

The book of Acts is a book of sermons. Most people think that the book is a narrative, which it is. But, if you read it straight through you will see just how much preaching there is in this book. There are a total of 10 actual sermons in the book (1 Stephen, 4 Paul, 5 Peter) and 32 summaries of preaching. While there are miracles and wonders done through the apostles and angels, visions of Jesus, and voices from the heavens, the real work is the continuation of the work of Jesus: the proclamation of the kingdom of God empowered by the Spirit of God. Just as Jesus left his baptism, where the Spirit descended on him like a dove and the vindicating voice echoed from heaven, “This is my beloved Son in whom my heart delights,” so also Jesus having ascended poured out His Spirit in a baptism of fire onto His Church, and in a similar way proclaims, “This is my beloved Bride, in whom my heart delights” so that they, too, could follow His lead in preaching that original message, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” In fact, the dominant phrases in the book are “word” and its synonyms “gospel” or “message” and “Holy Spirit”. The Kingdom of God is said to be proclaimed and the Word is personified as “increasing” and “adding” to this kingdom community of those who entrusted themselves to Jesus as their savior-king.

So, how did the culture, then, receive this proclamation of Jesus’ authority as King in the Kingdom of God? Well, you will find that they did the same thing that people do today when the pure gospel is proclaimed. They filtered it. Jews heard that the gospel was a message against their Law, their Temple, their customs (6:14), an intolerant strike against their culture. Greeks thought the message was “that gods made with hands are not gods” (19:26), a judgmental exclusive gospel which demanded changing of allegiance, an intolerant strike against their values. We see the same response with religious and irreligious people today. The gospel demands submission to Jesus alone, not our performance and not our values. He alone is our righteousness, nothing else.

The actual presentation of the gospel was given in diverse ways, but it was always the same message. There was not a gospel for the Jews and a gospel for the Greeks, a gospel for religious people and a differing one to lessen the offense to others. The gospel was not modified or filtered in order to get a better reception. The gospel stands on its own and is the ferocity of God to transform any heart in any culture without partiality. Charles Spurgeon saw the concern that his brothers put on making the gospel palatable to his culture and said,

“The Word of God can take care of itself, and will do so if we preach it, and cease defending it. See you that lion. They have caged him for his preservation; shut him up behind iron bars to secure him from his foes! See how a band of armed men have gathered together to protect the lion. What a clatter they make with their swords and spears! These mighty men are intent upon defending a lion. O fools, and slow of heart! Open that door! Let the lord of the forest come forth free. Who will dare to encounter him? What does he want with your guardian care? Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty, and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.” (Charles Spurgeon, *The Lover of God’s Law Filled with Peace*, January 2, 1888)

Peter and Paul both preach to Jews and Greeks, to all peoples, so you can see how they presented the gospel:

Acts 17 – to Greeks in Athens: Paul doesn’t begin with the OT Scripture, but appeals to Natural Law, or General Revelation, and moves to Jesus as the One God appointed to judge the living and the dead because He was raised from the dead – doesn’t even get to forgiveness of sins

Acts 28 – to Jewish leaders in Rome: Paul “From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” (Acts 28:23)

The center of their message is Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, ascended to reign in the kingdom of God. It is all about Jesus, His authority, both in power and in right. The message of Acts is only secondarily about the Church, as the purposed building of Christ’s Bride. In fact, in Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel and had healed a man who was lame, the Lystrans (modern day Turkey) loved the church! They wanted the church in their community! They saw how it could benefit them to have the church honored there and they longed to make it happen. But they didn’t understand the lordship of Christ. They revered Paul and Barnabas as super-heroes, as the gods come down for their good. Yet, look how the ambassadors respond in Acts 14, “They rushed out into the crowd and tore their clothes, saying, ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men, like nature to you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these empty things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea...’” (v15). Yet, the people didn’t want that God. They wanted their gods.

See, the gospel of Jesus brings about hostility and the book of Acts records this well, too. Look at the very next verse, v19. In one verse the people go from worshipping Paul and Barnabas to intending to murder them by stoning Paul and dragging him outside believing they had killed him. In honor or hostility the Church maintained its gospel of the crucified, risen, and reigning Son of God to whom people must turn exclusively.

Because the story is not about Peter or Paul. They do not replace Jesus. They are Jesus' hands and feet, but not His head. They aren't Christ to their communities, and never will you find in Scripture such a ridiculous statement as 'Be Christ to somebody'. They could not be the Christ. United to Him, but distinct from Him, as a husband and a wife. They are Peter and Paul, *ambassadors* for Jesus. Proclaim Christ! Preach Christ! Jesus lives and reigns and sends, and He is distinctly the content of the gospel message, the King whom the Word of the Lord proclaims. It is not the winsomeness of Peter or the likability of Paul that grew the Church. It was the gospel itself. The message. The Word of the King. This is so much the case that Luke says "the Word of the Lord continued to increase" in 6:7 to describe the growth of the Church. The Word increased. The Word concerning the Lord Jesus. The emphasis is on the Word, upon the King, not upon the Church.

This Word, and the glorious freedom of people estranged from God and the fullness of their joy and life in Him, the way humanity is created to be, grows in the soil of opposition. With the preaching of God's Word people are saved, and people are angered. The gospel, in the book of Acts, brings both reactions, usually in the same preaching event. As the Church grew, so did the intensity and vitriol of its persecutors. The book begins with Jesus ascended in triumph and the apostles returning to the Temple in joy and ends with Paul chained to a house in Rome awaiting trial. But the Word of God was not chained! It flourished in both opposition and the lack of hindrance.

Last week was the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Frankly, every Sunday ought to be, because wherever the gospel is preached in its fullness, it will bring about varying levels of hatred, from disdain to tortured death. May we implore the Lord together for the strength of our brothers and sisters to stand firm in the faith, to be filled with the hope of God's great and precious promises, and for their witness to the Lord's reign and mercy producing the repentance of sinners and the salvation of souls to the glory of God the Father. [PRAYER]

And it is our sure and certain hope, as revealed through this history of the early Church, that God does the miraculous work of raising dead hearts to life, hard hearts to fleshy hearts, of violent men to self-sacrificial men through the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is building His Church, and the violent mobs of social opposition, the narcissistic governors and kings, the rejection and disdain of the social elites, even the gates of Death itself cannot slow Him down. Their foolishness serves His purposes, for He has authority over all things. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, as you go, make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. Look, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Luke knew this. So, he wrote about the authority of Jesus in his gospel and then in this book, the Gospel according to Luke volume 2: The Acts of Jesus Christ Carrying On His Ministry Through His Spirit-Empowered Church. See how Luke connects the two works with one purpose in his prologue:

1. The Book of Acts is the Continuation of the Story of the Triumph of the Lord Jesus
 - a. Theophilus is the common receiver of this book and the gospel according to Luke.
 - i. They are both intended to reveal to Him the things which Jesus began to do and teach.
 - ii. This common receiver of the book indicates that the one who wrote the gospel of Luke is the same one who wrote this book of Acts
 - iii. It also means that this work is the rest of the story which Theophilus would gain from knowing
 - b. Luke was the first researcher, if you will, of the life of Jesus
 - i. The gospel according to Luke, 1:1-4
 - ii. He writes the first book as a collection of careful eyewitness testimony
 - iii. He writes this second book to continue this same story and show that the Church of Jesus Christ has the same mission (the proclamation of the kingdom of God), is given the same empowerment to complete that mission (the Holy Spirit, 'another helper'), and will succeed in that mission because of God's sovereignty ('I will build my church')

- iv. But in Acts, we see that Luke joins the story himself, a careful transitioning from “they did these things” in the first 15 chapters to “we went” in chapter 16
- c. The book of Acts is a continuation of Luke’s previous writing, the gospel according to Luke
 - i. There is recapitulation in vv1-11 of Acts, concerning the ascension of Jesus and the marching orders of the apostles/Church
 - ii. The major themes are all here:
 - 1. The continuation of the ministry of Jesus as Lord/King
 - 2. The promise of the Holy Spirit as the means of such ministry
 - 3. The sovereignty of God in the building of His Church
 - 4. The ministry consists of works and word
 - 5. This word is concerning the ‘kingdom of God’
 - iii. The major theme of the gospel of Luke is the Sovereignty and Authority of Jesus
 - 1. How important is it to remember, this week, that Jesus is sovereign over all things and that when He moves, EVERYTHING obeys
 - 2. Whether demons and angels, the weather and the sea, the illness within someone’s body, or the rulers of nations
 - a. “So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" ¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." (Jn. 19:10-11 ESV)
 - iv. The major theme of the Acts is the Sovereignty and Authority of Jesus being recognized and received throughout all the earth by the Spirit of God building the Church of Jesus
 - 1. “they had received the Word of the Lord” (2:41; 8:14; 11:1; 17:11)
 - 2. This “reception” of the “Word of the Lord” is equated with “believe” “turned to” and the like.
 - 3. Jesus is continuing to gather and transform sinners by means of the Word of God proclaimed and the Spirit of God regenerating
- 2. The Central Character in the Book of Acts is the Reigning Jesus
 - a. The central character in this theological narrative is Jesus
 - i. It is the work of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, which is proclaimed, explained, and promised in the book of Acts
 - ii. The building of the Church is His work (Matt 16:18) and the building of the new Temple of His body is His work (Mark 14:58)
 - b. The Gospel of Luke was about “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach”
 - i. The word "began" is poignant - it indicates both the start of something, but also that it is presently continuing
 - ii. While the book is titled, according to the early Church’s label, ‘the Acts of the Apostles’, Luke is inviting us to consider that these are the deeds of Jesus
 - iii. It should be titled, ‘the Acts of Jesus by His Holy Spirit through His Apostles’
 - 1. Really rolls off the tongue, eh?
 - iv. What is interesting is how Luke shows the teaching of the kingdom of God is the central means by which God builds His Church
 - 1. It begins here, as Jesus spent his post-resurrection time teaching the apostles “the things concerning the kingdom of God”
 - 2. It ends with Paul, in captivity, speaking with everyone who came to him under house arrest, both Jews and Gentiles, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” (28:31)
 - 3. From beginning to end, the message of the Kingdom of God, under the Lordship of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit in word and deed through the apostles, is the centerpiece of the book of Acts
 - c. Therefore, Luke is emphasizing that the ministry which Jesus started, concerning both his works and his teaching, is being continued in the events contained in the book of Acts
 - i. So, while the book of Acts contains miracles and historical caveats of Roman political structure, etc., it is not a book about these things

- ii. It is a book of the continuation of Jesus' ministry, and particularly His Word, the gospel of the kingdom of God, and its inevitability
 - 1. Miracles confirm this continuation of the ministry of Jesus, but the Word is the purpose
 - 2. The Word is the primary substantive work of this newborn Church, carrying on the ministry of the King as ambassadors and heralds
 - 3. The Spirit of God is the powerful means of the proclamation and verification of this continuation of the ministry of Jesus
- iii. This is the 'ministry of the Word and prayer' to which the apostles devoted themselves (6:4)
 - 1. 'prayer' is the active dependence upon the Lord's Spirit to bring the Lord's purposes to bear out in truth and reality
- d. The gospel grows outwardly, to the ends of the earth, and also inwardly, forming a community under the reign of Jesus, submitting to Him in all things, growing into what humanity is supposed to be

3. Jesus is the Triumphant King Over All Creation

- a. This word, 'taken up', is different than the word which Luke used in his gospel
 - i. It is a passive word and has the concept of 'receiving' (which Mark uses)
- b. The context of Jesus' ascension are given in the terms of "the kingdom of God"
 - i. They are words acclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the final King who receives the eternal kingdom
 - 1. Hebrews 12:2 – "endured the cross, despising its shame, *and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*"
 - 2. Rev 3:21 – "The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, *as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.*"
 - ii. Jesus *triumphed* over His enemies by conquering sin and death
 - 1. 2 Cor 2:14
 - 2. Col 2:15
- c. The fact that Luke mentions Jesus being taken up "into the heavens" in Luke 24 and "through the clouds" here in Acts 1 is the same language of Kingship from Daniel 7
 - i. Daniel 7:13-14
 - 1. Jesus quotes this passage during His trial before the Jewish leadership,
 - 2. The context of Daniel is a vision of 4 kings who all are made subject to "one like the Son of man, coming on the clouds of heaven"
 - ii. This is the ascension of Jesus – Luke showing it from under the clouds and Daniel seeing it from above in a vision
- d. The ascension of Jesus is His true "Triumphal Entry", as Peter alludes to in Acts 2:34-36
 - i. David was not the true king, for "he did not ascend into the heavens", but Jesus is and His sitting at the right hand of the Father was His coronation
 - ii. He didn't merely ascend the throne of Jerusalem, but of the heavens, over the entire world
 - 1. Luke has spent an entire gospel showing that Jesus has authority over all things and is thus King of all peoples, and even over all creation both spiritual and physical
 - 2. He has the power over sickness, the sea, demons, and authority to forgive sins, etc.
- e. Thus, Jesus ascends to reign from the throne of God because He has authority over all
 - i. So He tells His disciples in preparation for His ascension (Matt 28) that "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me."
 - ii. He is the triumphant King over all things created (Eph 1:21; Phil 2:9-11)
 - iii. As such, God has transferred us into His Kingdom as citizens, no longer enemies (Col 1:13-14)

4. The Triumphant King Works "through the Holy Spirit"

- a. The sign and proof of the Messiah is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit
 - i. Isa 11:1-4; Isa 42:1-3 – "behold my servant...I have put my Spirit upon him"
 - ii. Isa 61:1/Luke 4:18 – "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, give sight to the blind, to free the oppressed..."
 - iii. Luke 4:1,14

- iv. Therefore, Jesus depends upon the Holy Spirit as He leans upon His Father
 - 1. “Apart from Him I can do nothing” (John 5:19,30)
 - 2. Luke 11:20 – the ‘finger of God’ is the power by which Jesus cast out demons, and this is evidence that ‘*the kingdom of God* has come upon you’
- b. His blessing is that He is our representative with the Father and He will pour out from such a position His very Holy Spirit that we might be on mission to great effectiveness throughout the entire earth in order to declare and announce His kingdom
 - i. Acts 1-2
 - ii. Jesus told the disciples that “it is for your benefit that I go away...for I will send the Helper to you” (John 16:7)
 - iii. The gift of the Holy Spirit, who empowers our witness and reveals the glories and excellences of Christ to our souls, was contingent upon the return of Jesus to the side of the Father to mediate for us
 - 1. Eph 4:8, ascending, he gave gifts to men, leading captive a host of captives
- c. The way that the King exercises His power and authority is by giving His Spirit to His people, His Church, in order to carry out His mission
 - i. We live in a time when we have heard the message that the King has won victory, but He is still returning to the city
 - 1. Are we speaking about our culture like Jesus is on the throne? Are we confronting our culture with the proclamation that Jesus has all authority over history?
 - 2. Or, are speaking and behaving as if He is not reigning or that He is not returning?
 - ii. We are a people of witness, proclaiming that Jesus is the King and He will be the King
 - 1. The earliest encapsulation of the Christian testimony was “Jesus is Lord” in a time and place where it was said that “Caesar is Lord”
 - 2. The gospel message is first and foremost not a message of forgiveness or justification or restoration (which it surely and necessarily is these things), but is of the authority of Jesus over all things: sin, Satan, sickness, salvation, etc.
 - 3. In fact, this is the most offensive aspect of the gospel to our world and it is the heart of the gospel
 - iii. We have been given His Spirit to testify of this truth and to empower us to proclaim His authority over all things
 - 1. In our submission to Him, we proclaim the supremacy of His authority
 - 2. In our praise of Him, we proclaim the goodness His authority
 - 3. In our love of Him, we proclaim the sweetness of His authority
 - 4. He is the King, and He is the King who made Himself poor for His people, so poor as to humble himself to our death
 - 5. Now He reigns in glory and honor and power and might and dominion, and He is returning
- d. The Church of Jesus is an Embassy of the King in a foreign land
 - i. He commanded “the apostles” - “sent ones” – ambassadors
 - ii. The essence of Christian life is the life of representatives of the King – announcers and representatives of a foreign kingdom
 - 1. This world, and its values, is not suitable to the kingdom of God
 - 2. Therefore, the Church, while existing in the world, is differentiated from the world in its values, in its worship, in its expectations and hopes, and in its purposes
 - a. In fact, the book of Acts will show that the relationship between the world and the Church vacillates between hostility and apathy
 - b. Yet, the Church grows and spreads in either condition because the Spirit of God is at work and cannot be contained or restrained by the hearts of man
- e. The Church is a Sovereignly Appointed People
 - i. “whom He had chosen”
 - ii. The one responsible for forming the Church is Christ alone
 - iii. Note the emphasis of Luke – he does not emphasize their choice to leave their nets, but he emphasizes Jesus’ choice of them

5. The Triumphant King Proved His Authority by Triumphant Over Death

- a. Jesus, the victor over death, proved His resurrection by many proofs
 - i. He was “seeing by them” for over 40 days – not a hallucination, but a life-altering event
 - ii. He was instructed by them
 - iii. He was shown, according to the end of Luke, how He was the center point of all of history – that all the OT spoke of Him and is fulfilled in Him (Luke 24:27)
- b. Authority: Jesus has it.
 - i. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Announce it! Tell all peoples that repentance from trusting and serving other things (including oneself) and depending upon Me will receive forgiveness of sins and a place at God’s glorious family table.”
- c. Mediation: Jesus gives it.
 - i. “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:25)
- d. Proclamation: Jesus commands it.
 - i. “you will be my witnesses...to the end of the earth.” (1:8)
- e. Help: We receive it.
 - i. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Act 1:8)

What we see here is that Jesus began something which He is continuing to do in this period through the gift of His Holy Spirit. The content of His continuing work is teaching ‘the things concerning the kingdom of God’. It was this purpose that he was presenting Himself to them by various proofs over 40 days, and it was this purpose for which he was sending the Holy Spirit, and the result will be that same purpose because it has been sovereignly ordained by God to be so.

There is no tenor of “possibility”. It is the language of certainty, surety, and inevitability which flows from the pen of the inspired Luke. Jesus is building His kingdom. He is preparing a Bride for Himself from people from every tribe, language, nation and ethnicity. He is continuing to work through His ambassadors, empowered by His Holy Spirit, and He will not fail, for He is sovereign over all Creation, from the tiniest atom to the hearts of men.

In the light of this certainty and inevitability, I want to invite you all to gather with the Church in Eugene tonight at First Baptist, to pray for His Word to be received by the impoverished, the captives to hear the ring of His liberty, and the oppressed to be delivered by the Triumphant King that the Bride of Christ may be prepared as it has been ordained and that the Church would rest in its King’s victory and certain return in the midst of world opposed to Him.