



Session Seventeen

The Book of

Acts, Pt.1

Acts 1 & 2

We now shift our focus from the Gospels to the Book of Acts, from Jesus to the Holy Spirit, and from individual salvation and discipleship to the establishment and growth of the church—and, by extension, the Kingdom.

Chapters 1 and 2 are particularly important, not simply because they narrate some of the most important events in all Scripture—Jesus’ ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit in a new way at Pentecost, Peter’s preaching of the first post-resurrection sermon—but because they introduce many of the themes that will appear throughout the entire book: the importance of and evidence for the resurrection, the necessity of witness, the Great Commission and its focus on extending the Gospel to all the earth, the centrality of mission, the role of Truth and Scripture, the role of the apostles, and the importance of prayer and community.

Questions to consider as you read Acts 1 & 2

1) 1:2 mentions both the Holy Spirit and the apostles. Mention of the Holy Spirit’s role in Jesus’ teaching is important because it begins to address what was to become an increasingly important question: will the salvation and Kingdom announced by the Messiah continue to unfold in his absence? The fact the Holy Spirit played a key role in Jesus’ teaching, and the fact the Holy Spirit will come upon Jesus’ followers in a new way at Pentecost, is assurance that the Lord’s work will, indeed, continue. “Apostles” is important as the designation for Jesus’ followers because it derives from the Greek *apostello* which means “to send.” “Apostles,” therefore, are the “sent ones,” which will prove critically important for subsequent understanding of the role of the church. What does all this suggest to you about following Jesus? About the church’s role in preparing and sustaining you to follow Jesus?

2) 1:3 establishes yet again the historicity of the resurrection and its importance to our faith. That said, if bones were found in a cave outside Jerusalem and some miraculous DNA test determined that without doubt they were Jesus’, how would that impact your faith in him?

3) Read 1:6-8. Note that the apostles are still struggling with what the Kingdom actually means, asking Jesus if he is about to restore the “kingdom of Israel,” (1:6) which suggests they are still thinking in political and militaristic terms. Note how Jesus responds (1:7-8). What does his response suggest to you about how you should understand and approach discipleship?

4) Throughout our study of the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Luke, our focus has been on our individual understanding and experience of discipleship—always in service to something bigger than ourselves but nonetheless focused on us as individuals and our relationship with Jesus. The Book of Acts doesn’t discount that but wants us to balance that with an understanding of discipleship as active witness to the risen Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom. The operative term there is “active witness.” How do you react to the idea of engaging in “active witness”?

5) Verse 9 is significant. While none of the disciples actually saw the resurrection, they all saw the ascension and, therefore, could truthfully claim to have seen Jesus alive. It’s also significant because from that moment they—and, by extension, you and I—shoulder responsibility for the church and the Kingdom in a new way. Then note what their immediate response is: they remained together, living and praying together. In other words, their response was to create a *community*. Why is this act on their part so important?

6) 1:15-22 demonstrate that Peter has gone from denying Jesus three times to be the apostle’s chief mouthpiece and Scriptural exegete. We might all take comfort and encouragement in that. If Peter can do it, we can do it.

7) In reading 2:1-13 you may find it helpful to consult the attached, *Pentecost*.

8) What do the events of Pentecost suggest to you about the nature of God? the nature of discipleship? the nature of the church?

9) Peter’s “sermon” in 2:14-41 is generally regarded as the first of its kind in the very early church. As such, it serves a paradigmatic function, described by one Biblical scholar this way:

A Spirit-empowered witness to the risen Jesus is the means by which God’s purposes are realized. The departure of Jesus has made witness to him necessary, while the Pentecostal baptism with the Spirit has made it possible.

You may feel called to preach; most do not. Yet there is an important truth here for all of us nonetheless: the work of the Kingdom is done through “Spirit-empowered witness to the risen Jesus.” Assuming you don’t feel called to preach, how does this apply to you?

10) Peter's use of prophecy from Joel (2:17-21) is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is found specifically in verses 17 and 18: God's Spirit will be poured out on "*all flesh...Even upon my slaves, both men and women...*" This underscores the radical inclusivity of the Kingdom and, as such, is an important directive to the church. Thus, Peter includes Joel's words, "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (verse 21). As we'll see, the first half of Acts focuses on precisely what these prophecies mean, culminating in the so-called "Jerusalem Council" in chapter 15. As the church grows, its inclusivity becomes ever-wider.

11) 2:37 says that those listening to Peter were "cut to the heart" by the reality that they were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. On the one hand, this may have been literally true: while only the Romans could actually crucify someone, some of those listening to Peter may have been in the crowd shouting "Crucify him!" in response to Pilate asking what he should do with Jesus. On the other hand, they may not have been physically present at all. In any case, Peter makes no distinction—in his sermon, *all* were guilty. And if *they* were, by extension so are we. How?

12) Note Peter's response (verse 38) to the crowd's question of what they should do: *Repent*. The Greek word is *metaneo* and literally means a turning, a radical change of mind. In other words, repenting does not merely refer to a change of behavior. It first requires a complete change in thinking and how we view and understand the world. Then—and only then—can we expect a substantive change in behavior to occur. The call to discipleship, therefore, is first a call to change how we think. That seems straightforward enough, but it is incredibly difficult. Are you willing to subject your entire way of thinking to a systematic examination of how it does or does not align with Jesus' teachings? If so, how will you go about it?

13) Be forewarned: Acts will insist that a necessary prerequisite for any right expression of church or Christian community is a mind remade by Christ (thus, Paul's statement in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind").

14) Peter doesn't just say we are to repent. He also says we are to be *baptized*. Baptism, frankly, can be a more complicated issue than repentance. We tend to think of baptism as an individual act related significantly, if not exclusively, to salvation. Peter, I'm sure, would agree about the importance of that tie. At the same time, however, as Biblical scholar Robert Wall puts it, Peter is speaking of baptism as "a rite of initiation into a new life under a different Lord with membership in a community of common faith in him and a new future with God." Baptism, in other words, is not just about individual salvation; it's about entering into the creation of a new community. What does that suggest to you about the responsibility of your baptism?

15) 2:42-47 is, frankly, an ideological and political minefield, primarily because it has been used to make the case that the earliest Christians were, in fact, socialists. Over time, this has done these verses—and the early church—far more harm than good, first because of all the baggage the concept of socialism carries, particularly in capitalist societies, and, second, because the real message of these verses has tended to get lost amidst all the politically-motivated arguing.

Inasmuch as these verses provide a snapshot of how the earliest Christian community organized itself, what they have to tell us is extremely important. I urge you, therefore, to do your best to set politics aside and look carefully at what 2:42-47 tells us:

- The first Christians focused on learning, fellowship, worship, and creating community.
- Community, as the first Christians seem to have understood it, was defined by compassion, seeing that the needs of all in the community were met, and the pooling of resources (as opposed to maintaining individual resources).
- At least in part due to the above, the first Christians enjoyed the “goodwill of all the people” and their number grew each day.

The case can be made that none of this should be a surprise given the extent to which it simply reflects Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels about what life in the Kingdom should look like. Yet, for centuries, Christians have tied themselves in knots trying to explain this away as not being an accurate reflection of what the early church was really like or, if it is an accurate reflection, a way of being community that could not possibly apply to contemporary society because our socio-economic realities are so much more complicated.

And yet the verses say what the verses say.

So: how do you respond to this depiction of the earliest Christians? Do you think it has any application to life today? If not, what kind of community would you envision arising from Jesus’ teachings as you understand them?