
ACTS | A New Community

Rob Rogers September 26, 2021

Introduction

Last week we introduced a new series, working through the book of Acts. One of the problems in modern western culture is that we often think that we need some new secret knowledge, some life hack, something other people have, that we don't have in order to navigate the problems, the troubles, the storms, the difficulties of life.

IMPORTANT: But what we see in any Spiritual Awakening or Great Revival in times past is **what we need most is not some new secret knowledge to breathe life into something ancient — but something ancient, something transcendent to inform how we navigate the new challenges we face.**

Because 2,000 years ago there was one of the most well-documented revivals and spiritual awakenings in human history — and it reformed one of the most remarkable, seemingly unstoppable civilizations ever built. This awakening changed not just that empire, but it changed the trajectory of human history. It began with a tiny little group of nobodies. They had no political power, no position, no status, no educational advantages, no economic power, no influence, or sway. This little group of nobodies started something that within two centuries had swept up millions of people all throughout the Roman Empire into a revolution of JOY, of HOPE, of PEACE that they'd never known or thought possible.

This revolution, this revival, this awakening — the birth of the Church is exactly what we're looking into in the book of Acts.

ANNOUNCEMENT: I want to draw your attention to some resources we have available for you as we work our way through the book of Acts.

- **TRANSLATION:** Many of you have asked what translation of the Bible I'm preaching from — I primarily use ESV, although sometimes the NKJV.
- **READING PLAN:** There is a Book of Acts, including a Journal, available in the foyer.
- **VIDEO SERIES:** This afternoon we're going to be releasing a short video where Pastor Jimmy and I will be reading through and discussing Story 3. On Sunday mornings, we'll be preaching through the odd numbered Stories, and then Sunday afternoons, we'll be releasing the videos to the Life Groups, and the congregation for your own personal reflection, or for you to use for discussion. These will be available on the Grace Chapel web site, YouTube, and Facebook.

PURPOSE: *The hope in doing the series this way, is that collectively as a church family, we will open the Word of God, and work our way through the book of Acts both individually and collectively — that God would make us a church that reflects the beauty, the power, the grace, the compassion, the love, and the mission of the early church.*

The Purpose of the Church

ACTS 1:8

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

In Acts 1:8, in **one single verse** is the anchor, the purpose, the mission statement of the entire book of Acts. *It is not only the foundation of the Acts of the Apostles **but also the very purpose of the Church**.* It is the structure of the entire book, and what we'll be using as the structure for our series.

Last week we talked about the fact that we need the Holy Spirit to clothe us with power to be Christ's witnesses — the original Greek is the word *martys*, or *martyr*.

We often make the mistake of thinking we can claim to be followers of Jesus without actually following in the ways of Jesus. Being like Jesus, treating people like Jesus did, loving people like Jesus did, serving people like Jesus did, and challenging and stepping into conflict, like Jesus did.

When you look at the lives of those early followers...

- Peter was crucified upside down
- Paul was beheaded
- Andrew was crucified
- Thomas was pierced with spears
- Philip was executed by a Roman Proconsul because his wife came to faith
- Matthew was stabbed to death
- James was stoned, and then clubbed to death
- Simon was martyred because he refused to make a sacrifice to a pagan God
- Matthias was burned to death
- Early Latin tradition says the John was put in boiling and didn't die, then was exiled to the island of Patmos

This week, I had a conversation with a friend here at Grace Chapel who has been doing Disciple Making work in SE Asia for the last few decades. He said that 11 out of his 16 leaders have been physically beaten. Just last month, one of them was tied to a tree and severely beaten for baptizing someone.

It is important for us to understand that this has been and is the norm for Christians around the world. I'm not sure they would even recognize our western, Americanized version of Christianity.

Because the goal of any type of persecution is to stop the spread of the gospel.

But martyrdom is the method that God has chosen for the gospel to explode around the world.

Present Your Body as a Living Sacrifice

This is why Jesus says...

John 12:24-26

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

And martyrdom for us might not look like this exactly — but what being a Witness and Martyr absolutely ***does look like*** for us is this:

Matthew 16:24-25

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, let him **deny himself** and take up his cross and follow Me.

Luke 14:27

Whoever does not **bear his own cross** and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

Galatians 5:24

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have **crucified the flesh** with its passions and desires.

Romans 12:1

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a **living sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Paul, writing to the Corinthian church says,

1 Corinthians 15:31

...I die every day!

What does this mean for us?

It means that even though we might not be beaten or stoned to death, or dropped in boiling oil or beheaded, or exiled to some far off island — we are called to cooperate with the Spirit of God in the crucifixion of our flesh — in the denial of ourselves — for the sake not only of our sanctification, but also in order that God might be glorified, through the laying down of our lives — as Christ laid down His life for us.

Before any single one of Jesus followers were literally martyred for the cause of Christ — they were continually dying to themselves, to their flesh.

Revelation 12:10

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, *for they loved not their lives even unto death.*

The way we win the spiritual war is not through self-exaltation, but self-sacrifice! I must decrease so that Christ might increase! The way the ACCUSER is conquered is through subversion and self-sacrifice, by our becoming a servant, by losing our life for Christ's sake.

This is the WAY Christ showed us to live. This is why we need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit — because we don't have what it takes to do that.

The Heart of the Early Church

In the beginning of this subversive movement of God, through early gatherings of the church in Acts 2 — we see their heart, and what they practiced. There were 120 disciples. In the first part of Acts 2, Peter, empowered by the Spirit preaches and 3,000 people repent, believe in the Risen Christ, and are added to the Church. What's described next is the spiritual practices of these early believers.

Acts 2:42-43

And they **devoted** themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and the **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and the **prayers**. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

They persisted in, were consumed by, obsessed with 4 specific practices.

1. the scriptures, doctrine
2. the gathering of believers
3. breaking of bread — which implies two things, the Lord's supper, communion; but also sharing meals with one another together
4. prayer

They were devoted to these things.

Acts 2:44-45

⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Some will argue that this passage is describing or promoting socialism or communism — but here's why that isn't the case,

1. The distribution of resources was not mandated by the Roman Government — the early believers were doing this of their own volition and free-will. They chose to give; they chose to distribute resources — they weren't forced.
2. The distribution of resources was **not an equal distribution** among all the people — they were given as any had what? **Need!** The early church was MARKED by acts of compassion toward the poor, the needy, the hurting, the disadvantaged — and having everything in common — they were all onboard with that mission!

Acts 2:46-47

⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people.

- One of the things that helps me to know that God is good is that included in the spiritual disciplines of the early church is that they ate food together day by day, in each other's homes!
- What's described here is that they were in such close relationship and community together that they couldn't wait to gather in both small and large numbers
- In the Temple, and in homes

There was severe opposition to any sort of spiritual awakening or uprising. But their uprising was not one of hostility, but one of love. The early church was marked by self-sacrificing generosity, joy, love for friends and enemies. And because the early church was marked by those characteristics, you know what happened?

Acts 2:47

...And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Let me ask the question of us...

*As those who claim to follow Jesus... are **WE DEVOTED, PERSISTING IN...***

1. the scriptures, doctrine
2. the gathering of believers
3. breaking of bread, the Lord's supper, communion, sharing meals with one another together
4. and prayer

The outflow of our being committed to the same practices of the early church — is a church that is marked by sacrificial generosity and compassion — not only to those in need — but even to those who would seek to silence us, or even take our lives.

Why would I give my life to Jesus if that's what Christianity is all about?

One of the problems invading the modern western church today is we would rather sell people on a shallow version of Christianity to get them in the door, which leads to a shallow faith that fails when trials or tribulation comes.

Personal: This week I had coffee with a guy in recovery who is very skeptical about Christianity — because of Christians with shallow faith. He’s open to exploring who Jesus is. He said, “If I’m going to follow Jesus, I’m not going to make the decision flippantly. If I’m going to follow Jesus, I’m not going to make a half-hearted commitment, I’m going all in.”

You know what he’s doing?

Luke 14:28

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

He’s counting the cost.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever claimed to be a follower of Jesus without actually following in the ways of Jesus? When/how did your life change to actually become a follower in word and deed?
2. Have you ever been persecuted (in any way) for being a Christ-follower? How did it affect you?
3. What is the hardest part in your personal Christian walk of “denying your flesh,” of presenting your body as a “living sacrifice”?
4. What would prevent us (as a church body) from following the four spiritual practices of the early believers: devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers?
5. Do we want to be a church marked by sacrificial generosity and compassion — not only to those in need — but even to those who would seek to silence us? How would we do that?

NOTES