



**That night the Lord stood near him and said, “Keep up your courage!
For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem,
so you must bear witness also in Rome.” Acts 23:11**

Church of the Holy Spirit (Part 2)

The Acts of the Apostles is about the expansion and triumph of the good news of Jesus Christ as it penetrates the world from Jerusalem to Rome. It tells the story of a community of disciples that is centered on God’s saving work, led by the Holy Spirit, living faithfully in a way that serves others, and sent to proclaim the gospel through the words and deeds of their lives.

In the first half of Acts, we learned that the shape of the book is formed by the missionary mandate given to the apostles by the risen Lord: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). The early episodes demonstrate the growth of the apostolic church in Jerusalem, followed by its expansion to both Jews and Gentiles in the surrounding areas. Then, with the conversion of Paul and his first missionary journey with Barnabas, the church begins to expand to areas of the world outside of Israel.

The second half of Acts starts with the gathering of Peter, James, Paul, and Barnabas, along with the other apostles and elders, at the mother church in Jerusalem. There they encourage and set forth the conditions for the expan-

sion of the gospel to the Gentiles. Then the witness of the apostles to the risen Lord goes forth in earnest into the entire world. Led by Paul, the gospel is preached throughout the provinces of Syria, Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia. But Rome, the first-century hub of the world and the imperial capital, is the aim of Paul's missionary travels. While Rome is not itself the "ends of the earth," it is from Rome that the world extends from east to west and from north to south. The goal of Acts, expressed in the Lord's commission that Paul should bear witness in Rome (23:11), expresses the church's ongoing and universal mission to the whole world.

This good news of Jesus Christ, as witnessed by the apostles throughout Acts, is called "the word of God." And throughout Acts, Luke shows us how "the word of God continued to spread and gain adherents" (6:7; 12:24) and how "the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (19:20). This word of God, as Jesus explained, is like a seed sown that requires good soil to grow. When the word of God is sent forth, people do not always have "ears to hear" or "hearts to receive" the word. But when God's word is heard and heeded, it has the power to save.

As we read and listen to the Acts of the Apostles, we see how the word of God planted in Jerusalem bears a harvest throughout the world. Each harvest creates more seeds, as the word of the Lord grows mightily and prevails in the world. As we study these texts, we must take away whatever obstacles block us from receiving the word in our hearts, so that its saving power will develop within us and so contribute to the growth of the church through the work of God's Spirit.

Reflection and discussion

- What insights did I gain about the gospel and the church from the first half of Acts that will guide me into the second half?

- In what ways is the word of God in Acts and in my own life like seed?

The Holy Spirit Fills the Church from Pentecost to Today

Throughout Acts we increasingly realize that God desires to give his Holy Spirit to all people. In his Pentecost speech Peter quotes from the prophet Joel: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” From the time of Pentecost, all the major characters of Acts are filled with the Spirit, enabling them to act and speak with wisdom and courage.

Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and thus proclaims the message of salvation to the Sanhedrin who have put him on trial (4:8). When Peter and John are released from prison, the entire community of believers receives the Holy Spirit: “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (4:31). The seven selected to assist the work of the apostles are chosen among those who are “full of the Spirit and of wisdom (6:3). Stephen, in particular, is described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (6:5). Stephen speaks with wisdom and the Spirit (6:10), and the gift of the Spirit seems to be most intense at his martyrdom: “Filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus” (7:55). Philip is urged by the Spirit to catch up with the chariot of the Ethiopian and prepare him for baptism; then “the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away” to continue his mission (8:29, 39).

Paul receives the Holy Spirit at his initial experience of conversion (9:17), and the Spirit continues to guide his mission throughout the world. The Holy Spirit speaks to the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2). As they begin their first journey, which will bring these missionaries to Jews and Gentiles in new lands, they are “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (13:4). The Spirit continues to guide Paul’s journeys, even preventing him from going to certain

areas of Asia, so that he would be led to journey into Europe for the first time (16:6). The Spirit also leads Paul to make his final and fateful journey up to Jerusalem. In his farewell address at Miletus, Paul says, “Now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecution are waiting for me” (20:22-23). The Holy Spirit both warns Paul of suffering and compels him to go. Nothing can stand in the way of God’s plan that Paul will witness in the power of the Holy Spirit to the ends of the earth.

By demonstrating to us how all the major figures in Acts are empowered by the Holy Spirit, Luke is showing us that the whole church is guided by the Spirit. This work of the Spirit is shown most explicitly in the watershed event of Acts—the apostolic council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). In that gathering of all the major personalities of Acts, Luke portrays the church reaching a decision through a process of Spirit-guided discernment. Peter testifies that the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on both Jewish and Gentile believers gives evidence that God grants salvation to all in the same way. The decision of the council is expressed as a union of both human and divine action: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” This agreement for the whole church is an interweaving of human discernment and divine guidance in such a way that the decision is a human expression of the divine will. This Jerusalem council has become a model for decision making within the church down through the centuries: a council is called, hears testimony about God’s actions among his people, interprets the Scriptures, declares its decisions made in union with the Holy Spirit and the apostolic leaders, and sends out its written teachings to all the local churches scattered throughout the world.

This summary of the testimony of Acts about the work of the Holy Spirit within the church presents a number of conclusions for understanding the role of the Holy Spirit in the church today: 1) The Holy Spirit is the origin and source of life for God’s church. 2) We are filled with the Holy Spirit through faith and baptism. 3) As disciples filled with the Holy Spirit, we carry on the work of Jesus in our era. 4) The Holy Spirit empowers us to speak boldly and to act courageously. 5) Because the Holy Spirit fills the lives of believers, Jesus can be present to more people and do more than the limitations of his earthly life allowed. 6) The Holy Spirit guides the church in its mission of evangelization. 7) The mission of the church is universal, crossing every barrier to

extend to all people. 8) The Holy Spirit leads us individually to seek out people who are ready for a deeper experience of faith. 9) The Holy Spirit guides the leaders of the church to make decisions that conform to God's will. 10) The Holy Spirit compels us to go places and do things that involve risk and suffering.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways have I witnessed the Holy Spirit guiding the church during my own lifetime?

- In what ways do I desire to experience the Holy Spirit more actively through my study of Acts?

Paul's Mission to All the Nations

By the end of the first century, Christianity was a worldwide, predominantly Gentile religion due in no small measure to the mission and teachings of Paul. His missionary life demonstrates how Christianity evolved from a messianic movement within Judaism into a worldwide church that embraces believers of every nationality. Although Paul seemed an unlikely candidate for this work, as it turned out, he was just the right person to carry out the expansive ministry entrusted to him. For Paul lived in three cultures: he was a Jew, a Greek, and a Roman—possessing the ideal background for someone who would

bring the message of Jesus Christ to the great cities of his day.

First and foremost, Paul was a Jew. He considered himself as belonging to God's chosen people, he was loyal to the Torah, he maintained his Jewish identity in the midst of a pagan world, and he awaited the coming of the kingdom of God, the age to come foretold by Israel's prophets. As a Jew, Paul was a member of a noteworthy and distinctive religion within the vast empire. Grand synagogues could be found in most of the major cities throughout the Mediterranean world. Even after Paul came to believe in Jesus Christ, he always remained a proud member of this ancient faith and understood his mission within the context of its sacred Scriptures.

Paul was also a Greek, and his world was that of Hellenistic culture. Since the days of Alexander the Great, Greek had been the second language and the framework of thought for everyone reached by his conquests. Because Paul was a native of Tarsus, a great center of Greek learning, he not only spoke Greek, but Greek culture, philosophy, and rhetoric enriched his mind and his viewpoint. He read the Scriptures in Greek, the Septuagint version, and so was able to explain the Scriptures in the language of his audience.

Paul was also a Roman citizen, a privilege gained through his family, which he often used to his advantage in his missionary work. In the days of Jesus and Paul, Rome ruled the known world. Paul used the massive system of Roman roads and commerce to travel thousands of miles, establishing churches in cities throughout the Roman world. Yet, Paul was not an uncritical inhabitant of the empire of Caesar. The cult of emperor worship and the massive power of the empire to crush those who tried to interfere with its absolute authority were strong contrasts to the way of Christ. In the face of the imperial propaganda that proclaimed the emperor as savior and lord of the whole world, Paul's gospel message of Christ's lordship was defiantly subversive.

Paul used his international and multicultural experience for the sake of the universal gospel he proclaimed. He was a man who could talk with rabbis on the streets of Jerusalem and with philosophers in the marketplaces of Athens. He knew the ancient wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures, and he knew the wisdom of Greek literature, such as that of Homer, Sophocles, and Plato. He possessed a Jewish name, Saul, and a Greek and Roman name, Paul.

Paul's divine commission led him to proclaim the gospel by expressing it through the Scriptures and symbols of Israel (the Torah and the temple) and through the language and thought patterns of Greece (philosophy and rheto-

ric); at the same time he used the communications and transportation systems of Rome to his advantage. He traveled up to the temple in Jerusalem for the feasts of Israel, and he journeyed along the Roman roads to all parts of the world. He knew that the God of Israel was the Creator and Sustainer of the whole world, and therefore he became a man of the whole world in order to bring the very Jewish message of the gospel to all people.

Reflection and discussion

- What might be some of the reasons God chose Paul to bring the gospel to the world?

- How can my understanding of the languages, cultures, and wisdom of the world help make me a better disciple?

Acts is Open-Ended and Unfinished

The way that Luke concludes the book of Acts determines the way that we should read it. The ending is somewhat abrupt, leaving many details untold, but it is presumably the way Luke wanted his narrative to close. It feels quite unfinished because the goal of the work, witnessing to Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth, is incomplete. Luke wants readers to feel the incompleteness of the story and then take up the story in their own lives and continue working toward the goal.

Acts ends with Paul in Rome. After a series of arrests, trials, and escapes, Paul has arrived in Rome and is living under Roman guard. He has appealed his case to the emperor and is awaiting trial. The text's parting words tell us that Paul lives in this situation for two years, preaching with boldness in a manner unhindered. Was Paul ever brought to trial? Was he convicted or released? Was he martyred?

There are many clues in Luke's work suggesting an implied ending for Paul. Paul's story has similar shape to the story of Jesus in Luke's gospel. Both Jesus and Paul are rebuked, arrested, and repeatedly called before leaders to give account of their actions. The lives of both characters are swept up in a relentless journey, Jesus to Jerusalem and Paul to Rome. In Paul's farewell address in Miletus, he tells the elders that he does not count his life as having any value to himself (20:24), and at the end of the speech there is much weeping because Paul had said that he would not see them again (20:38). Paul seems resigned to his own impending death. And since readers know how it ended for Jesus, presumably the end was similar for Paul, as Christian history tells us it was.

But the book of Acts is not really about Paul. Although the second half of the book focuses on him, he remains just one instrument of God's work. The work is about the expansion of the good news of Jesus Christ and the growth of his church, led by the Holy Spirit. Paul's evangelizing ministry in Rome is the zenith of this development, the perfect conclusion of a narrative that repeatedly demonstrates the gospel crossing into new territory. But his work is certainly not the end of the church's witnessing to the ends of the earth. Acts is an unfinished book; it is still being written.

Where are the ends of the earth? From a first-century perspective, Rome is the center of the earth, not its end. For Jews, Greeks, and Romans the world extended far beyond Rome: to Spain and Britain in the west, Scythia in the north, India in the east, and Ethiopia in the south. For the twenty-first-century disciple, the ends of the earth are wherever there are people who have not experienced God's saving love. For you and me, it is all around us.

When Luke wrote his gospel, he knew that the story of Jesus was incomplete, that it must be continued in a second volume. The end of Luke's gospel pointed forward to the story of the church, which he wrote in the Acts of the Apostles. And when he wrote Acts, he knew that the story of the church was incomplete. The evangelizing mission of the church continues. It demands a third volume. Yet, Luke does not write a trilogy; but he implies that it should

be written. This third volume is a story that echoes the first two. It is a story similarly empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. It is a story in which we live out the reality that despite the worst that can happen, God's word progresses, sets people free, transforms lives, and offers salvation.

When we finish our study of Acts, we know that the rest of the story includes all of Luke's readers. We realize that it is the responsibility of each believer to contribute to the evangelizing mission of the church. Luke's ending challenges you and me to press on with the unfinished task.

Reflection and discussion

- Why might Luke not end Acts with the martyrdom of Paul?

- In what ways does Luke's unfinished book inspire and empower me to continue the mission?

Prayer

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon me as I continue to listen to your word through the inspired writings of Luke. Prepare my heart to encounter the risen Jesus working through the apostolic ministers of his church. As I continue this study of the Acts of the Apostles, help me to keep changing and growing as I read, reflect, learn, and pray. Stir up within me a passion for the gospel and a desire to evangelize the world around me through the witness of my life. May your word ever increase within me as it continues to expand and triumph in the world.