

January 26, 2020

A COMMISSION AND A REMINDER

Acts 1:1-14

*(1 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

A few weeks ago we began a new year, and my guess is that most of us took it as an opportunity to refocus on some things. Perhaps we had a plan to read our Bible this last year, or exercise consistently, or read a number of books. But as we look back, things didn't go as planned. Our Bible reading plan came to a grinding halt in 1 Chronicles, we never went back to the gym once the summer got here, and we haven't picked up a book since September. And it wasn't because we made a conscience decision, saying, "Today I'm going to the gym for the last time." Rather, it was because we just started drifting away from our focus. We may have gotten busy one day or forgotten to do something, and it became a little easier to neglect it the next day, and then one day you look up and you're far from where you intended to be.

Well, the same thing can happen with churches. My guess is that churches that started off great and now have basically abandoned the gospel, didn't think one day, "Let's begin denying everything we've held to so dearly and see how that works out for us." Rather, they begin taking certain truths for granted, begin drifting away from other things they should be focused on, and then you look up and this church is in no way reflecting the glory, honor, and mission of Jesus Christ. This is obviously something we can point to in many churches in our nation over the years, and it's a path that we don't want to go down.

Therefore, just as the new year provides us as individuals an opportunity to refocus ourselves on some things we need to be doing personally, so we need to do that same thing as a church periodically. And I believe that our study through the book of Acts, generally, and our study this morning of Acts 1:1-14, specifically, will serve that very purpose. The reason that this book is helpful in refocusing us on some things as a church is because Acts records for us the Lord's final instructions to the church in the days before he ascended, the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost, and the earliest believers fulfilling the mission that the Lord instructed them to be about. And our text this morning helps us see the core principles of how and what we're to be about as a church. So, as we begin this time of reminding, refocusing, and reorienting ourselves in our study of this book, my prayer is that we will find ourselves not only more concentrated on our mission and the nature of our mission as a church but also refreshed in pouring ourselves into this work during this year.

So, as we begin our study by looking at Acts 1:1-14 this morning, I want us to be reminded of our mission as a church and how we're to pursue it. Let me begin, then, by noting that the work of Jesus Christ is central to our mission.

**The work of Jesus Christ is central to our mission**

When I say the “work of Jesus Christ,” I’m referring to his coming, living, dying, rising, ascending, interceding, reigning, and one day returning. And what I’m arguing—and believe the book of Acts argues as well—is that this isn’t simply something that we need to hear in order to begin the Christian life, but it is central to our life and mission as a church.

I say that because this is where Luke begins. He writes in verses 1-3, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”

Now, just to get us oriented a bit with this book, when Luke makes reference to “the first book” he wrote, he’s referring to the gospel of Luke that we see as the third book in the New Testament. He also addressed that book to “Theophilus,” about whom we know nothing except that he is the addressee in both Luke and Acts. Therefore, he writes the book of Acts as part two, if you will, as his second of two books. And he tells us specifically that he wrote the first book (Luke) to deal with all that Jesus “*began to do and teach,*” which is to say that he sees this second book (Acts) as a record of all that Jesus *continues* to do and teach by the Holy Spirit working through the apostles and the rest of the church. That is to say, when we come to the book of Acts, we’re not leaving behind Jesus and his work in the gospels. The whole NT is about Jesus doing and teaching—by the Holy Spirit, through the church.

In this introduction to the book of Acts that Luke gives us in 1:1-14, Luke reminds us of Christ’s work. He brings to our remembrance Jesus’ death for our sins by speaking of his “suffering” in verse 3. He mentions his resurrection, telling us that Jesus “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days” (v. 3). In other words, the testimony of the apostles that Jesus rose from the grave wasn’t based on one man claiming to have seen him in a back room one time when no one else did. Jesus appeared to many over forty days, even appearing to over 500 people at one time. Luke alludes to Christ’s reign as God’s king over the world by mentioning that during these forty days of Jesus appearing to his people after the resurrection, he was speaking to them “about the kingdom of God” (v. 3).

Now, we might not have anticipated that this theme of the kingdom of God would be something that Jesus would spend these days talking about because we might not think of it often ourselves, and we might not be familiar with it. But it’s a crucial theme in the Bible, and it’s something that Luke highlights in the book of Acts. We’ve seen that Luke opens the book by speaking of it, and he also closes his book by speaking of it. The very last scene in this book is Paul “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31).

And the kingdom of God is probably more familiar to us than we might think it is. When God created the world and placed Adam, his image-bearer, in the garden, he was putting Adam there to be a king over the creation. That’s why Genesis 1:28 tells us that God instructed Adam and Eve to have dominion over the earth. And this was a picture of what God intended—human

beings reigning over the world and representing their God over his creation. But, as we all know, everything went terribly wrong, the man sinned and was driven out of the garden, and sin and condemnation came into the world to all of us through him. But the story of redemption, in short summary is that God promised that he would redeem this original picture in a more glorious way by sending another king who would come from the line of David, who would have authority to reign over the whole world, and who would reign forever as God's king. And so the whole Old Testament looks for this one who would come and display God's reign, bringing God's kingdom. Well, when Jesus rose from the dead and his followers came to him, we are told in Matthew 28:18 that the first thing he said to them was that as this promised king, and he said that by telling them that he had been given authority to reign over the whole world, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," and then gave them a commission that we'll come back to shortly. I am sure this is familiar to most of us, which means that Luke telling us that Jesus was talking about the kingdom of God shouldn't be that surprising. After all, it's entirely wrapped up in Jesus and his work for us.

Luke reminds us of Jesus' death, resurrection, reign, ascension, and return. He alludes to the ascension of Christ back into heaven in verse 2 (i.e. "until the day he was taken up"), but he describes the scene in more detail in verse 9 as he writes, "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." And finally, the angels who appear after the ascension tell the apostles that Jesus will return, saying, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (v. 11).

Do you then see that Luke begins his gospel telling us that we're not moving on from Jesus and his work? Everything we do as a church is centralized in Jesus and his work. The gospel message itself that we speak and by which we are saved is the message of Christ living, dying, and being raised for us. We walk as a church into enemy-occupied territory in this fallen world, knowing that Jesus is reigning at the Father's right hand. We confess our sins because we know he is interceding for us. We willingly lay down even our lives because we hope in his return and eternal life. And, as I noted, this letter will end with Paul teaching "about the Lord Jesus Christ." The work of Jesus Christ is central to our mission as a church. We must speak and teach about Jesus and what he has done, sing about it, pray about it, and hope in it, never forgetting it or taking it for granted. It is central, but there is more that we see here as well. The second important reminder to us is that the power of the Spirit is necessary in our mission.

### **The power of the Spirit is necessary in our mission**

In verse 4 Luke begins to tell us about how Jesus instructed them to fulfill the mission he was giving them, but before that, he notes that Jesus told them of a necessary prerequisite for this mission, namely, the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke writes, "And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'" (vv. 4-5), and then he added in the middle of verse 8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." In other words, the waiting was

necessary because the power of the Holy Spirit was (and is) necessary for the mission that the Lord was giving them.

Now, we will get into all that this means as we look at the Spirit's activity and the church's Spirit-empowered work in these early chapters of Acts over the next few weeks, so I don't want to launch into something that we'll be able to immerse ourselves in over the next few weeks. But I do want to say now that if you are a believer one of the most glorious blessings is that the Spirit of God dwells in you. This wasn't a universal reality for believers prior to the glorious events we'll see in Acts, but it's true now. Paul will tell us in Romans 8:9 that to belong to Christ means that we have the Spirit. And that truth is not merely meant to make us feel good as we acknowledge that reality. The Spirit indwells believers in order to change them. When God made a promise about what he would do for his people with the coming of the Spirit in Ezekiel 36:26-27, he said, "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

In other words, the Spirit was going to change God's people at the level of their desires. You see, before we come to Christ, we are held captive to sin through our sinful passions and desires. This is why Paul speaks of unbelievers as being enslaved to sin and then exhorts believers by saying, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its *passions* [or desires]." He also says in Ephesians 4:22, "Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt *through deceitful desires*." We were enslaved to sin because sin had taken hold of us at the level of our hearts, at the level of our desires.

Therefore, when the Lord wanted to cause his people to "walk in [his statutes] and be careful to obey [his] rules," he told us that he would give us new hearts and put his Spirit within us. And the reason is because the Spirit of God produces in us godly desires. And the result is what Paul says in Romans 6:17-18 as he writes, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient *from the heart* . . . and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." The Spirit not only frees us from our captivity to sinful desires but enables us to obey, not merely externally but from the heart, that is, in accord with new, God-honoring desires. That's what the Spirit's presence within us does. He changes us from our hearts, from the level of our desires.

Now, we will see and say more as we continue through these early chapters of Acts, but I want us to recognize this right out of the gate because you're going to think, "How can Peter go from denying even knowing Jesus in cowardice to willingly being persecuted for the sake of Christ ultimately?" and the answer is the Holy Spirit, empowering Peter at the level of his desires so that he willingly does what once would have seemed impossible. That's why Jesus wants them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit and the power he brings into our lives.

This is why if someone professes to be a believer but doesn't desire godliness, we question that profession, recognizing that belonging to Christ doesn't simply mean that we have forgiveness of sins but that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who shapes the desires of the children of God.

And this is also a reality I simply don't want us to take for granted as believers. The Spirit's presence in our lives is a glorious gift, and his power—most foundationally at the level of our desires—is utterly necessary for us as we seek to obey the mission Christ has given us as his church. And that brings us to our third point: being Christ's witnesses is the content of our mission.

### **Bearing witness to Christ is the content of our mission**

After Jesus mentions the coming of the Spirit, the apostles ask him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6). And the reason they're asking that is really for two reasons. First, when the Old Testament speaks of the end-times blessing of the Lord it often speaks of them as one whole package. So, for example, we can read of promises of the Spirit coming (Ezek 36), of God's people being gathered from the ends of the earth, and of the Lord's king reigning from Jerusalem over the whole world (Is 49). Therefore, when Jesus has mentioned them being "baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," the apostles instantly jump to the idea that this is the moment when all of these things will transpire. Therefore, their question. But a second reason they're asking this is because they don't yet understand as clearly as they will. Jesus had told them in John 16:12-15 that he had much more to say to them but they couldn't bear it at that moment. However, when the Spirit came, he would take the words of Christ and guide them into all truth. And that's what we're going to see throughout the book of Acts as the Spirit guides the apostles into all truth, which ultimately is why the NT can be written through their hands (and the hands of their associates). But at this point the apostles are probably still envisioning some kind of geo-political reality with Israel overthrowing Roman rule under Jesus' political leadership, and so Jesus simply tells them that they don't need to worry about the times or seasons, but they need to be his witnesses. Specifically he says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (v. 8). Perhaps surprisingly, instead of reigning over their enemies, they're going to find themselves often being martyred at their hands as they seek to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his work.

And this is the content of our mission as well. We bear witness to Christ. Now, we could make a misstep here and think this merely means that we go and tell people that Jesus lived, died, and rose, encourage them to trust in him by faith, and then just move on and keep bearing witness. But as we go through the book of Acts, we're going to see that though being his witnesses certainly involves that, it involves more. If you think that's it, you're going to eventually be confused why Paul is planting churches and appointing elders in those churches on his missionary journeys. But he's doing that because he understands that the local church is Jesus' discipleship program. You see, when Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20, he spoke of making disciples by baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ has commanded. And that meant that we are to bear witness of the gospel to men, and when they repent and believe, we baptize them, bring them into the church, and then in a context in which they have oversight, care, love, accountability, discipline, and fellowship, we continue to bear witness to Jesus by teaching them to obey all that Christ commands.

And that is our mission as a church. We do that here in Jackson. And we do that to the ends of the earth, which is why we continue to train and send out people to bear witness beyond this geographical area, plant churches there, and on and on. But foundational to what we do as believers and as a church is that we bear witness to Jesus. We don't have to creatively come up with things to say or teach. We bear witness to what Christ did and is doing, and we bear witness to what he taught us to do. And you and I are the beneficiaries of faithful believers doing that from the time of the apostles until now in generation after generation. May the same be true of us!

But there's one more note I want to make from this introduction to Acts—prayer and fellowship are required for our mission.

### **Prayer and fellowship are required for our mission**

One of the glorious aspects of our Lord's mission is that we doesn't require us to do it alone. This is a glorious scene to find these believers going back to Jerusalem, gathering together, and "with one accord . . . devoting themselves to prayer" (vv. 12-14). They understood that this was a mission that the Lord had given them to do together as a church by the grace and power of God. And so they walked together, and they prayed. About this I will say much more in these next few weeks as we continue to see this in the early chapters of Acts. But for now, let us delight in the fact that the Lord has called us out of the world as his people, has called us together as a church, has commissioned us to obey him, and has sent us back into the world to be his witnesses by his grace. So, let us as a church never forget this is our mission, and may this be the greatest focus of our prayers together.

Just as the new year offers us an opportunity to refocus ourselves on what is important, may we this morning remember afresh that the work of Christ is central to our mission, the power of the Spirit is necessary in our mission, that bearing witness to Jesus is the content of our mission, and that prayer and fellowship as required for our mission. And may we this morning reflect a refreshed commitment to this mission as a church as we come to the table. Amen.