structured in your Bible but in many Bibles where you have an Old Testament quote, it's set off in different font and you don't read very far in the book of Acts in chapter 1 you see a quote from the Old Testament. In chapter 2 you see a long quote from the Old Testament. And again in chapter 2 you see another long quote from the Old Testament. And you come over to chapter 4 and you see another significant quote from the Old Testament.

What has happened here, all of these quotes from the Old Testament come out of the mouth of the Apostles. For the first time, they understand the Old Testament and they are referring to the Old Testament prophecies regarding Christ. This was exhilarating for them. This was empowering to them because they had all this hesitation and all this confusion, and all this wonder, and all this doubt, and all this mystery about the fact that Jesus was sent from God, was a mighty prophet, claimed to be the Son of God, was in fact the Holy One of God, but He didn't fit their traditional messianic image. Once it became clear on the road to Emmaus and then the Upper Room that the Old Testament was being fulfilled through His suffering and His death and His resurrection, and that they would be empowered to spread the message and that the redemptive purpose of God from eternity past was on schedule and the next phase was going to come through them as they proclaimed it into the future. They were set free from doubts and questions.

And so, when you get into the early part of the book of Acts, you run immediately into their use of the Old Testament. Peter in chapter 1 verse 20 is talking about Judas. "Brethren," he says, "the Scripture had to be fulfilled, verse 16, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas. This is Peter. Peter is now going back to the Old Testament and saying that there is Scripture from David in the Psalms that was fulfilled in Judas. And he quotes it in verse 20. "For it is written in the book of Psalms, let his homestead be made desolate, let no one dwell in it and let another man take his office."

In the explanation of Judas, and the replacing of Judas, Peter actually sees this as a fulfillment of the Old Testament. And by the way, that's from Psalm 69:25 and also a reference there also, a quote from Psalm 109 verse 8. Here's Peter talking spontaneously and he just plucks out Psalm 69:25, Psalm 109:8 because now he has a new kind of facility, a new kind of alacrity with the Old Testament and he seeing it like he never saw it before.

Chapter 2, Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes, we'll look at all of this, and Peter gets up again. And Peter has now become the resident Old Testament expert. He stands up in verse 14 with the eleven, raises his voice and says, "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, may it be known to you and give heed to my words, these men are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day, but this is that which was spoken through the prophet Joel." So now, Peter for the

first time understands that the prophecy of Joel 2:28 and 29 has a preliminary fulfillment in the events of Pentecost. This is all brand new...brand new. Regarding Pentecost, regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit, this is what Joel was talking about in a preliminary way when the Lord pours out His Spirit. He gives the extensive prophecy from Joel which, of course, will not have its final fulfillment until the end of human history and the glorious day of the Lord noted in verse 20. But in the meantime, whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Here's Peter who didn't understand the Old Testament before the Lord explained it that night in the Upper Room, and now he can draw on the Old Testament. Familiar with these things, he can stand up spontaneously because he knows the Old Testament and now he knows what it is predicting.

Down in verse 25, that familiar message of Peter on the resurrection, God raised up Jesus, putting an end to the agony of death, since it is impossible for him to be held in its power, and then he quotes Psalm 16:8 to 11, "For David says of him, 'I saw the Lord...etc., etc.'" For the first time he understands the prophecy of Psalm 16. He also understands the prophecy of Psalm 110. Later in that message, down in verse 34, it was not David who was ascended into heaven, but he himself said, "The Lord said to My Lord, sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

You have to understand the euphoria that grabbed the hearts of these men when for the first time they understood the Old Testament all along, had not only been pointing to Christ, but it even pointed to Judas and it even pointed to Pentecost and it pointed to the coming of the Holy Spirit. This was exhilarating, to put it mildly.

You come over to chapter 4 in those early days of the Apostles preaching and they're powerful preachers, they're filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter again, the spokesman in verse 8, filled with the Holy Spirit, Acts 4:8, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man," because they had healed the man, "as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you, and all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by this name this man stands here before you in good health." Wow! Bold, isn't it?

And then he can't resist it. Out of his mouth just from his memory comes Psalm 118:22, and he hears himself saying, "He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief cornerstone." Wow! Peter who didn't seem to be able to understand anything, Peter who was told by Jesus that He was going to die and said, "No, no, no, Lord, You're not going to die...You're not going to die. That's not going to happen. That's not the plan. And to whom Jesus then said, 'Get behind Me...what?...Satan.'" He was so oblivious to the plan of God that he took Satan's side and didn't know it. But post-the Upper Room and the instruction of Jesus, after it was explained to him that all that had happened to Jesus, all about His rejection, all about His suffering, all about His death, all about His resurrection was planned and laid out in detail in the Old Testament sweeping all the way

to His coronation and exaltation, everything made sense. He gets the full picture.

Chapter 4, again a little later in the chapter, and again it's still Peter and John together, verse 23 of chapter 4, "When they had been released, they went to their own companions, reported all that the chief priests and the elders said to them," you remember they told them they were not allowed to preach, they threatened them. "And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, 'O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.'" This is borrowed from a number of Old Testament passages and, verse 25, "By the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David, Your servant, said, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, the peoples rage, the nations rage and the peoples devise futile things. The Kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His anointed, His Messiah, His Christ.'"

What are they quoting there? Psalm 2...Psalm 2 made sense for the first time. Psalm 2 predicts that the nations, rulers, kings would take their stand against Christ and against the Lord Himself, the Lord God.

They weren't going to be threatened by fearful warnings given by the leaders of Israel. They weren't going to be cowards anymore. They now knew that they were right in the middle of the unfolding of all the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament, down to the details. They had a clear view of the Old Testament, and a clear view of messianic prophecy, and prophecies related to aspects of the Messiah's life and suffering, and resurrection and coronation for the first time. There are two really dramatic long sermons in the book of Acts. One is in chapter 7 and one is in chapter 13. The one in chapter 7 is preached by Stephen, he was a leader in the church. The one in chapter 13 is preached by Paul. Both of them are prolonged narratives of the Old Testament history leading to Christ. I think this is just a remarkable way to understand what was going on in the lives of these men. They had a grasp but they were a part of this redemptive plan of God that was unfolding according to the details that had been laid out in the past. And I think that played a very large role in the transformation of these men.

The book of Acts continues the history of God's redemptive plan. And now the men through whom that history will be written, by whom it will be written and basically the characters who literally lived that history also for the first time understand it.

It might be hard for you to grasp the exhilaration of this because you understand it, I understand it. But they didn't. Acts then continues the story. Some people call it The Acts of the Apostles, that's all right. Some people call it the Acts of the Holy Spirit, that's all right. But I really think the main character in the book of Acts is the same main character that was in the Old Testament and the same main character that was in the gospels. The main character is God. These are the acts of God who is working out the plan of redemption. If the Old Testament thrilled you because of what it promised, if

the gospels thrilled you because of the account of the fulfillment of those promises in Christ, let me tell you, the book of Acts ought to thrill you as well because the book of Acts is the story that is still going on of which you are a part. And how wonderful is it that God has allowed you to be in a place where you have been taught the meaning of the Old Testament, the meaning of redemption unfolding in Christ, and now, if you haven't learned it before, the history that flows out of the gospels as recorded in the book of Acts. Acts is narrative history, it's narrative like the Old Testament is narrative. It's narrative like the four gospels are narrative. And the main person acting is God. The Old Testament is about God acting in blessing and judgment. The New Testament is about God acting in the bringing of His Son and acting to bring about redemption through His Son. And the book of Acts is about God acting through the Apostles and the church to preach the gospel to fulfill the plan. God is continuing His redemptive work.

I think for the first time the Apostles got above the fray. They got instead of the worm's eye view, the bird's eye view, they got on top of it all and they began to really grasp it that God is continuing His redemptive work, fulfilling His plan to save His own for His eternal glory. He's doing it through Christ. He accomplished everything He wanted to accomplish in Christ in the incarnation. He ascended to heaven. The Spirit has come, empowered us and we write the next chapter of history as God's plan unfolds.

How would they be able to do that? Well, Jesus had promised them, hadn't He? The Holy Spirit will come upon you. He said that to them in chapter 1 verse 8 just before His ascension, "You'll receive power after the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You'll be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost part of the earth."

What happened was basically the apostolic preaching of the gospel. The next chapter was the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of the gospel established the church and the church then took over. The apostles died off, the last one, John at the end of the first century, and the Apostles are gone. They've left their doctrine inscripturated in the New Testament. And the church has become essentially the caretaker of gospel truth until Jesus comes.

That's why the Apostles went out to preach the gospel and to establish the church because they saw this sweeping plan. Which then raises the question, which comes down to us, by what means does the Lord now build His church? By what means does the Lord now build His church? Because this is our history now. The Apostles have passed off the scene. They pass off the scene in the book of Acts. Peter and John disappear in the first half of the book of Acts. Paul disappears at the end of the book of Acts. But the church now is established. The church then becomes God's instrument in the world. Don't we need the Apostles? No we don't need the men because we have their doctrine, right? We have what they have written inspired by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

So by what means then does the Lord empower His church to carry on redemptive history? A very, very, important question. Very compelling question because we have to respond to that question. It wasn't helpful when the Apostles didn't understand. It's not helpful if the church doesn't understand. If the church gets confused about its purpose, about its mission, about its means, about its calling, much is lost.

So again the question, by what means does the Lord continue His redemptive plan through His church? The answer is not obscure, not complicated, not difficult, not debatable, not vague, it's established in the book of Acts pretty clearly, and it's the same today as it was then.

It's amazing the range of confusion there is about what the church is supposed to be in the world, what we're supposed to do because the Scripture doesn't leave us in any confusion at all. So what I want to do, just maybe tonight and next Sunday night, is kind of give you an overview of the means that God has ordained by which the church advances the Kingdom and the unfolding redemptive plan of God in the world until He comes. We're essentially by the power of the Holy Spirit writing the final chapters. We want to stay on schedule and we want to stay on point, fulfilling our duty because we have this calling from God. The promise, says Acts 2:39, is for you and your children, and all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself. That just looks all the way down the annals of human history. God's saving promise, "Repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins and receive the Holy Spirit and this promise is for you and your children, and everybody outside as long as history goes on. That's our job, to call people to repent and be baptized and believe and be forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit. This is the church's purpose in the world.

How did that early church go? How did they do? Well, I hear a lot about church growth, have for a number of years, but I've never heard about a story that equals the story of the New Testament growth. Really pretty staggering. Let's go back to chapter 1 and just get kind of an overview. Chapter 1 tells us that the Apostles mentioned in verse 13, minus Judas Iscariot, were all with one mind, continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women...women who were followers of Jesus and Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers who had become converted after the resurrection. And at this time, Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren, a gathering of about 120 persons...about 120 persons. That's kind of the beginning of the Jerusalem church, 120 persons.

That doesn't stay small for very long because if you go to chapter 2 verse 41, you read that on the Day of Pentecost in response to the preaching of Peter, verse 41, "Those who had received His Word were baptized and that day there were added about three thousand souls." Now the church has gone from 120 to 3,000 people converted on one day.

Then you go down to verse 47 of chapter 2, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." Now this is an imperfect tense which means continuous, continuous, continuous, continuous. We don't even know the number. But when you come to chapter 4 and verse

4, “Many of those who had heard the message believed and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. So you’ve got 120, you’ve got three thousand, you’ve got people being added every day, you’ve got five thousand men, not counting women, are we approaching twenty-thousand people? This is the last specific number, chapter 4 verse 4. Why is it the last specific number? Because it’s growing so fast, I think they lost count. Chapter 5 verse 14, “And all the more believers in the Lord multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number.

How many now? No more numbers, too fast to count. Chapter 6 verse 7, “The Word of God kept on spreading and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. The numbers are exponential at this point, it’s just happening so fast. Chapter 9 verse 31, “The church throughout all Judea and Galilee,” now it leaves Jerusalem, it starts to spread after tens of thousands of people have come to salvation under the apostolic preaching of the gospel. Now it spreads from Judea into Galilee and into Samaria and throughout all those areas. They enjoyed peace, the church did, being built up and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. Again the emphasis on the explosive growth, it has jumped out of Jerusalem into Judea, up into Galilee, over into Samaria. People are being converted rapidly as the church expands under the preaching of the gospel.

You come to chapter 12 after the death of Herod, verse 24, “The Word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” You come to chapter 16, this is just a pattern all the way through, chapter 16, you’re into the Gentile world now and the churches were not believers but churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily.

I mean, I’d like to have the number, wouldn’t you? I’d love to know how many tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people have been saved in these early beginning months and years as the gospel exploded. Why did it explode? Under the faithful preaching of the gospel. There were no gimmicks. Chapter 17, the Apostle Paul, of course, is now the main human character. The Apostle Paul, it is said in verse 12, ‘Under his preaching, many believed along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.’ This was in Berea, wherever they went. Chapter 19 and verse 20, “The Word of the Lord in Asia Minor was growing mightily and prevailing.” This continues to be the story until the final verse of Acts, Acts 28:31, “Preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness unhindered,” referring to Paul.

I don’t know that there is an even close parallel in the history of the church to this massive explosion of salvation, the greatest story of church growth ever, ever. It was the Apostles who were the preachers, with the addition of that one in due season, that odd-man-out Apostle, Paul. Under the apostolic preaching of the cross and the gospel, the church exploded. Astonishing growth in weeks and months and years under their preaching. That’s the story of the book of Acts, just exploding and exploding, and exploding, and exploding, and exploding.

This had to be exhilarating for the Apostles who were living it, to see this kind of response when they had been persecuted and hated at the very beginning. That's the story. But we need to look a little deeper into the story. What were the features? What were the elements that characterized this early church? What generated this kind of explosive growth?

Now we can't save people, we can preach the gospel. We can't determine what God will do in any time or generation or location. But we are the church, just as they were the church, the early church. We are the church. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to the very same principles, same elements, same features, same duties, same responsibilities that they had.

So we need to ask the question, what were the means that God used to grow the church like that? And I want to give you some of those. But our time is almost gone. So, let me give you one out of six or so. First of all, they had a transcendent message. They had a transcendent message. This is so obvious that it may embarrass someone who hasn't considered this. The church was born in the truth. We were begotten again by the Word of truth, Peter 1:23, it is the word that gives life. Jesus even said that, "My words are life. So it was the message. It was the message. And what was the message? Christ, Him crucified, risen, ascended, coming again, they preached Christ.

You know what is so interesting to me is that this message went everywhere without regard for the culture that it was being delivered to. The message transcended all languages, it transcended all nations. They were taking this message out of the Jewish world, into the Gentile world. And life in ancient times was not identified as a global village, even under the *Pax Romana*, there was still independent language and independent culture and traditions and customs that were inimitable to these various assembling of people. But the gospel transcended all languages, all nations, all cultures, all societal norms, all contexts, all status in terms of finance, all status in terms of education. There was no mass media, sort of normalizing one culture all over the globe. They were deep-seeded, distinct, cherished, engrained cultural perspectives, every village had them, every little region had them, every nation had them. In those ancient times, cities went to war with other cities. But the cultures had absolutely no effect on the transcendent message of the gospel. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel Be witnesses of Me." That was the command from the very beginning, that the message didn't change, it couldn't change. And even non the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, there were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the districts of Libya around Cyrene, people from Rome, Jews, Proselytes, Cretans, Arabs, they were all in Jerusalem. But they were all also everywhere else. And the same message was preached to them all.

In fact, on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter preached, he preached one message to all gathered from those nations that were mentioned and he preached Christ crucified and risen from the dead, and Christ as Lord and called on those people, whatever their language, whatever their nation,

whatever their societal norms to repent and believe the gospel. The result, three thousand responded in faith and were baptized.

Now many of those obviously didn't live in Jerusalem, they were just there because it was Pentecost. And so the believers in Jerusalem had to absorb them into their homes. They didn't want to go home because this was the only church in the world, the only church in the world.

Paul has to go around later on and raise money to give to the Christians in Jerusalem who are housing these people who have not left. The gospel transcended all cultures, all attitudes. Peter's sermon went to everybody without regard for how they viewed the world around them because they all had a universal problem...sin. They all had a universal need...deliverance. And there was only one Savior and one gospel and Peter called on everyone to believe. That was the message wherever they went, that was the message wherever Paul went. He was criticized for that, wasn't he? He was mocked. He was mocked for the absence of oratory, for being unimpressive, for not being some kind of a dynamic personality. He was mocked for the simplicity of his message. He didn't come with human wisdom. He came and preached Christ and Him crucified. And that, to them, was foolishness.

The modern cry, I think, for contextualization is a kind of curse. It is a kind of curse. The Apostles and the prophets of the early church, took their transcendent message from Jerusalem to Rome, from the biblically literate Jews to the biblically illiterate Gentiles. They took their message from slaves to slave owners, from bond to free, from Jew to Greek, from men to women. They crossed the hard borders and barriers of national social cultural lines and they never changed the message.

Why? Because it is the message that God has sent. It is the Word of the Lord. I don't know if you need to be reminded of this, but it might help. The New Testament epistles may seem complicated to you, they may be challenging to fully understand. Keep this in mind, the New Testament epistle is essentially the epistles of Paul, were written to Gentile churches full of brand-new believers who had no Old Testament background at all. And there's no attempt to accommodate the gospel or the instruction that Paul gives them to their culture.

Contextualization at a national level, or a contextualization at a zip code level is a shameful thing. The message of Christ is transcendent. It crosses the world, it ignores the nuances of social order, the peculiarities of custom, style is pointless, meaningless. Our message has to go to any person, to every person, to any place, to every place. Our message has to ignore the trends and the fads and the pop culture and bring heaven's truth down in its full...listen...its full alien character

Sometimes I tell pastors, "If you can't get your sermons out of your zip code, they are shameful. There ought to be a warning label on your CDs, 'This message self-destructs two weeks after it was preached, or if removed from this location.'" If the message isn't valid anywhere and everywhere in the world, then it isn't valid anywhere. The only context you need to master is the biblical context, it is

the Word of the Lord that saves and sanctifies.

You know, we're living today in a world not unlike that ancient world in this sense. The neighborhoods around us are pretty much the same. I mean, we've got some cultural pockets here, don't we? We've got some cultural pockets in Los Angeles. One of the things that I love about this place is it's the world...it's the world. But basically we're kind of exposed to much the same culture. But now that we have the Internet, now that we have technology, now that we have ways to transport digitized information, people can listen to messages preached at Grace Community Church anywhere on the planet. I know Grace To You is now beginning a new effort to translate into languages that we've never been in before. We don't change the message. What you hear here on a Sunday out of this pulpit is exactly what people in a rice paddy in Viet Nam are listening to today. The message is transcendent. And it is the Word itself that saves.

Back to verse 41, "So then those who had received His Word were baptized, three thousand were added to the church." So by what means does the Lord advance His redemptive purpose? First, through the Apostles who are energized because they got a grasp of the big picture, understood the Old Testament, and understood therefore Christ is the true fulfillment of it, got the picture of the role they were to play, they pass off the scene. By the time they pass off the scene, they've established churches, they've ordained elders in those churches, preachers, the church goes on and takes over the responsibility until Jesus comes.

Will the church succeed? Jesus said, "I'll build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, or the gates of Hades." We are that church. Our mandate is the same as the mandate of the Apostles and the early church. And it all starts with the fact that we have a transcendent message. Years have gone by, trends have come and gone, we've watched them. I've watched them since I came here in 1969, and we don't pay attention to them. I don't pay any attention to them because they're irrelevant to interpreting the Scripture which is what is relevant. So we have a transcendent message.

There's a second principle, I'll just mention it to you, that characterized the early church. They maintained a commitment to a transcendent message. They maintained a commitment to a regenerate congregation. They maintained a commitment to a regenerate congregation.

What do I mean by that? To say that the church is obviously an assembly of true believers and true worshipers. It's not an event for non-Christians to call an assembly of non-believers having some kind of experience, a church is preposterous...it's preposterous. The church is the called out gathered people of God who come together to worship and be edified. There's a serious defect in any situation where we don't understand what the church is. The church is the assembly of God's redeemed people.

Acts 2, look at verse 42. “The saved...verse 41...the three thousand who were saved, baptized, were continually devoting themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, Apostles’ doctrine, fellowship,” that’s spiritual sharing of life, breaking of bread, that’s the Lord’s Table, and prayer. Who is doing that? Those people who believed and were added to the church. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe, many wonders and signs taking place through the Apostles, and all those who had believed were together. That’s what a church is. It’s the believers who are together. Verse 46, “Day by day continuing with one mind in the Temple, breaking bread from house-to-house, taking their meals together, gladness, sincerity of heart marks them, praising God.” The church, one mind, one heart, their possessions they would readily and eagerly share.

Down in chapter 4 verse 31, “They were all together praying, gathered together when they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the Word of God with boldness. And the congregation, verse 32, of those who believed were of one heart and soul...one heart and soul.” All filled with the Holy Spirit. The Lord’s church is an assembly of regenerate believers, totally devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ who are true worshipers, gathered together for the Apostles’ doctrine for fellowship, for the breaking of bread and prayer.

The early church understood what a church is. To design an event for unbelievers, that’s fine. To design an evangelistic event, that’s fine. But to call it a church is to confuse the reality. The church is an assembly of God’s redeemed people.

You say, “Well, that’s not going to work for church growth.” Yes it is. Verse 47, this is a good place to end, of Acts 2, “They were all together daily with gladness, sincerity of heart, praising God, having favor with all the people and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” The Lord does the saving, the Lord does the adding.

How did we ever come up with what they call churches today that don’t even resemble this? So what are the means then that the Lord has ordained for the church to carry on the history of God’s redemption? Means, number one, a transcendent message, the gospel which never changes. Means number two, a regenerate congregation, the church has to be the church. Unbelievers can watch, can see it, can’t be a part of it. Even a sinning believer needs to be put out of the church if he doesn’t repent, right? It’s a collection of believers to come together to be edified and to worship, that’s a church.

When Christ builds His church, it will be marked by those things. The message that never changes, a congregation of those who are truly redeemed.

Now there are a whole lot of other things to share with you and we’ll save those for next Sunday night, okay? And then we’ll have a few breaks. When we hit January, we’ll go into the details of the

book of Acts. Let's pray.

We bring this day to a close reluctantly, Lord, it's been such a wonderful day...fellowship, music, opening Your Word, thinking deeply about our calling and our identity. How privileged we are to be exposed to the truth in a world of opinions and notions and ideas and no way to know who's right and who's wrong. We come together to hear the absolute truth. May we be faithful as Christians, may we be faithful as believers individually, may we be faithful collectively as a church, to the duties and the callings to which You've called us in the unfolding of redemptive history. It's important that we understand the Old Testament and its promises. It's critical that we understand how they were perfectly fulfilled in Christ. It's essential that we understand the role that the Apostles played which was so unique and their teaching which eventually was inscripturated even before it found its way under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit into the Scripture itself was attested to by signs and wonders and mighty miracles. And now the Apostles have long since disappeared. But the writings that the Spirit inspired them to write are in our hands and we study them as we have tonight to know our role, the part we play as this history continues to be written until Jesus comes. May we be faithful so that You can add daily those that You save to Your church. Thank You for these precious friends who love the fellowship, who love the Word and who have come tonight to be edified. What a blessing. Bless everyone, use us for Your glory, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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