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A Divine Work Continued

Acts 1:1-11

Intro: After much time and study in the Gospel of John, we have come to the Book of Acts. This Book of the Bible is incredibly important, especially in light of the current condition of our culture. One need not look very far to observe the consistent, downward spiral of American society in particular and Western civilization in general. It is clearly seen in what passes for entertainment today: movies, TV shows, music, print media (internet). It's evident in our education systems and our politics. It's even seeped into our religious institutions, so much so that even most of the evangelical churches, those that held the line on upholding the truth of the gospel for decades have now begun to waver in their resolve. Many are actually in the process of abandoning the Gospel and other theological convictions on which the Body of Christ is built. Many would say that our situation has never been so grim but that belief is very short-sighted.

The truth is, for most of its 2000+ history, the Body of Christ has faced some severe circumstances and incredible dangers and still does today in some locations. That is not to downplay the difficulties believers face today in this country nor does it mean that church planting is a breeze. In fact, there are probably thousands of books in print that deal with the subject of church growth with hundreds being published every year. Everyone has an angle or a new method or a better idea as to how to start a church or grow a church in our current social environment. Plenty of churches are being started and many of them are experiencing phenomenal growth. But the question we have to ask is: are they influencing the culture around them for the Gospel or is the culture influencing them?

That's the only real question because that's the only real goal of the true church. How do you establish and grow a church that will have a positive impact for the Gospel in its immediate community, its surrounding communities and the entire world? It's not enough to have large crowds and large facilities if the impact on the community is minimal or worse, negative towards the Gospel. I don't mean to disregard the multitude of scholarly works that have been produced and submitted concerning this topic but I believe our best option is to take a close look at the early church as it is

presented in the Book of Acts and discover what made it so strong and how it was able to make such a large impact on the pagan culture of its time.

One thing that is clearly seen in Acts is the rapid, amazing growth of the church – it was explosive! This is even more amazing when you consider that, humanly speaking; the 1st century church had nothing going for it. It had no money to speak of – the early Christians found themselves ostracized from their families and Jewish society in general. If they had a job or a profession, they often lost it. They were both social and economic outcasts. They had no proven leadership. The first leaders of the church were uneducated, inexperienced fishermen for the most part. The only real qualification they had, which was attested to by their enemies, is that they had been with Jesus. This later proved to be enough. They also had no technological tools for spreading the gospel. No internet, TV, radio, or printing press.

The early church faced enormous obstacles. It was utterly new – most other religions had been around for centuries or even a millennium. It taught truths that seemed incredible to the lost world. Paul later wrote that the preaching of the Gospel was...to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness (1 Cor 1:23). It was also subject to the most intense hatred and persecution. From the very beginning the witness of the Apostles and other believers was often written in blood. Yet, despite all the obstacles and resistance, the Gospel spread from Jerusalem, an obscure corner of the world, to Rome, capital of the western world, all within the lifetime of the first generation of believers. Every one of the main characters presented in the Book of Acts had been living during the lifetime of Jesus.

Another thing that is quite evident in the book of Acts is the concern the author has for actual presentation of the Gospel, that is, for the early Christian preaching. This book only has 28 chapters but those chapters include a total of 19 different sermons or formal addresses: many by Paul, some by Peter, the longest by Stephen, the first martyr. In other words, the book is full of teaching. This means is that the way the Gospel was spread in the first Christian century and needs to spread again in our time is by the faithful *preaching* and *teaching* of the great truths of the Bible. There is nothing today's church needs more than to rediscover the doctrine, spirit and commitments of the early Christian community. The truth of the Gospel hasn't changed nor has it lost any potency. It is still the power of God unto

salvation and its principles calls for the church to repent of its worldliness and recover the truth of God's Word and confess those truths in the doctrines it holds, the worship it offers and the life it lives before the world.

1-11 – The author of the Book of Acts is Luke, the physician who accompanied the Apostle Paul on many of his journeys. Acts is the second half of a 2 volume history written by Luke, the first volume being the Gospel of Luke. We know the 2 belong together because the introductions link them. Luke's Gospel begins with a dedication to someone he calls, most excellent Theophilus ([Lk 1:4](#)) and he is referenced again here in the first verse. Scholars are clueless as to who Theophilus was. He could have been a person just wanting instruction in the Christian faith but it is more likely that he was a Roman official being briefed on the Christian faith by Luke. In his 2 volumes, Luke was wanted to show Theophilus and the Roman government that: Christianity was harmless, some Roman officials had embraced it themselves; Christianity was innocent, Roman judges had found no basis for prosecution; Christianity was lawful, as the true fulfillment of Judaism, it was an approved religion in the Roman Empire.

The Book of Acts is an excellent history and Biblical scholars have long recognized and praised Luke's extraordinary historical accuracy. To write an account of a historical event today merely requires a visit to a library or surfing the web for reference materials related to that event but for Luke, this was not possible. Of the few libraries that existed, none of them contained any materials concerning the life and work of Jesus and yet, Luke was still able to produce a remarkably accurate book. The titles he gives to the rulers of the cities that Paul visits are accurate. The feel and flavor of the cities are different and they reflect what we know of them from other sources. Antioch wasn't like Rome; Jerusalem wasn't like Ephesus. Each had its own flavor and Luke knew what those cities were like.

Luke wasn't just a great secular historian; he was also a great historian of the early church. The story of Acts begins in Jerusalem, picking up with the closing hours of Jesus' earthly ministry. It's the period between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension into heaven. Luke then records the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world. At first it's spread mainly through the influence of the apostle Peter. In the second half of the book, Luke shows how Christianity spread all the way to Rome through the phenomenal life and ministry of the apostle Paul.

But Luke is not just recording church history; he's actually showing us that there is a plan to history. In fact, God is unfolding it. History has little to do with the rise and fall of empires. The meaning of history is in God's work: God is reaching down into the mass of fallen humanity and saving some hell-bent individuals, bringing them into a new fellowship, the church, and working in their lives in such a way that it brings glory to the name of Jesus Christ. That is what Luke is writing about as he unfolds these events before us. Along the way, we will discover sound principles for church growth and we'll see how temptations and trials are overcome by the grace of God.

Our text (1-11) focuses on the 40 day time period between the Lord's resurrection and ascension. These verses emphasize the historical foundation of Christianity, the obvious and necessary presence of Jesus, the missionary mandate of the Body of Christ and the Lord's return.

1-3 – Here we see the emphasis on the historical basis of Christianity. Luke tells Theophilus he's going to continue the history he began to record in his Gospel. The Gospel of Luke records what Jesus began both to do and teach in His human body, While Acts records what Jesus continued to do and teach through His spiritual Body, the church. These things are going to be continued in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What this tells us is that Christianity is a historical religion. It's not a religion based solely on ideas or philosophies. As I briefly pointed out last week, most world religions can exist apart from their founder. You don't need to have a historical Buddha to have Buddhism. All you need to have are Buddhist teachings. Not so with Christianity. If you take away the history; reducing it to a religion of ethics or ideas; Christianity evaporates. That's because Christianity is inexorably linked to the life and accomplishments of its founder, Jesus Christ. Jesus taught about God, but He didn't just teach. He showed what God was like. Then, to achieve our salvation, He died for us, taking our place to bear the wrath of God. Without that historical basis, Christianity would pass into the trash bin of history.

Christianity isn't just based on history; it's based on proven historical fact! Jesus didn't just give His disciples certain ideas to carry into the world. He appeared to them as one who had risen from the dead. They knew He had died – the fact was undeniable, even by His enemies. But then He rose from

the dead and began appearing to them. His appearances were enough to bring them together again. They would've never come back together for a philosophy or a mythology. They came together because the Jesus they knew and loved was alive. He had conquered death!

The resurrection was demonstrated by many infallible proofs and it is proof of everything else that needs proving. The resurrection is a fact. The disciples knew Jesus had been raised from the dead. If the resurrection is a fact, it proves the deity of Jesus for it was impossible that God would raise Him from the dead if His claim to deity was false.

A divine Christ must speak truth, because God is truthful and must speak truthfully. If what Jesus says is true, then we can trust everything He teaches. We can trust the Bible, because Jesus taught that it is the Word of God. We can believe God has forgiven our many sins, because Jesus taught that God would do that for all who believe in Him.

Another thing that bears mentioning in our text is the dominant presence of the living Christ in this passage. These opening verses do refer to each member of the Trinity. In **v3** Jesus mentions the "kingdom of God," a reference to God the Father. **V5** mentions the Holy Spirit while **v6** refers to Jesus as Lord. References to the Trinity aren't unusual for the NT. They occur elsewhere. What is striking here is that the Book of Acts refers to the person of Jesus Christ over and over again. Every one of these first eleven verses either records Jesus speaking or refers to Him directly.

This is important because over the last century, so-called biblical scholars have attempted to distinguish between the Jesus of History and the Christ promoted by His disciples. Their operating thesis is that the Christ preached by the disciples was unlike and unintended by the Jesus of history. All of the volumes written under this thesis have lead to nothing but a theological dead end because it's impossible to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. They always have been and always will be one and the same. The object of Christian faith is the Jesus who really lived, was crucified and rose from the dead.

4-8 – The next thing emphasized in the text is the missionary mandate of the church. The first thing we notice is that the disciples were suffering from a great misunderstanding – they still had old-fashioned ideas about the kingdom of God being established by political, earthly power. The disciples

were not thinking about spiritual things at this point. How do we know? Jesus had taught them differently! He taught that His kingdom was spiritual, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21). They didn't understand that. What kind of kingdom were they looking for?

They were looking for a political kingdom. They showed this by using the verb restore. They weren't thinking ahead to a new and different kind of kingdom, one that had never existed on earth. That's not what they had in mind. They wanted the restoration of something they already knew. They wanted the Davidic kingdom. They want it to be like it was when David was on the throne and Israel experienced her greatest glory.

They were looking for an ethnic kingdom. They didn't just ask if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom, they asked, if He was going to restore the kingdom to Israel," meaning "to us Jews." They're not interested in a gentile kingdom. They despised the Gentiles. Sure, Gentiles would be welcome but it was a Jewish kingdom that they had in mind.

They were looking for a geographic kingdom. This kingdom was to be in Jerusalem - God's city. That's where David and Solomon reigned. That's where the Messiah will reign, too. Greeks and Romans could visit anytime they wanted.

They're expecting a political, national and territorial kingdom and they're expecting it to be established immediately.

What is Jesus' response? He doesn't rebuke or rebuff them. He simply tells them that it's not their business to know when He's going to set up His kingdom. Your job is to be My witnesses in the world. And that is what they'll be.

Believers have always been faced with 2 temptations where this assignment is concerned. One is idleness: "Eh, I'm ok. I'll just hang around and wait for Jesus to come back." Jesus says to the inactive church that they will be filled with the Holy Spirit and when they are filled they're to go out and witness of him. The church that's not witnessing is not obeying its Lord.

The second temptation is the one the disciples were caught up in – thinking we can do the Lord's work in the world's way. God's kingdom will never be established politically: by getting believers into high government positions and imposing our vision of society on the world. There's a proper place for a

political expression of the Christian worldview but moral reform in society will not come by political maneuvering or power tactics. Only the Holy Spirit can carry the Gospel into the hearts and minds of the lost and transform them into disciples of Jesus Christ.

9-11 – The 4th emphasis of this passage is the expectation of the Lord's return. It's a pivotal moment for these disciples. Since his resurrection, Jesus had been appearing to them off and on to teach them spiritual things. They may have thought this was the way it was going to be forever. But the day came when Jesus bade them fare-well, ascended visibly into heaven and disappeared from view. This had to have been a wonderful sight and isn't just like us to stand and bask in the glow of a wonderful move of the Spirit, or a wonderful act of God in the life of a believer. But, the move of the Spirit or the divine act of God is not the point – how we respond to it is the point!

I love how these 2 angels respond to the gape-mouthed disciples. Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This is a polite way of saying, "What are you knuckleheads doing? Why are you just standing here? there's work to do. Get on with it!" Then they gave them a reassuring promise (**11b**). We know Jesus is going to return to judge the world but He's not going to return as a judge for believers. When they were told that this same Jesus would return, the disciples would have thought about the Jesus they knew and loved, not a judge.

It will be this same gentle, loving, gracious but also sovereign, holy and majestic Jesus who will come back for those who love, accept and follow Him. For those who reject Him, He'll return as a judge and His judgment will be perfect and impartial. People always declare that they want justice but you don't want justice from this judge – you want mercy!

How will you receive Jesus? As Lord and Savior or as a divine, all-knowing, all-powerful judge? Every person has both the right and the responsibility to choose for themselves. What choice have you made? 😊