

Last week, Pastor Michael concluded our series in The Gospel of Luke. Luke ended with an explanation, a commission, a promise, and some instructions (Luke 24:46-48):

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

Then Jesus ascended into heaven, and his disciples returned to Jerusalem to worship and to wait.

Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke left off. We'll be studying Acts in our fall and spring Bible Studies (and Adult Foundations classes). And so I thought it might be helpful to give at least a brief introduction to the book.

Rather than attempt to cram in an overview of the entire book this morning (you can get that as you read it on your own), I thought I would introduce you to a few (though certainly not *all*) of the major themes we encounter in Acts.

**We'll look at five themes.** As I reviewed our service guide this week, I couldn't help but notice that the hymn we sang—"The Church's One Foundation"—summarized several of the themes of Acts. So, I'm going to use lines from that hymn as my points. Perhaps that will help you memorize those themes. Or, perhaps, you'll want to memorize that hymn, sing it as you study Acts, and ask how Acts might illumine the song.

### **Point 1 — The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord.**

Acts opens with this wonderful line—"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..." That's an interesting phrase, isn't it? "All that Jesus *began* to do and teach..." If you think that "*began* to do" makes it sound like Jesus was not finished doing and teaching when he was taken up, you would be correct. Luke hints at the fact that Jesus has more work to do, which is what Acts is also about—the continued work and teaching of Jesus in establishing his church.

In Acts 4, when Peter and John are set before the Council and examined because they had healed a man, Peter declared, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone." Everything that is unfolding in God's plan of salvation and in the founding of the church (the people of God) begins with and flows from the rejected, crucified, and risen Jesus Christ.

We see this at the end of Luke, where Jesus explains that his crucifixion and resurrection are the fulfillment of Scripture—the Gospel is the "whole counsel of God," everything the Scriptures pointed toward. Furthermore, he says, forgiveness of sins through his death and resurrection is to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. And that proclamation is empowered through the Holy Spirit, who is sent by Jesus who—having accomplished salvation through his death and resurrection now ascends and pours out his Spirit that the work might be applied.

Every aspect of the founding of the church in the Acts flows from the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is why the Apostle Paul will write in his letter to the Ephesians (2:20-21) that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” Though God gave foundational truth to his people through the apostles and the prophets, that foundation builds on one cornerstone—Christ Jesus.

If you build on a different cornerstone, you have a different church.

**Questions for Application and Discussion** — What does it mean for Christ to be the cornerstone of our church? How does this truth appear in Acts? What would it look like to build our church on a cornerstone other than Christ? Would you recognize it if we did?

### **Point 2 — She is His new creation by Spirit.**

The original hymn—written by the Anglican priest Samuel Stone—reads, “She is his new creation by *water* and the word.” But, since we’re Baptists, we’re naturally afraid of water and edit it out as often as possible. Nevertheless, our hymnal reads “She [the church] is his new creation by Spirit”—and, since that fits a major theme of Acts really well, we’ll keep it.

In verse 4, Jesus instructs his disciples to “wait for the promise of the Father,” which is “baptism with the Holy Spirit.” He says in verse 8, “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 ends of the earth.”

Chapter 2 sees this promise fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and gave them utterance. Peter declares that this is a fulfillment of the prophet Joel, through whom God declared that one day he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh from the greatest to the least.

This indwelling with the Holy Spirit marked a significant milestone in God’s plan of redemption. In the Garden in Eden—which was a sanctuary of sorts, God walked with his people. However, they were cast out of this sanctuary, away from the presence of the Lord. The rest of the Bible looks for the restoration of God dwelling with his people.

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit certainly regenerated believers, giving them faith and repentance. He filled special people on special occasions to do or say special things—a filling that could come and go. But we do not see the Holy Spirit permanently indwelling the individual people of God. The Spirit did not dwell *in* God’s people—he dwelt in the Tabernacle, and later the Temple (temporary reconstructions of Eden).

But now, recall the verse from Ephesians that I read earlier, the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being

the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” Now, the dwelling of God is once again with his people—for he dwells *in* them. God has taken up residency in his *new temple*—the church, which is comprised of his believing people (temples themselves!). (You should notice that the Gospel of Luke ended with the disciples “continually in the temple.” But the movement in Acts is away from gathering in the Temple to gathering in local homes. This is because the local church—as the Body of Christ—is the temple of God.)

As you walk through Acts, you will see the Holy Spirit convert people—regenerating them, granting them faith and repentance. You will see the Holy Spirit sanctifying the church—bringing conviction of sin, clarification in doctrine. You will see the Holy Spirit empower the church for mission—men and women, young and old, will herald the crucified and risen Jesus and see people respond in faith!

**Questions for Application and Discussion** — Christian, do you believe that the Spirit of God indwells you? Do you believe that the Holy Spirit who gave you a second birth, who gave you faith and repentance, who was given to you by Christ for the sake of being his witness—do you believe that Spirit will stop empowering and working through you now? What would it look like to live and minister believing that God Himself dwells in you?

### **Point 3 — She is His new creation by the Word.**

The hymn explains what it means by “the Word:”

From Heav’n He came and sought her  
To be His holy bride,  
With His own blood He bought her,  
And for her life He died.

This is what we call “the Gospel.” In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul says the Gospel that saves us consists of two primary facts: **Christ died for our sins. Christ rose from the dead.** This is what Jesus, at the conclusion of Luke, explained the Scriptures foretold.

Christ came from heaven to redeem his people to be his bride. She was in bondage to the debt of her sin, condemned to pay the penalty of death. But Jesus shed his blood to purchase her, dying to give her life. Then he rose from the dead, demonstrating his victory in this quest.

As you read Acts, you will see that God is making his people a new creation through that message—the Gospel. In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preaches that Jesus of Nazareth was sinless (holy), was God-in-the-flesh (Lord), was the Messiah, was crucified and raised from the dead so that forgiveness of sins could be granted to all who repent and believe in Him. It is this same Gospel of a crucified and risen Messiah that will be preached again and again throughout Acts—whether to Jew or to Gentile.

**Question for Application and Discussion** — First, do you believe the Gospel? Do you believe that Jesus is God’s Anointed King, who died for your sins, suffering the wrath of God for the evil that you have done, and was raised from the dead? Have you turned from your sin and trusted that God will forgive you for Jesus’ sake? Do you believe that God has made you a new creation through the Gospel?

Second question—How do you seek to see others become new creations? Are you proclaiming the Gospel? How is it that the Spirit and the Word come to people throughout Acts? It is through God’s people proclaiming the Gospel! God makes sinners his new creation through his people proclaiming his Gospel. This is why Jesus says in verse 8, “you will be my witnesses.” God gathers and grows his people through his people preaching the Gospel to one another.

That gets back to the question for our first point—What would it look like to build on a cornerstone other than Jesus Christ? It would look like trying to evangelize sinners, to disciple believers, and to build churches on something other than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Thinking about the proclamation of the Gospel brings us to our next point:

**Point 4 — She is from every nation, yet one o’er all the earth.**

A major theme of Acts is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. The Gospel is not for Jews only, but Gentiles—for everyone who will hear and believe. Jesus says in verse 8, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Those four locations do *not* translate for us into “Ames... Iowa... America... the world.” Those four locations have specific theological significance.

Jerusalem is the capital city of Israel and the location of the Temple, the center of the Jewish religion. Judea is the region in which Jerusalem was found, where many Jews would reside. Samaria was a region in which Jewish-Gentile “half-breeds” resided who had differences in theology and practice (and who hated and were hated-by the Jews). The ends of the earth includes everywhere beyond the borders of Israel.

Jesus is saying that the proclamation of the Gospel will begin with the Jewish people to whom he first came, and then it will continue from there out to every tongue, tribe, people, and nation on earth.

That listing of locations—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth—becomes an outline for the progress of the Gospel in Acts. But the inclusion of the Gentiles is hard for the church to grasp. They deal with (what is essentially) racism in the distribution of bread to widows. And Peter will require a special vision from heaven to understand that God has made the Gentiles clean through the Gospel. But the book will end with Paul—not in Jerusalem but in Rome—preaching the Gospel to Gentiles.

There are not multiple ways through which people are saved or become God's people. As Peter says, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." There is not a salvation for Jews that is different than the salvation for Gentiles. There is not a separate plan of salvation for children and adults or for men and women or for rich and poor or for slave and free or for one ethnicity versus another. This truth should cause us to long deeply for the fullest possible unity we can enjoy with other believers this side of the New Heavens and New Earth without violating our conscience before the Lord.

**Questions for Application and Discussion** — How should the fact that the Gospel is the means of salvation for any and all peoples shape how you think of other ethnicities and of the nations of the earth? How should it give you hope in the face of the evils of ethnic supremacy, nations at war, and a global church divided by schisms? How should it make you pray and preach?

We're looking for a day when those of us who are "one over all the earth" in Christ, will be fully and truly one together with him. And so, our fifth point:

**Point 5 — 'Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war, she waits the consummation of peace forever more.**

The disciples ask Jesus in verse 6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" They believed he was the Messiah. So, they reasoned, if the Messiah has appeared, then the Kingdom must be restored to Israel!

Jesus answers wisely, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes..." Christians debate Jesus' answer. Some look for a special time in the future when a geo-political state of Israel has the Kingdom restored to it. I lean a different direction, toward understanding Jesus to offer a gentle correction. The disciples could not, at this point, understand what it looked like for the Kingdom to be restored. *But* they would be empowered by the Spirit to do the work of the restoration. For as the Gospel is preached to Jew and Gentile who respond in faith, the kingdom is being restored, a new creation is invading the present order, and heaven is being seen on earth. The fullness of this will not be experienced until—as the angels in verse 11 promised—"This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." That return will mark the full and final restoration of the Kingdom of God. But that will not come until the Gospel is preached to the ends of the earth and the fulness of God's elect are gathered in.

The church is *waiting* for the "consummation of peace." That's a great word—consummation. It means "the ultimate end," to "bring to completion." It hints at the fact that something has been inaugurated, begun. The disciples have seen and experienced the peace of Christ—they are reconciled to God through

the forgiveness of sins! But not everything is new and peaceful yet. So, they wait for it.

And the church waits “amid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war.” Suffering is a major theme in Acts—and Luke wants us to know that suffering is not out of God’s control! It was necessary, Jesus taught, that the Christ “should suffer and on the third day rise.” If it was necessary of the Christ, it is necessary of his body, the church. If salvation comes to the world through the means of suffering, it will be proclaimed to the world through means of suffering. You’ll see this in Acts. The world declares war on the church. She is persecuted, imprisoned, and put to death. And yet, this persecution only becomes a means used by God to scatter the seed of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Why does suffering serve the Gospel? Because the church is built on the cornerstone of Christ and cannot be shaken. She is waiting for him. So, our hymn ends:

Till with the vision glorious  
Her longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious  
Shall be the church at rest.

That’s who you are, brothers and sisters—“the great church victorious.” You’re already victorious—that is not a title we’re waiting for. We have already overcome the world through the victory of faith because faith unites us with Christ who overcame the world.

We are victorious, but we are *not* at rest. We await the vision of Christ returning. We await the consummation of peace forevermore. We wait amid toil and tribulation. But we *wait*. Waiting implies expectation, and expectation implies belief. We wait because we know that the Jesus who lived for us, died for us, rose for us, ascended for us, and dwells in us by the Spirit will also return for us. And what do we do while we wait?

For the cause of Christ the King  
We give our lives, an offering  
'Til all the earth resounds  
With ceaseless praise  
To the Son

For the cause of Christ we go  
With joy to reap, with faith to sow  
As many see  
And many put their trust in the Son<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gettymusic.com/for-the-cause>