

# Acts of the Apostles:

## The Church in the World ...Going Public with the Gospel

### BACKGROUND AND BIBLICAL WORK

*Acts of the Apostles* is a second generation Christian community response to the God's work in moving from Jerusalem to Judah to Samaria and to the end of the world (literally to Rome). This is not an orderly account because the Spirit has other things in mind. Just when the disciples think they have this church thing figured out the Spirit enters in and changes it again. God clearly is at work through it all, constantly collaborating with who and what is there to build the fellowship and extend the witness to the world. Just when we think things are set, the Spirit moves outside of the "tent" and brings others in.

Our life together as the disciples of Jesus Christ is informed by the Resurrection-Pentecost event and the work of the early church. As congregations, we are supposed to focus on mission and ministry, yet we must acknowledge that we have often laid aside the Spirit's stirring up of passion and mission zeal for a more obsessive, distractive focus on structure, numbers, and committees. We are called to mission as defined by Jesus Christ in Resurrection and Ascension traditions. Pay attention to the verbs: *Go, Make, Sent, Tend, Feed, Receive, etc.*

The term *biblical work* is used rather than bible study because scripture is to constantly inform and direct what we are doing as a church. Biblical work done by congregation councils is not just spiritual exercise; it brings the Word of God into every conversation and decision. You can tell you have been doing biblical work when the scripture passage or section you started with enters back into the dialogue throughout the meeting. Commit your group to take enough time for this work i.e. in a 90 minute council meeting 20-30 minutes is about right. (Note: If your monthly council meetings are taking more than 90 minutes then you are spending too much time on decisions that cannot be made at that time or the preparation work is not being done before the meeting starts.)

As always, begin in prayer...open yourself up to the presence of Jesus, feel the Spirit in your midst, listen to the call and sending of the Gospel. There is always an *invitation* in scripture as well as a *go and do*.

### Sessions

- I Are We a Chapter 1 or Chapter 2 Acts Church?
- II Pentecost - What could happen in 50 days?
- III Living in a Metanoia Community
- IV Divisions, New Leadership and Prioritizing Ministry
- V The Scattered-Proclaiming the word of God
- VI God Shows No Partiality...Peter and Cornelius

## Session I: Acts      ARE WE A CHAPTER 1 or CHAPTER 2 CHURCH?

ACTS lays out us from the beginning two distinctive models for operating as the church. One centers on meetings, numbers, and status quo, and the other on doing the Spirit's work in the world. One has heard Jesus' instructions of what we are to do next, and the other pretty much ignores everything Jesus says at the Ascension (or the end of the Gospels).

Acts 1:8 Pre-Pentecost - What the Church is NOT to be doing.

1. Go off on our own thinking we already know what God wants
2. Mistaking God's Kingdom for earthly kingdoms
3. Looking up to heaven to find the answers
4. Standing around doing nothing
5. Only praying about doing God's mission, yet never doing anything
6. Only focusing on the numbers, and not on why they could be helpful
7. Only having council meetings that elect new leaders

Conversation: What do these characteristics of the church tell us about our congregation?

Why are we as the church so easily distracted from the work that God empowered us to do?

### Acts 1:1-8 - Jesus' Instructions

You (pl.) will be baptized and empowered by the Spirit...

You will focus on the Kingdom of God...not on the end of the world

You will follow Jesus even into suffering

You will be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

What is the power of the Spirit? What can the Spirit do? What could that look like in your congregation?

What could/does the Kingdom of God look like in our context?

Suffering as part of a Christian's calling...had this ever been part of your understanding of your baptismal covenant?

### Action

List the changes, e.g. *metanoia*, in the hearts and minds of members that would let the Spirit do its work and the Kingdom be made alive in your congregation.

In twenty-five words, what is the Good News that we as Christian share with the world.

Why might this witness cause a person to suffer?

## Session II Acts 2 :1-36 Pentecost - What could happen in 50 days?

+*Ruah* = Spirit, breath, wind...Filling the void, Firing up the passion

*Creation from chaos to order....Living breath in creatures....God's likeness in adam*

*Leaders in Exodus in and out of the tent....Anointing of David...Dedication of the Temple*

*Prophet' voice....Filling a virgins womb....Fulfilling ancient promises*

Acts 2:1-13

+All together...All were filled...(All) nations...All amazed

+Public Proclamation is the first work of the Body of Christ;

+People from the known world...Jews, proselytes, Romans, Cretans and Arabs

What does "ALL" imply on the scope of the Spirit's work in the world?

"...in their own language." What does this tell congregations about having new folks fit us and our traditions OR our message fitting them and their context?

Acts 2: 14-24

+Pour Spirit on all; prophecy to sons, daughters & slaves

+Young have visions; the old have dreams- *metanoia* = the reversal; turning upside down

+ Saved (vs 21, 40) humanity...Israel....Joel...Peter...us today

+ God had a definite plan...crucified, killed (by you) and raised (by God)

Action

*Metanoia* (repent) implies turning things upside down; Christ's death and resurrection has conquered sin and death, then the salvation work is about here and now. The salvation work of your congregation is....?

Given the Spirit and Christ's presence, what could your congregation do in the next 50 days?

## Session III Living in a *Metanoia* Community

Read Acts 2:37-41

What should the crowd/public do?

- +Metanoia...change your hearts and minds to God
- +Be baptized...in the power and passion of the Spirit
- +Sins are forgiven
- +Receive the Holy Spirit
- +Promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away

What barriers, beliefs or blocks inhibit *metanoia*? For you? For your congregation

Is the work of Jesus complete or do we act/believe/respond "so that" salvation is completed through us? What does ACTS imply? What does Romans imply? Lutheran theology?

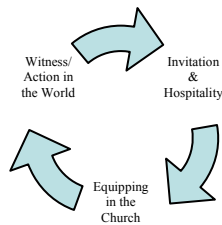
Read Acts 2:42-47 - What do "believers" do?

After PUBLIC PROCLAMATION...

- +Prayers, devotion and study of the apostles' teaching
- +Fellowship in the breaking of the bread
- +Signs and wonders that awe others...all done in the name of Jesus
- +Believe together and have all things in common-sell possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all in need
- +Witnessing in the temple
- +Breaking bread together at home and eating with glad and generous hearts praising God
- +Having the goodwill of all people

### Action

Living in the *metanoia* community starts with witness/action in the public arena; then the invitation and hospitality to "others;" then worship, sharing, and reflection together; and then going back into the world. Do you see this same pattern in your congregation? How is it different? What is missing?



How could your congregation move toward this pattern of ministry? What would need to take place in the first six months?

What stands in the way of being this kind of community?

## Session IV Divisions, New Leadership and Prioritizing Ministry

### Acts 6: 1-7

Think about other examples of when the job got to be too big for one person in scripture:

- +Moses and the advice from his father-in-law, Jethro,,to bring on judges for the people
- +Gideon and the army of Israel
- +Elijah and the call of Elisha; work of Jehu, Shaphat,
- +Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem
- +Jesus sending out the twelve and then the 72 to spread the Good News of the Kingdom

Read Acts 6:1-7

Hebrew speaking vs. Greek speaking widows...Is this the first division in the church?

What is it that the twelve *do not* want to do?

How are these new leaders identified? Where do they come from? What is the first ministry focus?

Issues have arisen in the early community

- Witness for Christ - Persecution occurs right away...being a disciple comes with suffering
- Some are holding back on giving, even lying...and there are consequences
- This new Way attracts the wrong folks: poor, hungry, widows. Service to others is expensive
- The needs of the community exceed the resources of leadership
- Not enough time to get it all done and just not wanting to do certain things

How has your congregation dealt with these issues or concerns?

How might you deal with these issues differently?

Going Deeper: What if this is not just a "service to widows" or Hebrew-Greek issue? Could this also be church issue in that priority is given to proclaiming the Word in the world against serving at the Breaking of the Bread (e.g. Communion)?

What does this say about ministry priority in the early church?

Does this reflect the priority in your congregation: Public Proclamation or Care within the Congregation? It is often stated, "We have to take care of ourselves before we can care for others?" Is this actually true for Jesus? For the early church? For someone like Martin Luther?

## Session V: The Scattered-Proclaiming the Word of God

### Acts 8:4-40 Philip in Samaria

Who were these Samaritans? Where have we heard of them before?

Why is this a huge step for the followers of Jesus? What does this foreshadow in going to the ends of the earth?

What does Philip do: Proclaimed the Messiah...crowds of one accord...Great Joy  
Seeing the signs...casting out spirits... curing the lame and sick  
Simon the magician... THE GREAT ONE...

But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon believed.

John and Peter sent to lay on hands...Holy Spirit. (Simon's desire for power...repentance... Holy Spirit)

In Acts, it seems that the apostles are "making it up as they go along." Philip baptizes, then John and Peter go up to lay on hands. What does this tell us about how we as congregations might do ministry?

Who are the Samaritans around us, in our communities? Why are we not willing to go there?

### Acts 8: Philip and Ethiopian Eunuch

Who is this eunuch? What does it mean for him to worship in Jerusalem?

Philip shows up and pays attention to what is happening  
Reading Isaiah... "Do you understand what you are reading?" ...starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away to Caesarea.

### An Apostle's Model for Witnessing

**+Show Up ... not wait until they come to you**

**+Pay Attention ... see who is there; it is about them, not you.**

**+Ask the Question ... let them invite you to share, wait for it**

**+Word of God ... is our source, witness is not about you until it has been about Jesus Christ**

**+Discipling ... the purpose of being a disciple of Jesus is to make more disciples for Jesus**

**+Baptism ... is about dying to sin and brokenness now and later and being raised into a new way of living today through water and Word. Baptism is model for living each day. What is the most difficult step to take? Why do you resist this work?**

## Session VI- God Shows No Partiality...Peter and Cornelius

Read Acts 10:1-48

What is Caesarea? Why is this important to our ends of the earth proclamation?

Cornelius...centurion of the Italian Cohort

Devout man who feared God, gave alms generously, prayed constantly

Messenger of God...Cornelius "What is it, Lord?" Why is this response important?

Peter's vision:

- Heaven opened-large table cloth with all kinds of four footed creatures & reptiles & birds
- Get up Peter, kill & eat; Never eaten unclean.
- What God has made clean, you must not call profane/3x
- Next day, Peter goes with some believers

Peter

*You yourself know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me." ...*

*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power...*

*He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the Prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles...speaking in tongues and extolling God.

*Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.*

Why is the dream of Cornelius important? What does it say about who God speaks through?

What did Peter's vision say about to whom the Gospel is to be shared? For the early church for us?

Do we believe that God shows no partiality that all are made clean in Jesus Christ?

One more time the Holy Spirit is outside the box. If the Holy Spirit can be present before Baptism, what does say about what the church needs to look for before it witnesses?

Further Reflections:

What could your congregation do to move you from being a Chapter 1 Church to a Pentecost Church?

Does your congregation intentionally look for and lift up how the Holy Spirit is working?

What is the *metanoia*-- the radical change of heart, minds and actions--that is required of your congregation? The Synod? The Church?

How would being a Spirit-driven congregation have you look at spiritual gifts--the holy assets of your congregation--differently? How might you use a spiritual gifts assessment?

Knowing that the Spirit is working in your midst, meeting you where you are already, how would this change how your congregation could meet and engage new people differently? Where would you meet them? Inside the upper room of your sanctuary or out in their context?

What is the challenge of leadership faced in your congregation? Are there too many things to get done with the volunteers you have? How might you prioritize what the pastor should do? The council? The members?

This second set of leaders--Stephen, Philip, etc.--quickly move beyond serving at table. How do you move volunteers into leadership? What is your process for mentoring new leaders? Is there room for new leadership to arise in your congregation or is one group or another not making room?

Model for Witness:

- Show Up
- Pay Attention
- Ask the Question
- Use the Word
- Disciple more Disciples,
- Help disciples find their Vocation in Baptism

Where might your congregation go to witness? What might be the first thing to do? What are different ways to witness?

Who is acceptable to God? How does this limit or expand who we go to with the Gospel? Who would it be hard for you to witness to?

Where might we find the Holy Spirit already working outside the church? What does it mean for the Holy Spirit to be working outside OUR structure of the Church?