

A Charismatic and Open Future

From the series: The People of the Way

Text: Acts 1:8; 3:19-21; 10:34; 11:2, 4

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Lesson from the Epistle is a reading from the Book of Acts, in fact several passages, in my attempt to give you a sense of how the Jesus Movement was founded and continued, and how the New Testament document was put together. We have spent a couple of weeks looking at the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the founding story. Those stories were written a long time after the event itself and they were not biographical in the sense of simply telling the story of Jesus. They were faith documents. They were written with a selective vision in order to create a portrait that would elicit faith in people. Those four Gospels come first in the New Testament, I suppose, because it would seem logical that the founding story would be there first.

The other large piece of the New Testament are the letters, particularly the letter of Paul. Between the letter of Paul and those gospels you have the Book of Acts. Sometimes we call it the First Church History. Well, that's as erroneous as to call the gospels the lives of Jesus. Just as the gospels were proclamations of faith in a narrative form, so the Book of Acts was a proclamation of faith in a narrative form. It does in a sense create a bridge, but it really is volume two of the Gospel of Luke. If you would read the opening verses of Luke and then the opening verses of Acts you would see that it's the same hand, the same intention to set forth these things in orderly fashion.

But, just as the gospel was the founding story in narrative form to tell about the life and ministry and resurrection of Jesus, so Acts was the continuing story to show how the Jesus Movement developed and spread. So, as I read, I want you to see that this Jesus Movement was the movement empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, and was thrust out into the world, not without conflict and resistance, but finally breaking the narrow bounds of Israel and going to all nations, or to the Gentiles.

There are those who say this may be one of the earliest formulations of the conception of Jesus that the Church eventually came to. This was a very primitive

understanding; this Jesus that they all knew, this Jesus, God has made Lord in Christ.

There's a dramatic healing at the temple and everyone wonders about it, and then Peter has another chance to preach. On that occasion he says, "Now, brothers and sisters, I know that you acted in ignorance as did your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets that Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent, therefore, and turn again that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that God may send Christ (the Messiah) appointed for you. Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets from of old." It is as though Peter is saying, "Come now, turn. If you'd just turn, then God could get on with it, you see, and this Jesus could come, Messiah, Lord, and wrap everything up." Well, it wasn't to happen.

The community continued to grow and to develop and it was very much a Jewish community. What Luke does is to give us some models, or some paradigms of how that movement developed and took shape. The Cornelius story, Peter and Cornelius, was certainly a classic paradigm of how this gospel broke the bounds of Israel and was brought to the non-Jew. It happened simply because Peter was given a vision that he couldn't deny and an experience that simply overwhelmed him. So he has a vision, hears a knock at the door, there are men beckoning him from Cornelius who has had a vision, and he comes to Cornelius's house and he says, "You know I shouldn't be here. This is contrary to everything I've ever been taught, associating with the likes of you. What do you want?"

They asked, "What's God telling you? Tell us."

Peter opened his mouth and said,

"Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality." [Pretty good for Peter.] "But in every nation, anyone who hears him and does what is right and acceptable to him. You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all. The word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth of the Holy Spirit and with power. How he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest—not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God, as witnesses. Who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead, and he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he was the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness and everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name."

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard and the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God, and Peter declared, “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” He commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and they asked him to remain for some days. Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcized people and eat with them?” Peter began to explain to them step by step.

About the same time, sometime between 70 and 100, the Gospels were written: the Book of Acts was written and the Gospels as well, the Gospel of John maybe toward the end of the century. But John, too, was trying to shape the future by understanding the present. So he tells the story of Jesus, and in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John is the familiar story of the woman at the well in Samaria. She’s a woman. She’s a Samaritan. Jesus talks to her, already shattering the preconceptions of his day. Then he indicates to her that he knows a thing or two about her, and she thinks to herself, “This is getting too personal, let’s talk theology.”

So the woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where we ought to worship.”

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. The hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. For such the Father seeks to worship.”

The problem with following the course is not that Jesus has failed us, but that we failed Jesus—over and over and over again. So there’s a Christian church instead of simply the blossoming of Israel into a great world religion with a message of light and salvation for the whole world. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus, but as I said, they’re faith documents trying to create faith in those to whom that story, that narrative form of that faith commitment is woven, and the Book of Acts as well. Often we see Acts as a bridge between the Gospels and Epistles, as I said at the scripture reading. As a matter of fact Acts is not a history, although it is in the shape of history. What the Gospel writers were doing and what the author of Acts was saying was the same as the Gospel of Luke, Volume II. What they were doing was telling the story not simply recording the past.

You know, historians are sneaky people. You think they are sort of harmless because they just grub around in the past. But you know what historians are? They grub around in the past until they can understand the present so they can

determine the future. There's not a historian alive who is an objective observer of what really happened, because most of the time we can't really determine what really happened. So, there's data back there. There's a connection with concrete events, but the historian is one who weaves that data into a story. And that story becomes compelling. That story interprets the present and it shapes the future.

This story was written sometime between 70 and 100. We are four decades, minimally, away from the event. The Jesus Movement has started with some considerable success already. It has permeated the ancient world, and it's in crisis. The Church is always in crisis; it's nothing new. The crisis is that the Jesus Movement starts out very understandably as a Jewish movement. Jesus was a Jew. Sorry to tell you, folks, Jesus wasn't a Christian. I don't think Jesus ever intended to be anything other than a Jew, a faithful son of Israel—the fulfillment and the blossoming and the culmination of all that marvelous tradition. So it is understandable, as well, that the first movement, the Jesus Movement, was a Jewish movement you could call People of the Way. In the story of Paul's conversion, from Saul to Paul, in Acts 9:2, you'll read that he went after the People of the Way. Acts 19:23: once again, when the talk in Ephesus was about some controversy, these are People of the Way.

How do you characterize new movements? No one knows quite what to call them and so they were called People of the Way. So it's a Jewish movement, those who believe that this Jesus of Nazareth was indeed God's anointed one, God's Messiah. It is a community in Jerusalem in which Jesus' brother James becomes a dominant figure.

But the intention, Luke tells us, was that this thing go in concentric circles out to the whole world and so it started in Jerusalem, a Jewish community, where it gets some opposition. There was a good solid Jew named Saul, who was on his way to persecute the People of the Way. Bingo, he receives a vision, a light from heaven, and he turns around—a dramatic conversation – and he becomes St. Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ.

Now, his vision entails a ministry beyond the limits of Israel. He begins to go out into the Roman Empire. He tells the story at the synagogue to the Jews first but, when he gets turned away there, he preaches in the marketplace to anybody who will listen. Before long there's a community there: the cities in Galatia, Asia Minor, etc. Now there's trouble brewing. This I think is what the Book of Acts is really about. It is not a bridge between the Gospels and Paul's letters. It is attempting to be a bridge between the Apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles or the nations, and James—the Lord Bishop of the First Reformed Church of Jerusalem. That's the tension.

You see, there were a limited number of Jews to evangelize in the world, but there was a whole world of Gentiles. And when the consistory met in Jerusalem at the First Jewish Christian Reformed Church, they said, "You know this fellow, Paul? If he keeps doing what he's doing, saying that those Gentiles can be members

with us in the community of faith without first becoming Jews, the whole character of our church will be changed. It will no longer be like it has been. They don't know our customs. They don't know how to act. They don't know the inside jokes of the family when they gather. They've got a lot of strange things about them. It doesn't feel comfortable. How can we be a family when people are coming right out of all kinds of pagan practices and expecting to sit down at table with us?"

Anybody with any insight could see that, if Paul was successful and the mission to the Gentiles should prosper, it was going to be a whole new ball game. There was sharp tension because the things that have been for us, the mediators of grace, the things that we have grown up with, the things that we feel in our depths without having to think intellectually about, those are precious to us. We don't let those go easily and we don't open ourselves up to that which might threaten that very easily.

Well, poor Peter got caught in the crossfire between James and Paul. And what Luke does as an author, as a spinner of a literary tale, is to give us marvelous paradigms. The central paradigm, the hinge-point of the Book of Acts, is the story of Peter and Cornelius. We read it earlier together. Peter, kind of against his will, finds himself in a setting and doesn't know what to do but to tell a story of Jesus—his ministry, his death, his resurrection. Bingo, the Spirit zaps these non-Jewish listeners and Peter says, "I can't believe this, but it would appear that God shows no favoritism, there's no partiality with God." So he says, "Go ahead, baptize them."

Well, it's one thing to have a vision as Peter had, it's one thing to have one's concrete experience confirmed, the intuition, but it's another thing to have to go back to headquarters. And he got it in the neck. They said, "We understand you had ham and eggs?" So Peter started to tell the story, step by step. Now folks, that isn't just an interesting little tale. Today when I'm preaching the truth, which isn't always the case, of course. (Laughter) But, preachers are like historians, they are also trying to understand the present in order to shape the future out of the facts of the past. That's what was going on.

So, this People of the Way, a Jewish movement, was developing a People of the Way, a Gentile movement. The People of the Way, Jewish movement, were able to be brought around to where they could see that this Way [involved more] than they first dreamed of. Unfortunately, not much of the leadership of the Jewish church at the time was able to do that 180-degree turn like Paul did, and like Peter did, and maybe the 110-degree turn that James did. James never quite came around, but he turned around enough to get in and stay in. But what happened is that a Jesus movement within Judaism began to get an identity and then it got connected to this Gentile movement of Jesus. Before long, even though these people were so close together, as history developed they separated because what happens in human groupings is that when there's a lot at stake we need to

justify our separate existence. And we justify our separate existence over against the other. It works both ways. Before long the People of the Way were comprised of Jewish and Gentile people, but it becomes a separate movement from Israel, the womb that gave it birth.

That Jesus movement was a charismatic movement, which means that it was a movement gifted by the Spirit. In the Christian church today we talk about certain charismatic churches. Well, I want to tell you the whole church is charismatic or it's nothing. Now, in the whole church some groups come alive suddenly and they experience the power and presence of the Spirit, and they begin to sing and dance and stomp their feet. Then we say, "Oh, they are charismatics."

Well, so are we, although we're kind of dull and boring. Because what was happening, what moved that Jesus Movement out, was the gust of the Spirit. As Luke tells the story in the Book of Acts, it is the risen Christ whose presence, not in flesh but in Spirit, whose power was still on—the power, the presence, everything that they had experienced with Jesus – was still there. It was within their community. It was a movement of the breath of God, the wind of God, the Spirit of God.