

LESSON TWO

THE CHURCH IN THE ACTS: Vigor, Beauty, Simplicity

*“Then the churches...had peace and were edified.
And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort
of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied” (Acts 9:31).*

DAY 1: READ & SUMMARIZE

The following verses encapsulate the lesson to follow. Read them carefully, meditating on their message. Express the key concept of each passage as it applies to the early Church in the book of Acts.

A) Acts 1:8 –

B) Acts 2:41, 42 –

C) Acts 2:44-47 –

DAY 2: LEARN & RESPOND

INTRODUCTION

As has been pointed out, Luke's first volume (the Gospel According to Luke) tells of "all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). His second volume (The Acts of the Apostles) tells of the things that the risen Lord Jesus continued to do by His Spirit through His people. You also notice as you come to the end of the book that it seems unfinished—what happened to Peter? to Paul? In a sense, the book is unfinished. Every disciple of the Lord has a part in the story. Only eternity will tell it all. So we must "judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come" (1 Cor 4:5).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH IN THE ACTS

A. They responded in faith to Christ's massive global vision (ch 1). How does the book of Acts begin? The disciples asked the Savior (only moments from His leaving them to go back to heaven), "Lord, wilt Thou at this

time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (v 6). He responded, "Ye shall receive power...and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (v 8).

They were thinking small – of Israel; the Lord was thinking big – of the whole world. They were thinking about the past and restoring it; He was thinking about the present and redeeming it. They were thinking defensively; He was thinking offensively. They were longing for Israel. But He longed for the whole aching planet to come to Him.

Whose view won the day? Obviously the disciples caught the Savior's vision. A while later, Paul wrote: "Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (Rom 1:8). More than that, "The gospel...was preached to every creature which is under heaven" (Col 1:23)! Yet every generation must reach their world for Christ; Paul's generation can't do that!

We have the very same Great Commission today. Has our generation made it the Great *Omission*? Have we concluded that Christ's promise to work with and through His Church "*even to the end of the age*" somehow has expired?

B. They waited on the Holy Spirit "until" Pentecost "was fully come" (ch 2:1-13). Something new was happening!

- Now we have an Intercessor in the heavens (a real Man on the throne of God. See Rom 8:26, 34).
- And we have an Intercessor in the heart (the indwelling of God the Spirit in the hearts of every believer).



What actually happened at Pentecost?

i. It was a reversal of Babel (Gen. 11). At Babel (the beginning of the great false system of Babylon), the people gathered themselves together in rebellion against the word of God, and to make a name for themselves.

God "confounded" their languages and they were forced to spread out because no one understood another. But at Pentecost, the disciples proclaimed "the Name" in obedience to the Word of God. When the gospel was proclaimed, ironically "*the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language*" (Acts 2:6). This One whom they preached was truly the "gate to God"—the meaning of Bab-el. (For Babylon's end, see Rev 17-19.)

ii. It was a reversal of Sinai (Ex 32). At the giving of the Mosaic Commandments, there were "*about three thousand men*" slain under the curse of a broken law (v 28). This is called by Paul "*the ministration of death, written and engraved in stones*" (2 Cor 3:7). But at the proclamation of "*the gospel of the grace of God*" (Acts 20:24)—what Paul calls the "*ministration of the Spirit*" (2 Cor 3:8)—there were "*about three thousand souls*" saved! (Acts 2:41).

iii. It was a complete fulfillment of the Feast of Pentecost (Lev 23:15). In the Jewish year, Pentecost (held in the late spring) was the beginning of the harvest since all their field crops were winter growth. So the events in Acts 2 were the beginning of a mighty harvest that would result from that “grain of wheat” that fell into the ground and died that it “*might not abide alone*” (Jn 12:24). Notice the connections between the type and the antitype*:

| P E N T E C O S T I N T H E | |
|---|--|
| OLD TESTAMENT | NEW TESTAMENT |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seven sabbaths plus one (pente = 50) day of the week, therefore the Lord’s Day • two loaves of <i>leavened</i> bread made one offering by the <i>pouring out</i> of the holy oil | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week; Resurrection Day, the new beginning • two become one: Jew and Gentile (see Acts 10) by the <i>pouring out</i> of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18) |

iv. It was a partial fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21). It was only a partial fulfillment because there was only a partial turning of the Jewish nation to God. When “*all Israel will be saved*” (Rom 11:26)—after 2/3 of the nation will be destroyed along with Anti-messiah’s forces (Zech 13:8-9)—then all of Joel 2 will be

fulfilled. Please note that the promise of Joel 2 is NOT to Gentile believers; it is inappropriate to use it to explain the modern Charismatic movement. The use of tongues (*dialektos*) at Pentecost (Acts 2:8) was a sign to Israel (“*For the Jews [not the Gentiles] require a sign,*” 1 Cor 1:22). It was a judgment, as Joel 2 states, proving to Israel that

* Sometimes *anti-* means against. Here, it means *over against* or *beside for comparison*.

their God doesn't only speak Hebrew! He was now going out to the whole world. But Joel (and Peter) point out that "in wrath" the Lord "remember[s] mercy." *"And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved"* (Acts 2:21).

v. It was the birthday of the Church (Acts 2). As the disciples waited in obedience to the word of the Lord, the Holy Spirit—called *"the promise of the Father"* (Acts 1:4)—came down upon the assembled believers in the upper room. Later Paul would say, *"By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit"* (1 Cor 12:13, NKJV). In other words, 120 believers went into the room; one body came out—united forever by the Spirit. Note the differences between the role of the Spirit in the OT and the NT:

| THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE | |
|--|--|
| OLD TESTAMENT | NEW TESTAMENT |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He came upon both believers and unbelievers to move them to fulfill God's purposes • It was an individual act of God • God dwelt symbolically above the mercy seat • It was a temporary endowment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He indwells every true believer to make them a dwelling place for God • He unifies all believers • God dwells actually by His Spirit in the Church • It is "forever" (Jn 14:16) |

Now, back to the other CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY CHURCH...



C. They constantly gave witness to Christ in the proclamation of the gospel (ch 2:14-41). Not every believer in New Testament days was a gifted evangelist, nor did everyone do it the same way. But notice, *“They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word”* (Acts 8:4). The commission to go *“into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature”* (Mk 16:15) includes you and me. We are not all evangelists, but we are all to be witnesses. If we are willing to be involved, God will give each one a custom-designed way to fulfill His call.

D. They proved the unifying influence of the Spirit by co-operatively working together (see *“with one accord”* in Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46; etc.). Without phones, email, or faxes, the early believers kept in touch. It seems from his writings that Paul knew the spiritual state of most assemblies, if not every one within his sphere of influence. Although constantly harassed by civil and

religious authorities (and internal struggles), the Christians doggedly pursued their goal of world evangelization. Neither the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Roman Empire, nor the gates of hell could stop them.

Occasionally it looked like one thing would stop them—division (Acts 6:1-5; also chs 11 and 15)! But the matters were wisely and quickly resolved, and the gospel work continued unabated. We cannot expect the sinner to believe he can be reconciled to a holy God if we cannot even be reconciled to one another. Remember our Lord prayed, *“That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me”* (Jn 17:21). More on this in Lesson 3.

E. They practiced baptism, and met regularly for the teaching of “the apostles’ doctrine” as well as for “fellowship...breaking of bread and...prayers” (Acts 2:41-42).

Of course this is not an exhaustive list of the meetings of the churches. There were meetings for the elders, for matters of church discipline, for united gospel efforts, and for missionary reports, but these four were the chief reasons for corporate gathering. More on these subjects in Lessons 5 and 6. But we can briefly note that those who shared this new life had:

- A NEW RULE OF LIFE, *“the apostles’ teaching”* which was in fact the teaching of Christ through them (Jn 16:13)

- A NEW SOCIETY or BROTHERHOOD, the bond of *“fellowship”* with like-minded saints

- A NEW ORDINANCE, the weekly remembrance of their Lord out of devotion to Him

- A NEW ACCESS into God’s presence for resources to serve: *“Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name”* (Jn 16:24)

Thus the early believers were marked by the outflow of TRUTH, LOVE, WORSHIP, and POWER.

F. They cared for each other, shared with each other, were in each others’ homes and lives (Acts 2:44-47). This involved regular disciple-making, each one working with younger believers to help them mature in the things of God (Lesson 7 has more on this). Now here are six important reasons that we ought to *“Love the brotherhood”* (1 Pet 2:17):

- because it is our Lord’s express desire (Jn 15:9-14; 1 Thess 4:9)

- because by loving those we can see, we love Him whom we have not seen (1 Jn 4:17-21)

- because it is a most effective means of proclaiming our faith (Jn 13:34-35)

- because it is a family char-

acteristic (1 Jn 4:7-11; 1 Pet 3:8-9), just like our Father

- because they are loved above (Jn 16:27) and we ought to love what God loves
- because they are blood-bought, Spirit-indwelt and heaven-bound—members of the royal family

G. They took seriously the leading of the Spirit (Acts 2:44-47).

The apostles planned and acted, first praying that the Lord would direct their steps. And He did exactly that. When they “assayed to go into Bithynia” (Acts 16:7), the Lord did not allow them to do it, and the Spirit’s redirection was most welcome.

This conscious and constant aligning of themselves under the eye of God was key to their success. Mark reminds us that “they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them...” (16:20). Luke states: “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were

being saved” (2:47, NKJV); “And the hand of the Lord was with them” (11:21).

H. They were known for their good works (Acts 2:44-47).

Isn’t it amazing how much our Lord in His earthly ministry was involved in doing good works? He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38), tirelessly ministering to the needs of others. And this was a pattern that the early believers followed. For example, “There was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha...this woman was full of good works and alms-deeds” (Acts 9:36). Her winsome ministry softened the ground along the Sharon Plain so that Peter’s sowing bore a mighty harvest.

Paul wrote: “These things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men” (Titus 3:8). What happens when we do some good deed? “...they

may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Mt 5:16). You must give the Lord the credit, of course; otherwise they will think you are just a good person. But Paul links good works with our fruitfulness! Is it possible that we are unfruitful in the gospel because we do not *"maintain good works"*? (Titus 3:14).

Christians should be encouraged in this. We need to *"provoke [each other] unto love and to good works"* (Heb. 10:24). Those who are rich (who of us isn't rich by world standards?) are to be charged: *"That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate"* (1 Tim 6:18). *"...Our Savior Jesus Christ... gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works"* (Titus 2:13-14).

Widows over the age of 60 who have, during their married lives,

been known for good works are a blue chip resource in the local church. They should not, after their husband dies, be forced to eke out an existence. They should be financially supported to do visitation and good works in the community. So says the Scripture (1 Tim 5:3-10).

I. They fulfilled the Lord's promise that "He who believes on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto My Father" (Jn 14:2). The early Church was hallmarked by **"great power...and great grace"** (Acts 4:33); by **"great fear"** which *"came on all them that heard"* and **"great fear"** which *"came upon all the church"* (Acts 5:5-11). And in spite of **"great persecution"** (Acts 8:1), *"there was great joy" among the saints* (Acts 8:8). There is no hint that we should excuse our ineffectiveness by calling today the *"day of small things."* That phrase, from Zech. 4:10, refers to the Tribulation when God brings in such a

mighty harvest that John describes it as *"a great multitude, which no man could number"* (Rev 7:9)! The "small things" are the few resources He uses, not the results.

J. Their lives were kept simple, vibrant and effective by concentrating on preaching and living Christ (see 1 Cor 1:23; Eph 4:20). Notice the many references to "the Name" in Acts. They **preached** in that Name (2:21), **baptized** in that Name (2:38), **healed** in that Name (3:6), said that people were **saved** by that Name (4:12), **taught** in that Name (4:18), and *"rejoic[ed] that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name"* (5:41). Paul would say later to those tempted to allow their lives to be distracted and complicated by other things: *"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ"* (2 Cor 11:3).

K. They lived in the moment-by-moment anticipation of the return of Christ (see Acts 1:11; 1 Thess 1:10-11). What does this hope do for us? Of course, it makes every day an exciting one because this could be THE DAY! But as well:

- it reminds us about the **long war we are in**, and keeps us from becoming entangled in this life (2 Tim 2:4)
- it keeps us **pure** (1 Jn 3:3) and from being involved in anything that would be embarrassing then (1 Jn 2:20)
- it motivates us to **redeem the time** (Col 4:5) and to be serious about evangelism: *"NOW is the day of salvation"*
- it puts **suffering and temporal disappointments into perspective** (Rom 8:18); it is *"not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us."*

**WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A
NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY**

The word “assembly” simply describes a *group of people together with a common purpose*. The same word is used for the mob in Ephesus (sometimes we do look similar!). So the question is not whether we meet as “assemblies”, but is my local church a “New Testament assembly”? There is no local church, of course, that perfectly aligns itself with the description of the Church in the Word. But we should strain every nerve to become more like this model every day. But is this model a good practical way of doing things? It certainly is! For example:

- **the New Testament design is adaptable to every situation.** It will work with tribal groups, in prison camps, or among the disenfranchised in poverty-ridden inner cities. There is no need for expensive buildings, special vestments, highly-trained professionals or contact with earthly headquarters. And it is transferable to every culture.

- **this design is ideal for the rapid deployment of the gospel.**

As soon as a group of people are saved, they can be mobilized for action. The gospel is simple to understand, free for the taking, available to all, and empowered by the Spirit. As one young disciple put it, “We talk to God every day; we talk to people every day. Then why is it hard to talk to God about people and to people about God?”

- **it is also persecution-proof.**

The first thing oppressive regimes do is to shut down headquarters, jail clergy, confiscate buildings, close seminaries. And with what are you left? Small, purified groups of believers meeting simply with the Spirit to lead them, the Word to guide them, and gifted local believers to minister among them—just what the Lord intended in the first place! They cannot reach the headquarters of those who “hold the Head.”

- **it is suited to utilize the spiritual gifts, personalities, life experience and talents of the full array of believers.** Putting the focus on a few “professionals” will never accomplish God’s purpose to bring growth to the whole body. Every believer should have the opportunity to go as far as his or her gift will take them as led and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- **it is intended to minimize the glory of people and to maximize the glory of the Lord.** *“For one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren”* (Mt 23:8). With our focus on Christ, we find unity, blessing, and godly influence in our communities. When others seek the pre-eminence, division, deadness and a poor testimony are the result. Let us all take as our rallying cry, *“Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory...”* (Ps 115:1).

There is no place for thinking ourselves superior to some other group of Christians, *“For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare our-*

selves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (2 Cor 10:12). There will be no room for pride if we honestly measure instead how far we fall short of the ideal. Nonetheless, any group of believers who honestly desires to be true to the pattern in the Scriptures and seeks to obey everything the Spirit shows them can rightly claim to be New Testament assemblies, since they willingly study and submit to this standard.

QUESTIONS

FOR DISCUSSION...

1. What are REAL hindrances that we have today that the believers in Acts did not have? How can we overcome these?
2. What are REAL assets that we have today that First Century Christians did not have, and how can we use these more effectively?

THE CHURCH IN THE ACTS

Review:

1. Complete this sentence from the notes: "We are not all evangelists..."

_____."

2. You were given four chief reasons for corporate gathering . Which of these do you most need to approach differently? How will you do this?

3. According to the notes, how important are good works in the life of a believer, and why?

4. What did you learn about the role of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the Church?

5. List several ways this model of Church gathering is practical.

DAY 3: WATCH & ANSWER

Fill in the blanks as you watch the video. TIP: It's helpful to pre-read the questions before watching. You can check the answers in the Answer Key (Appendix 10).

1. Re-title for this book: The Ongoing Work of the Lord Jesus Christ by His Holy Spirit, through His .
2. If God keeps track of every tear, and every hair, He also keeps track of every for Him.
3. *Babylon the Great* is not geographical in nature, but the pervasive, official against the government of God.
4. The Bible can be called the Tale of Two Cities: and .
5. Babel was built using brick for stone, and slime for mortar. The Church is built of stones.
6. Only two Jewish festivals were held on the first day of the week:
 - pictured the resurrection day of Christ;
 - pictured the resurrection day of the Church
7. We need to be if we expect God to use us.
8. If we don't teach a doctrine, the will. The Church suffers a for every doctrine we fail to teach.
9. The only limitation to the gospel is not the unbelief of the unbelievers, but the of the believers.
10. To be in the gospel, we have to be doing good works.
11. The greater works the disciples would do would be greater , , and .

DAY 4: WRITE & REMEMBER

1. Record three significant statements from this chapter. Why are they significant to you?

A) **Statement One:** _____

B) **Statement Two:** _____

C) **Statement Three:** _____

2. Memorize Acts 2:41, 42

DAY 5: REFLECT & PRAY

Respond in prayer: Having looked carefully at the Church in the Book of Acts – its vigor, beauty, and simplicity – reflect on your own life in the following ways:

Praise: _____

Repent: _____

Ask: _____

Yield: _____

PRAISE: What specific blessing have you discovered in this lesson? Thank the Lord for it! **REPENT:** Is there something in your life that is hindering you from experiencing what you have just learned? **ASK:** What specific way would you like the Lord to help you live out these truths? **YIELD:** Is there a particular area in your life that needs to come under the Lord's rule?