

THE BOOK OF ACTS: COWARDS OR CONQUERORS?

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Acts 2:1-6, 12-21, 22-24, 36-41

The Book of Acts contains a lot of weird, wonderful stories. The main challenge we'll face as we read through the book will be to grasp that it's not just the story of the very first church. It's also our story. It's about you and me, in *this* church, right now.

Acts is to the Church what revolutionary history is to Americans. It gives us important clues about who we are. It helps us to find our way as we face an uncertain future.

I can think of four main reasons why many of us have trouble identifying with the early church:

- First, we think the Holy Spirit was poured out in the lives of the early believers in ways that were unique and never-to-be-repeated.
- Second, we think the Apostles were special people who had received super-hero powers from Jesus.
- Third, we think that, because memories of Jesus were fresh, and faith was new, it was somehow more compelling.
- And fourth, we think that, in contrast to our own culture, the culture of first century Palestine was ripe and ready to receive the gospel message.

The Bible's response to these suppositions is: No, no, no and NO!

No, the Spirit that was poured out at Pentecost wasn't somehow different from the Spirit that we receive when put our faith in Jesus. We only *think* it was a different Spirit because of our profound skepticism about the Spirit's authority and power in our lives.

No, Jesus didn't convey to the Apostles some unique spiritual force that's unavailable to ordinary Christians. We only think of the Apostles as super-Christians because we're afraid to go where they have gone.

No, the early church didn't take root because the news about Jesus was fresh and new. It took root because the first believers understood their mission to be that of making new disciples of Jesus. And what was true then is true today: When the God's people speak the truth about Jesus in love, they usually reap an abundant harvest.

And no, the culture that surrounded the earliest Christians wasn't uniquely open to the Good News about Jesus. To the contrary, it was a pluralistic and idolatrous culture where teachers of religion were engaged in a fierce competition for converts. The Roman government could be astonishingly brutal. The economic order was appallingly unjust. The cities nurtured every form of vanity and vice.

And it's only to make ourselves feel better about our own ineffectiveness that we say: "Peter and Paul had it easy. Their audience was hungry for their message. We could never touch people as they did. Our culture is just too materialistic – too self-absorbed – too distracted – too self-satisfied to get excited about Jesus."

The Pentecost story that we just read brings these issues together for us. The Spirit comes, accompanied by wind and fire; the Apostles are empowered to preach in various foreign tongues; and 3,000 people are converted on the spot.

Too many of us respond by making distinctions between our time and theirs. We hear the story and say, "That was then – this is now. The age of the Apostles is long gone. The Spirit doesn't work like that anymore."

Too few of us hear about the outpouring of the Spirit and wonder if there isn't something wrong with *us*. Too few of us have the courage to ask: "Why isn't God performing signs and wonders in *our* churches? Is it all just due to differing circumstances? Or is it possible that the early Christians had a different and better way of relating to Christ and the Spirit?"

Last week Lee talked about Acts, chapter one. There we learn several key facts about the disciples and their relationship with Christ. We learn, first, that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his followers on multiple occasions over a period of forty days. During that time, those who had been skeptics became true believers. The evidence regarding Jesus's resurrection was so overwhelming that all of them were won over.

Some of us call ourselves believers, yet we're still tripping over our doubts. We're still trying to decide if Jesus really did rise from the dead. We're still gathering evidence about the reality of God's Spirit. That's one important way in which our relationship with Christ may be different than that of the first disciples. Their faith was rooted in an unshakeable conviction that Christ had overcome death.

Jesus tells his team to stay in Jerusalem and await the coming of the Spirit. He doesn't give them a specific assignment; they're just supposed to worship, pray and wait upon God. They obey, but after a while they grow restless. They want to see God move; they want to see him do something spectacular that will turn the world upside down. They ask Jesus to reveal the details of God's plan, but Jesus disappoints them. He tells them the Father will be keeping the details to himself.

I'm not sure I would have had the patience to sit around with the rest of the team in Jerusalem during the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost.

I like to keep busy. I use my busy-ness to show the Lord what a great disciple I am. And I like to have a plan of attack. When I have a plan, it's easier for me to believe I'm doing God's work, and blowing him away with my accomplishments. I'm not good at waiting for the Holy Spirit. It's hard for me to pray for even an hour. I think I might have gone stir crazy waiting and praying for ten days after Christ's ascension for the Spirit to appear.

Many of us have never learned how to wait upon God. We've never had the patience to seek God's heart over days and weeks. We seldom pray with others, or ask others to pray with us and for us even when we're facing tough decisions. We hardly ever combine our prayer time with

worship and reflection on the Bible. If we pray at all, our prayers are short and formulaic. We ask God to reveal to us his plan. Then we immediately go and do as we please, foolishly assuming that God wants what we want, and vainly hoping that he'll bless us.

So there's another way in which our relationship with Christ may be different than that of the first disciples. Jesus taught the disciples how to slow down and wait upon God. He's trying to do the same for us, but most of us aren't cooperating.

Three years ago about sixteen of us were in the Dominican Republic for a summer mission trip. Our goal was clear: we were there to help with the construction of the Beraca School. We kept to a predictable schedule that included about seven hours a day of work, visits to other churches, worship time, prayer time and a beach trip. Everything was carefully scheduled, and each day we felt a great sense of accomplishment.

While we were there a team of about 12 women and men suddenly appeared at the compound where we were staying. It was a church group from Haiti.

"I'm happy they're here," I said to Pastor Phanord, our hostess, "but I didn't realize they were coming."

"I didn't either," she said.

They told the pastor that they'd been praying in their church in Haiti, and God had told them to travel to La Romana to pray for their Haitian brothers and sisters at the Beraca Church. So they loaded up a battered old truck and made the eight hour drive. They didn't know how long they would be staying. Only God knew, they said. Their job was to pray. And that's exactly what they did, all day long, for days on end, for the rest of the time we were in La Romana.

One morning the leader of the group told me God wanted them to pray for us. I said I thought that was a great idea and turned to go, but the man said, "No no – we'll meet you here, in the garden, before you go to work. We'll pray for you today."

"Great," I said, wondering if we were about to sacrifice a whole morning of work.

The prayer team surrounded us dressed in white shirts and dresses that they wore when they prayed. One man started with a Creole prayer. Then several people prayed in murmuring tones. After a few minutes, everyone was praying loudly. Every now and then one elderly guy with a sort of crazed look in his eye shouted and shuddered and jerked his head back. At one point the whole group sang a Haitian hymn in three part harmony.

The entire time that the team was praying, a strong breeze was blowing in and through the enclosed garden courtyard. When the team stopped praying after maybe fifteen minutes, the wind ceased.

I can't explain that to you – I can't say for sure that it was sent by the Spirit to let us know he was there, as I believe it was. I only know the wind started and ended with those wonderful Creole prayers, and that we all felt a great sense of joy and peace as we climbed aboard the bus that morning and headed to the worksite.

I want more of that kind of prayer in my life. (Not the shouting and jerking kind – I mean the gentle, murmuring kind.) We all need more pray – prayer that isn't driven by agendas that we've already set for ourselves – prayer that's prompted by the Spirit moving in Christ's body.

Just before he ascends into heaven, Jesus reminds the disciples that the Spirit will be coming to them. When the Spirit comes, he tells them, they'll become his witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and eventually "to the ends of the earth."

When the Spirit finally does come, in Acts chapter two, the disciples immediately do exactly what they've been trained and commissioned to do. They stand up to tell people about the crucified Christ who was resurrected in glory. And of course the Spirit gives them the ability to speak other languages so their message can be heard and received.

It took a lot of guts for the disciples to accuse that crowd of thousands of crucifying the Messiah. It took a lot of faith for them to believe the Spirit would overcome multiple language barriers, and pierce people's hearts, and draw them to Christ.

As a preacher, I'd like to think I would have done what they did, but I doubt if that's true. And that suggests to us yet another way in which our relationship to Christ might be different than that of the first disciples. Most of us speak of our faith only when we're around other believers, and only when we're asked to do so. The Lord's first witnesses risked their reputations and even their lives so that the people who killed Jesus might be saved.

The earliest Christians weren't super-heroes; they were women and men just like us. But they had a kind of wisdom that most of us are still learning.

They understood that God's plan of salvation was far more important than any petty dreams they had for their lives. What they wanted more than anything was to be used by God. So instead of resisting the Spirit, as we do when he interrupts our schedules, they cooperated with him. They moved where the Spirit moved, knowing that the Lord himself had chosen them to be his witnesses. There was no doubt in their minds that Jesus had been raised from the dead, or that he had the power to save. So when the promised Spirit finally came, they weren't afraid to let him take control of their lives. They trusted in God's plan even if they didn't fully understand it.

The Pentecost story reminds us that there's a difference between receiving the Spirit of God through faith, and exercising the gifts of the Spirit for the benefit of Christ's body. Everyone who knows and loves the Lord has received the Spirit as a gift. Yet relatively few people in today's Church are tapping into the power that available to them through the Spirit.

Pentecost power comes when we embrace our calling to represent Jesus, and we act under the authority and power of the Spirit God has given us. It isn't enough just to believe that Jesus is the Messiah who was raised from the dead. We also have to trust God's agenda. It isn't enough just to believe God is going to be victorious. We also have to embrace the work God gives us with the clear understanding that he's made us an essential part of the plan. That's what we learn from the very first Christians.

We've talked a lot about Pentecost. Now let's talk about us, and work that God has called us to. Let's think now about what it would look like – how we would act, as a church – if we let the Spirit take charge, and we fully embraced our role in God's plan of salvation.

I want to challenge us to think in concrete terms, so I've put together a top ten list. I call it "The Top Ten Markers of a Spirit-led Church." As we go through the list, ask yourself these questions: How can I do a better job, in my personal life, of cooperating with the Holy Spirit? How can we, as a church family, be more effective in continuing the ministry that Jesus began?

The first marker of a Spirit-led church is that, instead of whining about the church's decline, the people are excited about the great harvest that God is preparing.

The second marker is that, instead of making plans and asking God to bless them, the people ask God to reveal his will to them. They worship, pray and seek guidance from God's word before making important decisions.

The third marker: The people are praying for the sick in Jesus's name, and they're seeing clear evidence of God's hand at work.

Marker number four: The congregation is focused on making disciples of Jesus – the kind of disciples who will make more disciples of Jesus.

Number five: The people are regularly sharing their personal faith in Jesus with others, even at the risk of offending them, confident that the Spirit always goes before them.

Marker number six: The people don't allow personal concerns about their safety and security to keep them from responding to God's call.

Marker seven: The people overflow with praise and thanksgiving, and they get excited about bringing their friends to worship.

Marker number eight: Every family member is accountable to a circle of people that gathers regularly to pray, have fun, wrestle with God's Word and seek God's heart.

Marker number nine sets the bar high: Every person who can do so gives a tithe, or even more than a tithe, for God's work. The people are confident that the Spirit will multiply their gifts and take care of their personal needs.

Finally, the tenth marker of a Spirit-led church: The people go the extra mile for those with the greatest needs. They joyfully share God's love with widows and orphans – prisoners and prostitutes – the hungry and the unemployed – the homeless and the heartbroken – the addicted and the afflicted.

I want to be a part of *that* kind of church. I want to be part of church that's acting on God's agenda, and that's moving where the Spirit is moving. I want to see the abundant harvest that the Lord promises to his field-hands. Don't you?

Pentecost power is available to every one of us at every hour of every day. The question is: are we ready to yield to that power? Are we willing to give up our own vision for our life and embrace God's vision? Will we say yes to Christ's invitation to represent him in a world that doesn't know him?

Holy God, we've reflected deeply today on our sins and weaknesses. We haven't loved others as you love them. We haven't prayed as you have taught us to pray. We haven't been the bold disciples you created us to be.

You are the God of New Beginnings, the God of Resurrection and life. Take away our fear. Give us vision when we can't see a way. Inspire us to embrace the vision of the church you give us in Acts—the church born in the streets of Jerusalem with tongues of fire – the church that pulses with the heart-beat of Jesus.

We are your people, Holy God, but we have a long way to go. Thank you for inviting us to your table in spite of our unworthiness. Thank you for giving us your Spirit. Thank you for the promise, sealed in Jesus's blood, that our best days lie ahead of us. Amen.