
Day 324 - November 20

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Acts of the Apostles

Power of the Holy Spirit

Readings: *Acts 1:1-5; 2:1-47*

Reflections:

- Introduction to the book Acts of the Apostles: Scholars agree that Luke the physician wrote both Luke and Acts as a two-volume history of the church. Theophilus (which means “friend of God”) may be the name of the person to whom the book is dedicated. It may be an official who requested a written explanation of the Christian movement or it may be the person who financially invested in it being written. It may be that Luke is using the name, “friend of God” to suggest that this book is dedicated to all the friends of God. Similar to the other biographies, these books were written to affirm the facts and truthfulness of the story of Jesus in the hope people would come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and savior of humanity. There is internal evidence that these two books were written by Luke. Part way through Acts Luke joins Paul’s team and the language switches from “they” to “we”. Also, the style of the book is written in the style of a medical or science journal of the day and we know Luke was a physician according to Colossians 4:14.
- Power of the Holy Spirit: The coming of the Spirit happens during Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after the Passover. This was the celebration of the harvest and one of the three major Jewish celebrations. The coming of the Spirit at this time gives the early church a clear vision of God gathering in a harvest of people from all nations. Talk about a great party to kick off the new community!
- The Holy Spirit: The images of the Holy Spirit follow the patterns of the Old Testament experience with a strong wind and fire. The difference is that a pillar of fire descending on the tabernacle or temple is now replaced with smaller tongues of fire descending on them individually. They now as individuals and as a community represent the dwelling place of God’s presence. These tongues of fire transform them so that they now start speaking in the tongues of other nations. God no longer connects with people through a building or priests. God now lives intimately within all people as he has removed all barriers to people living in intimate friendship with him.
- Speaking in other languages: Here we see right at the beginning of the new community of Jesus, the great reversal of the tower of Babel. Rather than God working miraculously to cause division, he works intentionally to create a unifying community. The ability to

understand each other is foundational for true relationship. All the nations of the world are now welcomed into an inclusive community rooted in intimacy with God. Apparently they go out into the streets and a crowd gathers. Some wonder how such a thing is possible. Others see their delirious joy and wonder if they are drunk. When God works in such incredible ways often times people feel so happy and joyful that they look a bit on the drunk side. Throughout the New Testament there is actually a connection between life in the Spirit and drinking. Paul challenges believers in Ephesians not to get drunk on wine but to be continuously filled with the Spirit.

- Peter proclaims Jesus as the Christ: Throughout the book of Acts we see a number of teachings captured. Peter's message at Pentecost captures a number of core teachings of the early church, particularly as it relates to the key teachings they presented to the Jews. Peter references Joel 2:28-32 and the prophecy that promised God filling all of his people with his Spirit and entering into intimate two way communication with them. He also highlights Psalm 16:8-11 to show the prophetic foreshadowing of the resurrection of the Messiah. The key statement: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord (Greek title for the Caesar) and Christ (Messiah). Jesus is the king of all kingdoms.
- First believers baptized: These listeners are Jews who would have heard of Jesus and maybe even welcomed him into Jerusalem as the coming king. These are not the temple workers or religious community who advocated for Jesus' death. Peter calls them to a very simple expression of devotion to God. They are to repent of their sins and receive forgiveness directly. For the Jews this means they don't have to go to the temple to offer sacrifices but can now just pray and be forgiven. This is similar to John's baptism with one key difference. Now in Christ all sins past and present are forgiven. Although we may repent of a specific sin, it is now all forgiven in Christ. This gives believers complete confidence to always approach God to receive grace whenever they feel the need. They are to be baptized as an expression of being aligned with Jesus and his new irreligious movement. Baptism at this point symbolizes cleansing and washing away of sins and being soaked with the Spirit. Having said this, the image of identifying with Christ' death and resurrection may also be implied as Paul will later express this in Romans. The Holy Spirit is promised to come on them immediately and in response to their simple acts of humility and faith. We see that complicated, multi-level religion is now as simple as a prayer and one simple symbolic act of identification. All of religion is now swept away. This promise of forgiveness and being filled with the Spirit is for all of the Israelites ("you and your children" a common phrase for Israelites and their future generations) and for all the Gentiles ("all who are far off"). Peter suggests that God must call to them and we will see that through Paul and Barnabas. God sends out messages to call the Gentiles into a trust relationship through Jesus. Peter pleads with the crowd to receive this message and be saved from this corrupt generation. It is not their specific generation that is particularly evil but rather fallen humanity is in focus here. Humanity has been corrupted by self-centeredness and people need to be rescued from this. For them to be saved, they need to humbly receive the message by trusting in God, not

themselves. Three thousand were added to their community. They typically did not count women and children and so it was probably four to five thousand in total.

- Fellowship of believers: Here we see a summary of what it meant and still means today for people to live together as the family of God. It means growing together in truth by focusing on the Apostles' teaching. This is captured now in their writings (the New Testament). It means growing together in relationship as we hang out regularly together as family (called fellowship). It means eating together and partying together (called breaking bread). This eating together was also a way to remember all Jesus accomplished for us through his death. It also means taking time to pray together and open our hearts to God. Community is now two way – intimate friendship with God and intimate friendship with others. This community is led by Spirit-empowered servants. God works through them to do miraculous signs. This will be demonstrated clearly through the accounts of Acts as we see recorded a number of miracles to underscore God's active presence in their midst. This community is not inwardly focused but outwardly active. They downsize their lifestyles to be able to give to those in need. Where Israel constantly struggled to live justly and with an emphasis on caring for the poor, the new community does this naturally and sacrificially. This kind of loving, other-centered, joyful community is magnetic and more and more people join the movement. Joyful, loving, generous community leads to a growing community. This describes the kind of inclusive family God has always wanted. The way this moves from being a dream to reality is by the Spirit changing our hearts from the inside out.