

## O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

A Model for Missions (Acts 16:1-17:15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 28, 2015

### Introduction

- ❖ It's been really good to walk through the book of Acts with you. Since April we've been taking large chunks at a time and flying over trying to get a lay of the land. Trying to hit the big themes. Trying to give you a better sense of the early church and what was driving it.
  - ▶ **Now it's common to hear people say, especially after they finish a studying Acts, that we need to go back to the early church.** We need to recover the "early church way" of doing things. Let's strip down all the modern entrapments, all the modern innovations in the way we do church, and let's go back to a simpler, purer form.
  
- ❖ Let's recover the Acts way of things – devoting ourselves to the apostle's teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (2:42), to rejecting private ownership, to selling our possessions and distributing to those in need (4:32, 34), to meeting in our homes (2:46; 5:42; 12:12), to prayer and worship and fasting (13:2; 14:23).
  - ▶ To some people that means going so far as to reject church buildings and only have house churches. To reject the idea of multiple churches in a city and have one church per city like you see in Acts. Some argue that we shouldn't use modern electronics and instruments. We should sing with our voices only and only sing from the Psalter.
    - Others would argue that we're not a full expression of the NT church unless we're doing signs and wonders (5:12), performing miracles, healing the sick, speaking in tongues, and issuing prophecies. It was characteristic of the early church, so shouldn't we aim to recover their way of doing things?
  
- ❖ I appreciate the sentiment – the desire to have Scripture be our guide. **And it's true that Acts does offer a historical glimpse into the past.** A picture of the church in its nascent form while still under the leadership of the apostles. This is the church living out its life, carrying on its mission, engaging the culture – before the injection of any serious corruption or heresy or division. Things that would sadly come to define later generations of the church.
  - ▶ So yes, we have before us a model of how we ought to do church and pursue our commission to be Jesus's witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8). **But the book of Acts should not be read as simply an instruction manual for the contemporary church.** We aren't meant to imitate every single thing. To attempt so would be to overlook one of the book's central themes: **The need to contextualize.**
    - We need to contextualize gospel ministry to fit the ever-changing circumstances and cultures that lie before us. We don't live in the first-century, in Greco-Roman society. We're not members of the early church under the direct guidance of apostolic leadership. We're not operating out of that context. So we have to do the hard work of contextualization.
  
- ❖ And that's been my goal. To draw out the scripture principles that transcend time and culture. In our case, in today's passage, to draw attention to certain characteristics of the Apostle Paul's ministry during his second missionary journey. I've identified five traits that I hope we can contextually apply to our church and to our mission as gospel witnesses.

## Sensitive to the Culture and the Spirit

- ❖ The first trait of Paul's gospel mission that's worth noting is his sensitivity to culture and to the Spirit especially when he was faced with tough decisions. We all know that Paul was dogmatic when it came to the gospel. He was inflexible to any addition or subtraction.
  - ▶ **But he demonstrated a great degree of flexibility when it came down to *how* he carried about his gospel ministry by taking into account the cultural dynamics around him.** And even though he had reasons to be self-assured and self-confident in his leadership (being the Apostle Paul after all!), he was sensitive and submissive to the Holy Spirit's guidance. All of this is evident in his actions in vv1-10.
  
- ❖ Last week we consider chapter 15, which focused on a theological controversy that was settled at the Jerusalem Council. It was a gospel issue over whether Gentile converts had to first convert to Judaism, where male converts would submit to the rite of circumcision.
  - ▶ **The Council concluded that, no, you're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.** So with that settled. With it clear that you don't need circumcision. **Paul goes on and has his number one disciple, Timothy, circumcised.**
    - You're thinking "what?" Why are you circumcising Timothy when it was just agreed that circumcision is *not* a condition for salvation?
  
- ❖ It's just that. Because it was agreed that it's not a condition for salvation. **So Paul now feels free to have Timothy circumcised out of sensitivity to Jewish culture.**
  - ▶ We're told Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father was Greek (16:1). But in their culture it only matters what your mother is. So Timothy's Jewish. Now think about it. If you're going to run with Paul and go about city to city preaching the gospel first to Jews then to Gentiles, then it's wise to avoid laying any potential stumbling blocks.
    - If being perceived as an uncircumcised Jew would damage the credibility of your gospel witness to Jews, then it's not an easy choice but circumcision is a choice you're free to make in order to maintain a compelling gospel witness.
  
- ❖ Timothy made that tough call and Paul approved. **They were being sensitive to the culture in which they were serving.** Not flaunting their Christian freedom. Not insisting the culture get with their program. But instead knowing the culture well enough to know how to contextualize their ministry in such a way as to adorn the gospel and avoid unnecessary offense.
  
- ❖ A relevant example this week is **the debate over flying the Confederate flag.** There's been so much ink spilt over whether these flags should still be flown or sold in stores in light of the Charleston massacre. I think the Christian response is straightforward. It shouldn't be illegal to fly or own a Confederate flag. That would be a 1st amendment violation.
  - ▶ But as a Christian concerned with your gospel witness, you should be willing to restrict your liberty (your 1st amendment right) to fly a Confederate flag – even if you know and God knows your intent is not racist. Because if you're sensitive to the culture, you know how incendiary this issue is and how it can negatively affect your gospel witness.

- ❖ I realize this is not a pressing issue for us. But it is for our nation. So it's a relevant example of being sensitive to the culture for the sake of our gospel mission.
  - ▶ The fact is the gospel itself is already so offensive. So why add unnecessary offense? Let's make a point to study our culture. ***We study the Bible plenty, but have you ever thought about studying our culture to determine how to maintain our gospel witness?***
  
- ❖ We're so accustomed to talking with other Christian and hanging with church friends, that we've forgotten (or we never learned) how to speak winsomely with non-Christians about matters of faith. Either we're so far removed from their world that we can't relate *or* we don't know how to speak of our faith without it sounding like a foreign language.
  - ▶ **We have to be more willing to step out of our Christian sub-culture and learn to engage the dominant culture in a manner that maintains both gospel truth *and* gospel credibility.**
  
- ❖ **Another demonstration of Paul's sensitivity (besides to the culture) is his sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.** In vv6-10, he's traveling with Timothy and Silas in modern Turkey, and we're told he make plans to enter two different regions. But both times he's prevented by the Spirit.
  - ▶ A lesser man with a lesser degree of sensitivity to the Spirit would've naturally concluded that you should just continue in a straight line going city to city preaching the gospel. He would've made his plans and stuck with it come hell or high water. **But Paul was never so self-assured in his own decision-making that he would dare ignore the Holy Spirit's prodding.**
    - We're told in v9 that he's given a vision one night of a man from Macedonia – the northern region of Greece – calling him to come and preach the gospel to them. He heeds the call. Paul and his companions travel by boat across the Aegean Sea, and finally the gospel make its headway into continental Europe.
  
- ❖ Again I believe Paul's actions convict us because they're so unlike us. It's so common in churches to sit around a table, make a bunch of decisions, and then pray when we're all done asking God to bless our plans. Sadly that's how ministry gets done. And I don't excuse myself.
  - ▶ **The model Paul sets for us calls for far greater patience, far greater dependence, far greater willingness to stop and listen to how the Spirit leads.** And notice that doesn't mean we throw reason and deliberation out the window and depend solely on private impressions we get from the Spirit. We read in v10 that Paul shares his vision with his companions and they deliberate and conclude together that this means we should go to Macedonia. And notice the use of "we" which becomes more prevalent from this point on. It's assumed that Luke joins Paul here in Troas and continues with him to Macedonia, and now he writes as an eyewitness.
  
- ❖ **The point is our church's gospel mission should be carried out by leaders who are astute and sensitive to the culture outside of them and sensitive to the Spirit inside each of them.** It takes a certain quality of leader. As we're currently in the process of nominating new elders and deacons, pray for us to find such leaders with sensitivity in this regard.

## Strategic in the Prioritization of Cities

- ❖ So sensitivity to culture and the Spirit is one key trait of apostolic gospel missions. A second is the strategic prioritization of strategic cities. You see this in the way Paul specifically chose Philippi, what Luke calls "*a leading city of the district of Macedonia*" (16:12).
  - ▶ **Philippi** was a wealthy city located in an area rich in precious minerals like copper, silver, and gold. It was awarded the status of a Roman colony, so Philippi was influential as cities go. Next, Paul travels to **Thessalonica**, the capital of Macedonia. It was a harbor town and located on a major thoroughway (*Via Egnatia*), so it was a flourishing commercial center for trade and exports.
    - And after Thessalonica, Paul goes to **Berea**, the third of the three principal cities of Macedonia. As he continues, he enters Achaia the southern region of Greece and heads for the capital city, **Corinth**. And when Paul finally does arrive in Asia (not the continent as we know it but a region on the western end of modern Turkey), he heads to its capital, **Ephesus**. They're both hugely influential cities in their respective regions on a political, economic, and cultural scale.
  
- ❖ **The point is Paul recognizes the strategic value of reaching major urban centers that have a high concentration of – not just people – but people (and institutions) that have culture-shaping influence over large geographic regions.** Because what happens in these cities, don't stay in these cities. Rather the innovations, the ideas, the values, the culture that originates there will eventually radiate out into the surrounding region to smaller towns and rural districts.
  - ▶ So if you can plant and maintain a healthy, flourishing church driven by a gospel mission in one of these major urban centers, then you've made huge impact for the gospel on a much larger scale.
  
- ❖ **It's for this reason that I believe we're in a strategic position as a church located near the urban core of a major metropolis like Houston.** We have a strong local economy that boasts consistent job growth. We're among the fastest-growing and now the most diverse city in America. We have the highest concentration of refugees being settled here literally coming from the ends of the earth.
  - ▶ I know a good many of you are transient. You're here for school, for training, for a project. You're thinking it's so hot, so humid, so many mosquitos. When I'm finished I'm going to move and settle in another city where it's far more comfortable.
  
- ❖ I just want to challenge you to think like the Apostle Paul. **God has placed you in a strategic city with great potential to reach the nations with the gospel, to witness to people groups coming from the ends of the earth.** And all within driving distance!
  - ▶ If Paul was going to pick a city to establish a beachhead for the gospel, it would probably be a city like Houston. And you and I are already here. *So why move on for the sake of comfort when you're in such a strategic place for the sake of missions?*

## Adaptable in How to Communicate the Gospel

- ❖ Here's a third trait of Paul's gospel mission. It's his adaptability in the way he communicates the gospel depending on who he was dealing with. We see this played out in his encounter with three very different individuals while in Philippi.
  - ▶ **A) The first person he meets is a business woman named Lydia, and with her Paul appeals to the reasonableness of the gospel (16:14).** She's a seller of purple goods from the city of Thyatira (in Asia), which was known for its textile industry. Lydia was in imports. She was the Macedonian agent of a purple fabric manufacturer in Thyatira.
  
- ❖ So Lydia is an industrious woman, and successful in her trade since she owns a large enough house to accommodate Paul and company. And we know she's a worshiper of God. Lydia was part of a prayer group/bible study that would meet outside the city beside a river where they worshipped Yahweh God. There was something about Judaism that she found attractive, yet there was something lacking. Something that left her unsatisfied.
  - ▶ Then one day that yearning is filled when this man shows up to join their prayer group/bible study. Lydia was engrossed by what he had to say (16:14). **She listened intently to Paul's teaching of the gospel, and the Lord opened her heart to see and believe.** The language harkens back to Luke's Gospel where on the road to Emmaus the two disciples felt their hearts burning as the "stranger" explained the Scriptures. Then the eyes of their hearts were opened to recognize Jesus for who he really is (Lk 24:31-32).
    - So when Paul is sharing with this likely intelligent woman who has been searching the Scriptures seeking God, he knows to engage her reason. To show her in the Scriptures how it all points to Jesus. That's what she needs to hear, and by God's grace he'll open the eyes of her heart to see and believe.
  
- ❖ We're told in v16 that he meets another woman. **B) It's a slave girl, and this time Paul appeals to the power of the gospel.** It says in v16 that she (literally) had "*the spirit of a python*". That's a reference to the temple of Apollo, who supposedly took the form of a python and whose his priestesses were believed to be clairvoyants, fortune-tellers. In actuality this girl was in bondage to a spirit and in bondage to slave owners who were exploiting her.
  - ▶ It says in v17 that she keeps following Paul around for many days crying out, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.*" Which is totally true, but the affirmation is coming from the least credible of sources.
  
- ❖ So after a few days, Paul's fed up. It says in v18 he becomes "*greatly annoyed*". He rebukes the spirit and it leaves. Now we're not explicitly told that she's converted, baptized, and joined to the Philippian church. But since she's sandwiched between two individuals who explicitly are, it's a safe assumption that she also one of the first members of the fledgling church.
  - ▶ The point is that an appeal to the reasonableness of the gospel wouldn't have helped this slave girl like it did Lydia. At this point, she didn't need someone to show her how the books of the Bible all fit together and find their fulfillment in Christ in the gospel. **What she needs is an encounter with Christ and his power in the gospel.** She's in bondage, in slavery, so she needs a message of liberation. She needs Jesus to free her.

- ❖ **C) And the third person Paul meets is a Philippian jailer and to him Paul appeals to the practicality of the gospel.** Let me explain. After Paul cast out the spirit from the slave girl, her owners took issue with him disrupting their money making scheme. So they seize Paul and Silas and drag them before the magistrates.
- ❖ We're told that they're brutally beaten and thrown in prison, placed in an inner cell with their feet fasten to stocks. And then we read in v25, *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”*
  - ▶ I can only imagine the impression this made on the jailer. He was likely a retired soldier, an army vet. We know he's a man of honor. In v26 a great earthquake suddenly hits and the prison doors are flung open and everyone's bonds were unfastened. The jailer's first reaction is to kill himself supposing all the prisoners escaped. He's a man of honor. But Paul stops him and assures him that they're all still there.
- ❖ The jailer is so moved by his encounter with Paul and Silas that he falls before them trembling and asking, *“Sirs what must I do to be saved?”* (16:30) They tell him to believe in the Lord Jesus. Then the jailer and his entire household believe and are baptized that very night.
  - ▶ **What this man needed most of all was evidence of the gospel's practical effect on your life.** As a soldier and jailer, he was well familiar with pain, and he knew full well what Paul and Silas endured in their flogging. And here they are bloody and bruised, in excruciating pain fastened to stocks, and yet they're singing! They're praying and singing hymns to God.
    - **The Philippian jailer was presented with indisputable evidence that the gospel actually makes a difference.** That if you have Jesus in your life, then you can face the worst. You can go through grievous suffering and still live with honor. That's what the jailer needed to hear and see about the gospel.
- ❖ So in Philippi, Paul encounters three very different individuals with three very different needs, and he adapts the way he shares the gospel to fit the person, to contextualize to their needs. **When God gives you the opportunity to share your faith, it's not helpful to apply a pre-packaged gospel presentation to every person in every situation.** Sure, it's easier that way. You just learn one way to share the gospel and you wash, rinse, dry, repeat.
  - ▶ But the apostolic way requires know your audience, being sensitive to their needs, and being willing to adapt your approach in the way you appeal to them with the gospel.

### **Courageous to Endorse a Socially Subversive Message**

- ❖ A fourth trait of apostolic gospel missions is the courage to endorse a socially subversive message, and it's exemplified by one my favorite characters in the Bible (next to Jesus), that being Jason of Thessalonica.
  - ▶ After Philippi, Paul and Silas make their way to Thessalonica and head first to the synagogue, as was their custom, and Paul preaches to the Jews for three straight Sabbaths. Again he knew his audience and adapted accordingly.

- ❖ He knew they shared the same conviction that the OT Scripture is God's Word. And a shared hope in God's Messiah/Christ. So Paul's strategy is to reason from Scripture and prove that the Christ was supposed to suffer, die, and rise, and to prove that Jesus is that very Christ.
  - ▶ We're told that some of the Jews are persuaded, including a number of God-fearing Greeks and leading women. But in v5 it says other Jews get jealous, form a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attack the house of Jason, who was hosting Paul and company.
  
- ❖ But they can't find Paul so they end up dragging Jason and some of the brothers before the authorities and accuse them of conspiring with "***men who have turned the world upside down***". That's an interesting choice of words. They're being accused of social upheaval.
  - ▶ They're turning everything on its head. They're saying the first shall be last and the last first. They're teaching blessed are the poor, blessed are the persecuted. They're saying to die is gain. **They're taking all of our categories, all of our expectations, and flipping them around.**
  
- ❖ And then in v7 they lay out their sharpest accusation, "*they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.*" In other words, these are seditious traitors who won't bend the knee to Caesar. **Who won't bow to the will of the prevailing culture. Who won't condone what we condone or celebrate what we celebrate.** Theirs is a socially subversive faith. Turning the world upside down.
  
- ❖ ***Church, could the same be said of us? Are we turning the world's categories upside down?*** The world's expectations upside down? Or are we on the same page with the culture? Have we bowed the knee to Caesar?
  - ▶ Everyone knows what happened on Friday. **Same-sex marriage is now the law of the land.** We knew this day was coming. The writing was on the wall. The question is no longer: *How can we persuade our colleagues, classmates, and neighbors to recover a biblical view of marriage and sexuality?*
    - I think that ship has sailed. Their views are fairly settled. The question we face is: *Do we have the courage to endorse what is now considered a socially subversive message? Will we hold to a socially stigmatized and vilified viewpoint on marriage?* Are we willing to be like Jason of Thessalonica and take a figurative beating (God forbid a literal one) in solidarity with the Apostle Paul and all that he taught and stood for?
  
- ❖ This is tricky because some are going to argue that we're not being sensitive enough to the culture. That we're affecting our gospel witness and losing credibility by always defending marriage. We need to stop talking about this or just affirm and go where the culture is going.
  - ▶ But that's only possible if we could somehow disconnect marriage from the gospel and marriage from our gospel mission. But we can't and we mustn't try. **God's intent is for marriage to be a tangible means of communicating the truth of the gospel.** Of how two very different persons can be miraculously joined together and made one. Whether you're talking about a man and a woman. Or Christ and His Bride.

- ❖ In both cases, two very different are made one and the same. And when that's reflected in a marriage it reflects well on the gospel. **This is why we can't just ignore the issue and focus on our gospel mission.** They're not mutually exclusive. They're intimately tied. So we have to endorse a socially subversive view of marriage because we have socially subversive gospel.
  - ▶ **Church, remember who's your king.** It's not Caesar in a palace or in a court (even a supreme one). It's Jesus on his throne at his Father's right hand. There's no reason to fear, to despair, or to play the victim. There's every reason to keep our King's commission to make disciples, teaching them to observe all he commanded, to love and serve our neighbors no matter where the culture is going.

### **Grounded in Scripture and its Authority.**

- ❖ The fifth and final trait of apostolic gospel missions is the way it's grounded in Scripture and its authority. Paul's teaching ministry among the Berean Jews demonstrates this clearly. We're told in v10 that Paul and Silas smuggled out of city by cover of night to Berea.
  - ▶ Again as their custom, they preach first in the synagogue, and this time we're told that the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those from Thessalonica. They were more open-minded, fair-minded, to hear Paul out. They carefully examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul was teaching is true.
- ❖ Think about this. **Paul's teaching must've been saturated with Scripture and grounded in its authority.** That explains why the Bereans were driven into the Word to check if his exegesis was sound, if his biblical arguments held water.
  - ▶ Paul didn't just sprinkle a few verses throughout his teaching. He didn't use the Bible to proof text his own ideas. No, he grounded his arguments in the authority of Scripture as God's Word and offered his listeners a sustained exposition and explanation as he tried to prove that Jesus is the suffering and risen Christ, the hope of Israel.
- ❖ That's the pattern he set for us in the way we ought to teach and share our beliefs. And it's so important for us to keep it. Our culture no longer recognizes biblical authority, so it's tempting to ignore it too and ground our arguments elsewhere.
  - ▶ **But our gospel mission as a church is not sustainable if our authority rests in anything but the Word of God – that never fails, never fades but remains forever.**
- ❖ *So what do we gain out of studying the book of Acts? An instruction manual for doing church?* Not exactly. We're given a sustainable model for gospel missions that we can adapt as a church. Where, Lord-willing, we too will be 1) Sensitive to the culture and the Spirit, 2) Strategic in the prioritization of cities, 3) Adaptable in how we communicate the gospel, 4) Courageous to endorse a socially subversive message, and 5) Grounded in Scripture and its authority.