

# O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

## Anointed Witnesses (Acts 1)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on April 12, 2015

### Introduction

- ❖ This morning I'm pleased to begin a new sermon series through the entire book of Acts. That'll bring us all the way till the end of July. We're calling it "O Church Arise". This is a series we're trying to connect with various themes going on in our church.
  - ▶ **On the one hand, we're celebrating our church's fortieth anniversary later this November.** God's been good to us. He's been faithful. And by that reference to his goodness and faithfulness, I'm including not just the good times – all the conversions, all the baptisms, all the disciples made and churches planted. I'm also including the hard times – all the tragedies and trials, all the difficulties and controversies that we've been through as a church. God has been good and faithful over these forty years as he has walked us through the highs and lows of church life and ministry.
  
- ❖ And in response, we want to press on. To go further up and further in. **We don't want to let the foot off the gas as we reflect over the past forty years.** We want to issue a call to arise, to get up, to press on and press forward toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ (Phil. 3:14). That's why we want to study the one book that best describes the birth and growth of the Christian church. That's why going through Acts is fitting as we consider the next forty years for our church (Lord-willing).
  
- ❖ So that's one theme going on, our anniversary. **Another theme has been our recent emphasis on being a church *for the city*.** We've been discussing the strategic urban location of our church that gives shape to our mission to make God-loving, compassionate disciples.
  - ▶ The idea was to shift our mindset and self-perception away from a **commuter mentality** where we only come to this location to gather amongst ourselves. To embrace a **community mentality** where we're intentional to reach our actual neighbors, the community around us (which has been growing more diverse in its demography). The hope is that we'll embody the identity of a city church located in the urban core of a major American metropolis.
  
- ❖ Last year was all about establishing this *mind shift* among each of us. And now building off that, we want to begin making slight but strategic *ministry shifts*. And that begins with preaching and casting vision. **We want God to use the book of Acts to ignite a fire within us. To set us aflame with the Holy Spirit, with great boldness and power, with prayer and proclamation, as we go into the city and then from there to the ends of the earth.**
  - ▶ So building off our ministry theme *For the City*, we want to tweak it and now emphasize a new theme that we're calling ***Into the City***. As a city church, we believe our call to follow Jesus includes a call into our city.
  
- ❖ I love this one verse in chapter 5 where the religious leaders in Jerusalem arrest the apostles and bring them before the high priest for questioning. He says to the apostles in v28, "*We strictly charged you not to teach in this name [the name of Jesus], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.*"

- ❖ Listen to that. **The city has been filled with their teaching about Jesus.** Every where you'd go in Jerusalem, there were people talking about Jesus. It doesn't matter where – in the public square, in the marketplace, on the streets, in the dark corners, in all the seedy joints – this teaching in Jesus' name was penetrating and filling up the city. The city of Jerusalem was filled with Jesus talk. Everyone noticed. Including those opposed to the gospel.
  - ▶ What an encouragement and yet what an indictment against us, against the Church in our city. ***Can anyone accuse us of filling up Houston with our teaching about Jesus?*** O for the day it could be said of us! O for the day that we may be guilty of filling our city with our teaching. If we want to follow in the example of the early church, then it makes a lot of sense to study this book.

### **Acts: The Gospel of Luke, Part 2**

- ❖ Now the way we're going to study Acts is to use a flyover approach. We're going to preach whole chapters at a time, so we won't cover every verse or get into every detail. Perhaps one day we'll come back and study these passages at a slower pace. But this time we're looking at the big picture of each chapter(s) and drawing out implications for us as a church.
- ❖ **I want us to start off by considering the author and intended audience.** Tradition tells us that the author of Acts is none other than Luke who authored the third Gospel. In v1 he's addressing a man named Theophilus, which means "lover of God". *"In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach."*
  - ▶ The "first book" that Luke refers to is obviously his Gospel, which was also written for Theophilus (Lk. 1:1-4). In that first book, he took up the subject of Jesus' life and earthly ministry. There he dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.
- ❖ That's an interesting choice of words. It's about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach. **That suggests that this second book will deal with all that Jesus *continues* to do and teach.** That's important to note because there is a common misconception that Luke's Gospel is all about Christ while the book of Acts is all about the Church. So it's important to see at the start that Acts is centered on the person of Christ as much as Luke's Gospel. **The book of Acts is essentially the Gospel of Luke, Part 2.** The author is the same and so is the subject.
- ❖ The Gospel focuses on Jesus' earthly ministry by his incarnation through his mighty words and deeds. **The book of Acts focuses on his heavenly ministry by the Holy Spirit through the words and deeds of his first witnesses, of his Church.** And the turning point between these two phases of Jesus' ministry is the Ascension. Luke says in v2 that the Gospel was about all that Jesus did and taught, *"until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen."*
  - ▶ So once Jesus accomplished his work on earth, he was taken up to his Father's right hand where he continues his work, but now conducting it from a seated position on his throne. **As I turn our attention to the Church of Christ, just keep in mind that Christ himself is still our primary subject.** It's still all about Jesus.

- ❖ So here are the four things we'll see in our passage regarding the Church. 1) The Church is given a gospel mission that is Spirit-dependent. 2) She's given an ancient mission with a centrifugal force. 3) She's given a gradual mission of a spiritual nature. 4) The Church is given a public mission that prioritizes our witness.

### **A Gospel Mission that is Spirit-Dependent**

- ❖ The first thing we see is that the Church is given a **gospel mission that is Spirit-dependent**. Ours is a mission so difficult that it cannot be engaged by man's strength alone. If the apostles were to go forth proclaiming a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus, it doesn't matter how organized they are or how enthusiastic they get. **They will fail miserably if they attempt to move without the Holy Spirit.**
  - ▶ Read vv3-5. *"<sup>3</sup>He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; <sup>5</sup>for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*
- ❖ So after multiple Resurrection appearances over a course of forty days, Jesus orders the apostles to stay in Jerusalem to await the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. In Luke 3:16, John the Baptist predicted that the Christ who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity is coming. Wait for him.
  - ▶ **Now throughout the OT and during Jesus' earthly ministry, the person of the Holy Spirit was already present and active.** We read accounts of the Spirit falling on individuals (Ezk. 11:5), rushing upon individuals (Judg. 14:6; 1 Sam. 11:6; 16:13), entering people (Ezk. 2:2), or filling people (Ex. 31:3; Lk. 1:67). The effect was to empower these people for service to the Lord – either by giving strength and power, skill and talent, or prophetic speech and utterance.
    - **But just as quickly as he would come upon you, the Holy Spirit would depart.** That's why David prays, *"take not your Holy Spirit from me"* (Ps. 51:11). The presence of the Spirit in your life was not permanent. He didn't take up permanent residence.
- ❖ That is, until this prediction and promise of **Holy Spirit baptism**. Look back at v5. *"for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."* Based on what occurs on the day of Pentecost in chapter 2, we know that *"not many days"* equates to about ten days. Pentecost was celebrated fifty days after Passover, and we're told in v3 that Jesus remained for forty days before ascending.
  - ▶ So they patiently waited for ten days, and the next day, as they were praying, the Holy Spirit rushes upon the disciples, filling them, baptizing them. Now they're empowered to speak in new tongues and Peter is enabled to preach the first Gospel sermon leading to the conversion of about three thousand (2:41).

- ❖ **This baptism of the Holy Spirit was no temporary enablement that would come and go.** We see the Holy Spirit remaining present and active in believers throughout the book of Acts empowering and guiding them for mighty gospel service (4:8; 7:55; 10:44; 13:2; 19:6, 21).
- ❖ *And what was the result?* Starting with 120 disciples, within 30 years the Church shook the foundations of the Roman Empire. Within 250 years, 50% of the Empire was Christian. The emperor himself claimed allegiance and made Christianity the official religion. Since then, the faith has spread throughout the world having transformed the lives of billions of people.
  - ▶ Think about it. **Because they waited for the Holy Spirit, this small band of fishermen and tax collectors turned the world upside down** (Acts 17:6).
- ❖ Church, remember we too have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. We too have been clothed with power from on high (Lk. 24:49). He is ever present in our lives and in our church.
  - ▶ ***Yet are we turning the world upside down?*** *How often do we plan and approach our ministry, our service to the Lord, without waiting for him, without conscious dependence upon him?* We organize and lead small group meetings, plan and play worship sets, serve and care for the helpless, evangelize and disciple individuals – and it’s so easy to fall into this pattern where we’re just faithfully doing the ministry, yet all the while depending on our own wisdom, strength, and experience.
- ❖ The Lord is issuing a similar order to us. *“HCC, before you go into the city and to the ends of the earth with a gospel mission, wait for the promised Holy Spirit. **Don’t leave this place until your heart, soul, mind, and strength is consciously relying upon the Spirit’s indwelling presence and power in you.**”* Don’t lead that meeting, don’t play that set, don’t serve that meal, don’t hold that conversation until you’re depending on the Spirit. That’s how crucial and difficult our gospel mission is. It cannot be engaged by your strength alone.

### **An Ancient Mission with a Centrifugal Force**

- ❖ The second thing we see about the Church is that she’s been given **an ancient mission with a centrifugal force**. By ancient, I mean a mission that didn’t start with Jesus and the New Testament. **Our gospel mission is an ancient one that began in Genesis, in the beginning.**
  - ▶ I see this point being made in vv15-26 when Peter explains that Judas’ desertion of his seat among the Twelve needs to be replaced by another eyewitness of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.
- ❖ Look at v21. <sup>21</sup>*So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,* <sup>22</sup>*beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”*
  - ▶ **The desire among the eleven apostles to keep their number at twelve is significant. It shows they really viewed themselves in continuity with the Twelve Tribes of Israel** (cf. Lk. 22:30; Rev. 21:12-14).

- ❖ Within their biblical theology, God’s promises to the Twelve Tribes of Israel were not forfeited when the Jewish leadership rejected their Messiah. **God wasn’t finished with Israel and moving on to this new thing called the Church.** That implies discontinuity, an utter contrast between the Old and New Testament. That’s not what they learned from Jesus. That’s why in v6 they’re asking, “*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*”
  - ▶ Of course they still had a fundamental misunderstanding. At this point, they’re still thinking about a political kingdom. A restoration of Israel’s monarchy with Jesus on David’s throne. They thought he was about to restore Israel’s national sovereignty.
  
- ❖ Jesus is going to correct that thinking as we’ll soon see. But he doesn’t deny the continuity between Israel and the Church. **The Church is now here for the restoration of Israel but not a restoration of its national sovereignty. It about restoring Israel’s unique mission to the world (its vocation).** Israel was commissioned to be “*a light for the nations that [God’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*” (Isa. 49:6)
  - ▶ **And now it’s through the disciples, those who have been baptized by the Spirit, that Israel’s mission will carry forth into a new age, the age of the Church.** The aim is the same. The mission is ancient. It’s about bringing the light of God’s salvation to the nations, to the ends of the earth with centrifugal force.
  
- ❖ OT passages like **Isaiah 2:2** and **Micah 4:2** speak of all the nations, all the many peoples of the earth, flowing into Jerusalem, streaming into the city to congregate around Mt. Zion. That was the OT hope and approach to missions. Their way of blessing the world. As we’ve describe it before, it was a **come-and-see approach**. It had a **centripetal force** where you’re moving towards a center, namely Jerusalem.
  - ▶ But Jesus says now with my Ascension to the Father’s right hand and with the baptism of the Holy Spirit that’ll soon come upon you with power, I’m restoring Israel’s mission to the world but now with a **go-and-tell approach** with a **centrifugal force** where you’re moving out and away from a center.
    - Look at v8. “*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.*”
  
- ❖ The rest of Acts shows how it happened. First in Jerusalem (chapters 2-7), then radiating throughout Judea and Samaria (chapters 8-12), and then to the ends of the earth (chapters 13-28). **Have you ever noticed how the book ends without a clear conclusion to the story?**
  - ▶ We, as readers, are left with an implicit challenge to pick up where it left off and continue the mission. It’s pretty exciting when you think about it. **We have a significant part to play in this ancient, ongoing mission that has been radiating out from Jerusalem with centrifugal force for the last two thousand years!**

## A Gradual Mission of a Spiritual Nature

- ❖ But here's where we have to pause to clarify the nature of this mission we've been given as the Church. If we're not careful we can fall into two errors. On one hand, we can end up **politicizing our gospel mission**. That's the tendency among Christian activists. Or on the other hand, we end up **privatizing our gospel mission** – the temptation among Christian pietists. Both are misunderstandings of the mission that vv6-11 try to correct.
  - ▶ Let's look at our third observation, and we'll first consider how our passage speaks to the Christian activist who tries to politicize the mission. In vv7-8, Jesus explains that the Church has been given a **gradual mission of a spiritual nature**.
  
- ❖ As we saw, the disciples, in v6, assumed otherwise. They assumed the Lord was going to restore Israel politically "*at this time*". **They wanted to see Jesus take up his earthly rule at this time**. They wanted the kingdom come. For his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And in their enthusiasm they assumed now was the perfect time.
  - ▶ The Christian activist shares the same sentiment. He wants to see God's kingdom come so badly that he'll take it upon himself to usher it in through social activism. **The activist sees the Church's mission as aimed at transforming society and culture to reflect kingdom values (Christian values)**. This sentiment is found across political aisles. No matter if they lean liberal or conservative, Christian activists want to see kingdom values enshrined in law.
  
- ❖ Now notice how Jesus doesn't reject their expectations for a restored kingdom. **He doesn't deny the fact that one day kingdom values, kingdom ethics, and kingdom priorities will all be perfectly reflected and celebrated in all the earth**.
  - ▶ But he does say the timing of this – of when this great day will arrive – is none of our concern. Look at v7, "*It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.*" **All you need to know is that the Father has fixed a date for the kingdom's restoration**. It won't be immediate. It'll be gradual. But you can be sure the kingdom will come. God's will will be done perfectly on this earth.
  
- ❖ **But that day has not yet arrived. And in v9, Jesus basically underlines that point by ascending into the clouds out of sight**. It's like he's saying, "*Sorry guys, but I won't be establishing my earthly reign today.*" And no amount of social activism on our part will speed up the process or hasten the day.
  - ▶ Jesus said the Father has fixed a date. Bank on that. And on the promise that's in v10 spoken by the two angels, "*This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*" **The King will return**. Of that you can be sure. And when that day arrives, his kingdom will come in all its fullness.
  
- ❖ **So does that mean we should care less about social activism in the meantime?** No, I hope you are concerned with renewing our city, tackling issues like poverty, homelessness, and human trafficking. I hope you get involved and fight for the rights of the unborn, defend the institutions of marriage and family, and protect the religious freedom of all Americans.

- ❖ But make sure that your hope ultimately lies in the King’s return to restore his own kingdom. **Then you can be socially active and not get that confused with the Church’s primary gospel mission to go-and-tell the nations about our Risen and Coming King.**
  - ▶ The point is: When you realize your job is *not* to bring heaven down to earth, then your activism can be pursued with proper motives and with strong confidence that the same Jesus who ascended to heaven is the same Jesus who will return and bring heaven down with him.
  
- ❖ So even if our society completely rejects all kingdom values, even if the Church is completely marginalized to the fringes, even if Christians are used as a punchline by secular culture – we need not worry. The kingdom of God will not have lost a step.
  - ▶ **Whatever controversial event is in the news or whatever hot-button issue is being debated in Washington – it won’t deter the kingdom’s advance.** That’s because the kingdom of God doesn’t spread by elections or legislation.
  
- ❖ **The kingdom spreads by the Spirit-empowered witness of Spirit-filled Christians in word and in deed.** Ours is not a political mission but a spiritual one focused on giving witness to our neighbors, to our city, of what our King has done to make peace with them by his own self-sacrifice on a cross. **By our words, we witness to the power of his death and resurrection, and by our life together as a church, we witness to what life in the kingdom come is going to look like.**

### **A Public Mission that Prioritizes our Witness**

- ❖ So beware the error of politicizing our gospel mission. But there’s another error we can fall into. We can swing the pendulum the other way and end up privatizing our mission. That’s the mistake of Christian pietists. Those who would argue that there’s very little hope or value in transforming society and culture. It’s all going to burn up and be destroyed anyway.
  - ▶ **Pietist believe the Church should just back off and focus on worshipping and waiting for Jesus in private.** They have a tendency to privatize their faith. Well vv9-10 have something to say to that. This is our last observation. We see here that the Church has been given **a public mission that prioritizes our witness.**
  
- ❖ In v9, the disciples see Jesus ascend up into the sky. And it says in v10, *“And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?’”*
  - ▶ In other words, what are you guys doing staring off into space? **Some Christians today are likewise staring off into heaven looking for some pie in the sky.** They've concluded that our culture is going to hell in a hand-basket. So they've disengaged from society and are huddled away with their families hoping and praying Jesus comes back soon to scoop them up and get them out of here before it all burns.

- ❖ If you find yourself gazing up into heaven with a fretfulness that takes your eyes off your earthly duties and responsibilities, then perhaps you need these same angelic words to ring in your ear, “*Saints of HCC, why do you stand looking into heaven?*” There’s a job to do. There’s a mission to get involved in. Stop staring into the sky waiting for Jesus. He’ll come when he comes. And he’ll come with all of heaven in tow. In the meanwhile, get to it.
  - ▶ The King of kings has ascended his throne. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Mt. 28:18). He sits in absolute authority, and he’s given us a mission along with the power of his own Spirit to carry it out. *If that’s true, then how could you ever justify a private faith?* A faith that you keep quiet and to yourself?
  
- ❖ **Imagine if the President gave you the authority to wield his executive power in all the land.** What if all you did with that power and authority was to secure yourself a reserved parking spot in front of your office building? Or you made sure that all the traffic lights along your commute were timed just right to give you all greens. How selfish is that?
  - ▶ You have so much power at your disposal, and you’re not using it to serve the public good? You’re keeping it private? That’s selfish and unloving.
  
- ❖ **Church, we have so much power at our disposal. We have the Holy Spirit living and active within us.** Let’s not keep our faith, our mission, private. We’re tasked first and foremost to be witnesses. You can’t witness in private. Witnessing requires a public audience.
  - ▶ **Like the apostles, we’re called to speak of what we have seen and experienced of the Risen Christ.** We’re to proclaim a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations (Lk. 24:47). We’re to call sinners to turn to the One who died for sins and rose again that all who trust in him may have everlasting life.
  
- ❖ But the mission of a witness goes beyond just words. As we go from here *into the city* as gospel witnesses, let’s **witness to the radical generosity of Christ** through deeds of radical generosity towards the poor and homeless. Let’s **witness to God’s unyielding commitment to justice** by exposing and fighting the unjust victimization of society’s weak and helpless. Let’s **witness to the covenantal love between Christ and his Church** by strengthening our own marriages while preserving the institution for society.
  - ▶ In so doing, we’re not going to bring heaven down to earth. That’s Jesus’ job. **But at least when he does return, he won’t catch us standing around looking up into the clouds.** He’ll find us faithfully witnessing in his name in our Jerusalem, our Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.