

The Sequel

Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts

Pre-Explosion: The Preparations for Pentecost

A Prep Guide for Session One

with Dr. Allen R. Hilton

The most famous episode in the Book of Acts is Pentecost. Many churches around the world celebrate it every year on its anniversary, a.k.a., “the birthday of the church.” There are Christian groups and denominations who classify themselves as “Pentecostalists,” but all Christians find the origin of their practices at least partly nested in the grand occasion when a rushing wind blew threw a room and into Jerusalem streets and then a wider world after that.

If we’re after the origin of the movement that changed the world, though, the original stuff from which the Big Bang came, we haven’t even reached home when we get to the famous episode in the Jerusalem streets. As powerful as Pentecost is, that explosion doesn’t happen among the apostles if not for the One who empowers them. For this we fix our eyes first on Jesus.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” he told them. And everywhere this happens in the Book of Acts, people will feel their lives get larger and see themselves doing things they never imagined they could do. Jesus lives on through this church.

Luke establishes the primacy of Jesus cleverly. His Gospel – our Gospel according to St. Luke – has twenty-four chock-full chapters of Jesus stuff. The prophets anticipate Jesus, then an angel comes to Mary and announces him, then shepherds seek him and angels sing him in Bethlehem, then the scholars at the Temple see his prodigy at age 12, then he’s baptized by John in the Jordan, then... You get the picture. Luke’s story of Jesus packs a load of teaching, healing, wonder-working, community-building, marginal-people including, authority-challenging into these pages, not to mention a crucifixion, a resurrection, some afterlife appearances, and an ascension to the heavens. Whew! It’s a sprint and a marathon at the same time! It’s enough to hold a life.

After all this, though, at the beginning of volume two, this Book of Acts that has occupied our lives these eight weeks, Luke stops us in our tracks. This will be no social movement or human initiative. It will be Jesus continued...through the church.

I wrote to you in my first book, O Theophilus, about all that Jesus BEGAN to do and to teach, before he was taken up into heaven...

The chock-full Gospel of Luke was just Jesus getting started. Acts is Jesus Part Deux – The Sequel. The power, the wisdom, the courage, the vision, the sheer stamina of the apostles in this amazing book is all Jesus living out through a brilliant collection of devoted lives.

One more jaw-dropping truth comes in behind this one, so take a deep breath: Jesus wants to do the same with every new generation of Christians in every church in all the world. 2 billion of us worldwide ought to look around, because the same One who lived through Peter and John and Paul and Lydia and Priscilla and Aquila wants to live just as powerfully through us.

What does this mean? Well, in Acts 11 we learn that, after calling their movement, “The Way” from the beginning, “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’” (11.25) We use this now nearly 2,000-year-old term casually, as a title or a category. But it’s worth knowing what it meant when it was coined. Most languages have ways of making a big thing smaller. Spanish speakers call their beloved “mi amor”, but if the apple of their eye is young or small, it’s “amorcito/a” A laundry becomes a laundrette in French if it’s little. Ancient Greek speakers did this, too. If they wished to speak of Christ, they used “*Christos*”. But if one wanted to picture a smaller, lesser version, they called them “*Christianoi*” – little Christs. It’s very likely that the term started as a form of derision, coined by the opponents of The Way. “Look at the little Christs!” But it’s just as likely that those early followers wore the name with pride. And we should wear it proudly, too. Jesus needs a new set of small and lesser replicas in every time and place. May we live up to the name!

God’s Calling and God’s Equipping

Most of Acts 1 describes a roomful of Jesus’ followers sitting still. Here’s how Luke names the crowd.

Then (after Jesus commissioned them and ascended to heaven) they (the followers of Jesus) returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

These are the people who followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and stayed around. They’re confused, but loyal, and they know enough to build a very useful practice: “When in doubt, pray!”

This first list is short:

- eleven apostles,
- Jesus' mother Mary,
- "some women",
- and Jesus' four brothers. (according to Mark 6.3)

These eleven are the same apostles who abandoned Jesus after Gethsemane, denied Jesus during his trial (Peter), and were mostly no-shows at the cross on Friday. And they are also the same apostles whom Jesus has just commissioned to take his message everywhere in the world.

This contradiction is fascinating, right? But it is not at all new in the story of God's HR Policies. Consider this:

- God chose Abraham to be the father of the promise and the blessing, and then Abe went south and lied to Egyptian officials that Sarah was his sister, to avoid whatever violence might befall the husband of a beautiful wife.
- God called Sarah to be the mother of all that good stuff, and then, when she heard God assure Abraham that the promise of a son and an heir would indeed be fulfilled...she laughed.
- God called Moses to be the spokesperson before the most powerful ruler of his age, even though he had a bit of a stutter and practically turned God down for the job.
- God called Rahab, a Jericho prostitute, to play a big role in Israel's entry into the long-ago-promised land.
- When God called Isaiah, Isaiah told God, "I'm not up to this job. I've got dirty lips that can't speak holy words."
- God called Esther to save the Jews from genocide during the exile, even though courage would fail her initially and her sage cousin Mordecai would ultimately have to beg.
- Old Zachariah, whom God chose to become John the Baptist's daddy, doubted God's ability to give him and his also-aging wife, Elizabeth, a child.

And so on. You've probably heard the adage, but it bears repeating...OFTEN:

God doesn't call the equipped;
God equips the called.

That principle made space for fishermen and tax collectors and a revolutionary and a few others, who likely would not have made the varsity team at their local synagogue. And they changed the whole world in ways and to an extent that still makes historians scratch their heads.

So why does God choose such losers for such big jobs? Paul offers a theory about God's logic in his correspondence with the Corinthians, when he writes,

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4.6-7)

That puts you and me in the game, right? We're clay. Whatever the strategy, it worked in those ancient apostles, and it can work in us.

What They Did Up in That Upper Room

The gathering ended up bigger than it started. The next sentence multiplies that upper room gathering, to include "brothers and sisters" numbering 120 people all told. (As we've noted before, our New Revised Standard Version mis-translates the Greek *ADELPHOI* as "believers")

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons)...

So what did these sweaty six-score confused people do while they waited to "receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon" them? They replaced Judas. That much makes sense to us. Twelve's an important number in Israel's history (12 tribes), after all. But notice just how they discerned: they literally rolled the dice.

[Peter] said, ¹⁶ "Friends, ^[e] the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, ^[f] he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For it is written in the book of Psalms,

*'Let his homestead become desolate,
and let there be no one to live in it';
and
'Let another take his position of overseer.'*

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." ²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place ^[g] in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

They “cast lots” to choose an apostle? Really?! This guy will be 8.33 percent of the staff, and they’re choosing him by a blind draw?!

Let’s look again. How did they actually choose Matthias?

- First, they set up a primary criterion: Judas’ replacement needs to have been with the Jesus people from the start.
- Second, by some sort of evaluation – the text doesn’t tell us the criteria – they narrowed that group to two finalists. With 120 in the room, there were surely more than 2 who had been around for the long haul.
- Once they got to two, they cast lots – probably because either one would have been fine for the job.

Discernment is a crucial part of discipleship. Life is full of large decisions, and sometimes we feel like we’re out there alone trying to guess at God’s will. So what can we learn from this quick upper-room window Acts 1 gives us into early Christian decision-making?

My big takeaway from this scene has always concerned the latitude within which God can operate. People seeking a life partner often imagine there’s only one “right for me” person in the world who can be “the one”, “the other half”. That view produces all sorts of pressure and angst. It’s a daunting prospect: I’ve got to scour the earth to find the one person I’m supposed to marry. Under such pressure, some people give up on finding the proverbial needle in the proverbial haystack. In this scenario, God comes away looking a bit cruel. “I’ve hidden Mr./Ms. Right out there somewhere. I’ll wait for you at the altar. Get back to me when you find him/her.”

Sometimes people look at job decisions the same way: like they have to make the right decision about THE job for them. Big decisions become awfully nerve-wracking if there’s only one right answer. Maybe that’s why ancient folks looked at bird entrails and modern folks shake a magic eight-ball.

But what if God’s will is broader? What if we can narrow down with prudent criteria and then feel sound in whatever choice we make? The mate-seeking equivalent of the apostles’ “it’s gotta be someone who’s been with Jesus from the start” is something like “shares my most cherished convictions about the world” or the job equivalent is “accomplishes something important to get done in the world”. Once we’ve defined well the things we value most and narrowed the field of possibilities on that basis, each of these big questions could have several right answers.

In these sorts of discernments, the “he’s the perfect man for me” or “this is the absolute best job in the world for me” realizations are beautiful retrospectively, but quite stressful at the front end. The upper-room Christians were fine with narrowing the search down and then flipping a coin.

Close

The great Dr. Bruce Metzger, New Testament text critic was a great hero of mine in college, and I got to meet him at a Bible conference just before I packed my bags for grad school. I loved the New Testament, and he had been the most eminent text critic of the New Testament for decades. He had taught and researched for fifty years in Princeton Seminary, and that happened to be the school where I was just about to begin my first semester, so I grabbed my buddy, Chris Davis and mustered up my courage to ask the great one to breakfast.

To my great joy and surprise, Dr. Metzger said yes. I didn't sleep the night before. What would I ask him? How would I keep from looking stupid?

When Chris and I sat down with Dr. Metzger in the restaurant, we were dumbstruck, so he had to ask us the first question. "What do you want to study next?" I too-proudly blurted, "I want to concentrate on New Testament Studies at Princeton Seminary!" He was polite. "How nice!" When my friend Chris offered, "I'd like to go into church history," Dr. Metzger's eyes lit up: "Well," he said, "there's always more of that!"

And there is.

IMPActs

Retracing the Spirit's Power Through Acts and Luke

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding

Sept 19 **Acts Unending – Paul's Ministry in Rome (Acts 28)**

The magisterial 52 chapters we call Luke-Acts culminate by describing the ministry of Paul in Rome as "unfettered". In this session, we read this open-ended closing as a signal that this author and his Author intend for us to see this story of Jesus and the earliest churches as a launching pad rather than an end point. Question: Are we the 57th chapter of Acts?

Sept 26 **All Things to All People – Paul's Gospel among Jews and Gentiles (Acts 17 and 21)**

Early Christianity grew up in a complex ethnic and cultural world that required good communicators to speak the language of many peoples. In this session we'll see that Acts is a book about a multilingual church who find ways to communicate good news to a wide variety of people and communities. Question: What 'languages' do we need to learn?

Oct 3 **Talking It Out – How the Early Church Made Its Decisions (Acts 15)**

The early Christians faced huge decisions as they moved into the world – issues that went to the very identity of Jesus' movement. The Book of Acts gives us a window to how they discerned their way forward. They developed an instinct to come toward one another and hash things out together. Question: How should our Christian conversations go?

Oct 10 **Pushed Out of the Nest – What Sent the Church into the World (Acts 8—15)**

Just before Jesus left the company of his disciples, he sent them "to Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth." (Acts 1.8) But seven chapters and many moons into the story, they were still snug in Jerusalem, with no sign that they knew the rest of the world exists. In this session we'll ask why that was...and how it changed. Question: What will get us out of our nest?

- Oct 17** **Standing Up – Risky Faith in the Face of Danger (Acts 4—7)**
- After Jesus, their inspiration, leader, protector, and friend had been cruelly executed, the previously cowardly disciples became suddenly brave apostles. In this session, we'll watch that newfound courage at work and drill down to find its source – for them and for us. Question: Why would we need to be bold in our day?
- Oct 24** **“Jesus Continued” – The Resemblance of the Jesus People to Jesus (Acts 3, 4, 7, a)**
- As far as we know, Peter, John, James, Matthew, Bartholomew, and the lot never wore “WWJD” tee shirts, but in Acts they look a lot like “J”. In this session, we'll take a look at that likeness as it plays out in the daily life of the earliest church. Question: How can we become more like Jesus?
- Oct 31** **Halloween Hiatus**
- Nov 7** **The Dividends of Difference – Early Christian Variety in the Hands of God (Acts 2)**
- The brilliant, multi-colored, multi-cultured, and multi-lingual raw material of the first church had gathered in Jerusalem for a feast. God chose this moment to move newly into the world. In this session we'll ask what this means about God and the church. Question: What are the dividends of our differences?
- Nov 14** **Explosion – The Purpose and Power of Pentecost (Acts 1 and 2)**
- At the beginning of Acts, bewildered apostles spilled out from a crowded, smelly upper room on to the streets of Jerusalem. What happened next changed the world. In this session, we'll watch God use unqualified, aimless men and women to light up their city and then their Empire with the news that God had come to the earth in Jesus of Nazareth. Question: What is the purpose and where is the power in our lives?

