

The Gospel's Continuing Advance

Acts 1:1-11 on February 6, 2022

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*Please read Acts 1:1-11 before going further in this transcript.*¹

So here we are at last, the final sermon in our series on the book of Acts, #48 of 48! Unless of course, we decide to add a few more weeks? In fact, come to think of it, this past Wednesday was Groundhog Day. Perhaps some of you saw this post from Church Curmudgeon: “If the pastor sees his shadow, there will be 6 more weeks of this sermon series!”² To be clear though, today is indeed our final sermon in this series. We began this series about a year and a half ago, back in the fall of 2020. Just out of curiosity, how many of you have been here for all 48 sermons? The book of Acts covers a 30-year timespan.³ It has 1,007 verses.^{4 5} 18,450 words in the original Greek! (And we’ve read just about every one of them together as a church, in English!) Acts is the 2nd longest book in the New Testament, beaten out only by Luke’s Gospel, which is part 1 of Luke’s 2-book contribution to the New Testament.⁶ Today we’re going to retrace several of the key themes that we’ve found in our journey through the book of Acts. All of these themes fit under the umbrella of “The Gospel’s Continuing Advance.”⁷ “The Gospel’s Continuing Advance” shines brightly all throughout the book of Acts. God continues to sovereignly work out His master redemptive plan in real time and in real human history. So Acts shines a spotlight on a particular 30-year timespan of the gospel’s advance. And the gospel has continued to advance over the past 2,000 years since then. As we saw last week, at the conclusion of Acts 28, there is still much more to be written in the story of the gospel. The gospel’s continuing advance in Acts reveals 2 primary needs. First of all, it reveals...



1) The need for spiritually healthy churches...

1. That worship God reverently. This probably shows up most potently in the story of Ananias and Saphira, in Acts 5. This happens early on in the life of the church, right around the time they were generously sharing their possessions with one another.⁸ Acts 5:3-5 tells us, “Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a

¹ Acts 1:11 reassures us, “...This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” And so, Acts 1:11 reveals that there will come a day when the gospel will stop advancing. Until that day, let’s proclaim the gospel boldly, and without hindrance.

² Thanks to Scott and Laura Engelstad for posting this on the “EFCB – Tree of Life” Facebook page. It’s from “Church Curmudgeon.”

³ This is based on a timeline of Jesus’ ascension around 30 AD in Acts 1 and Paul’s Roman imprisonment around 60 AD in Acts 28. See chart on pp. 1577-1588 of *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

⁴ Although the exact number could be disputed since, for example, Acts 28:29 is in the footnotes in the *NIV*.

⁵ Learn more at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-is-the-longest-book-in-the-bible-hint-its-not-the-psalms/>

⁶ Learn more from Jeffrey Kranz: <https://overviewbible.com/word-counts-books-of-bible/>

⁷ The gospel, the Good News about Jesus, permeates every nook and cranny of these more than 1,000 verses.

⁸ See Acts 4:32.

thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God. When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.”⁹ Just a few verses later, Acts 5:13-14 tells us, “No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.” In other words, no one dared to join the Early Church, except for the men and women who truly believed. There were no pretenders and no half-hearted followers.¹⁰ And then the number of fully devoted followers of Jesus increased. This theme of reverence continues in stories like Simon the Sorcerer. In Acts 8, when the gospel was spreading to Samaria, Simon offered Peter/John money so that he could lay hands on people and have them receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8:20 Peter tells Simon, “...May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money.” In Acts 12, King Herod is struck down and eaten by worms. Why? Because he didn’t show proper reverence to God, he forgot that he himself was just a man.¹¹ *Spiritually healthy churches worship God reverently.*

We also need spiritually healthy churches...

2. That learn from God’s Word together. The word “disciple” actually means learner. And the Early Church embraced spiritual health by being discipled as learners of God’s Word. This shows up right away in Acts 2:42, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...” We see another notable example of this in Acts 17:11-12, “Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.” Now, to be clear, these Berean Jews were examining the Scriptures, before they even believed. But what this reveals, is that teaching from God’s Word was the accepted pattern within the Early Church. They placed a high value on learning from God’s Word together. We should also point out that there were many different teachers in the Early Church. In other words, it wasn’t just the big names like Peter and John, or Paul and Barnabas. For example, Acts 15:35 says, “But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.” *Spiritually healthy churches learn from God’s Word together.*

We also need spiritually healthy churches...

3. That connect relationally. Again we see this early on in Acts. Acts 2:46 says, “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” Acts 4:32 tells us, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions

⁹ Now, we might guess that this would really slow down the growth of the church. After all, reverence for God is one thing, but who wants to join a church where people are dropping dead in their tracks? This seems a little extreme, don’t you think?

¹⁰ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1833 footnote on Acts 5:13.

¹¹ In fact, in Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas are thought to be the gods Hermes and Zeus, they are quick to stop the crowd from sacrificing to them. They shout, “we too are only human, like you.”

was their own, but they shared everything they had.” The scene of Paul’s tearful farewell with the Ephesian Elders is described in Acts 20:37, “They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.” Spiritually healthy churches connect relationally; they love one another, deeply, from the heart.¹² This is why we do “Nemetag Sunday” once a month. It’s why we’ve been promoting our Connection Café. It’s also why it’s SO important for everyone to consider joining a Life Group where we not only “learn together” but also “love one another.”

We also need spiritually healthy churches...

4. That proclaim the gospel boldly. We covered this in-depth last Sunday, so we won’t go into detail today. However, let’s remind ourselves of that amazing prayer that the Early Church prayed, early on in its history.¹³ (*Can you remember their bold prayer back in Acts 4?*) In Acts 4:29-31 the church prayed, “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” Sometimes God gives us exactly what we pray for, and MY OH MY how the Early Church got what they prayed for! Where did that boldness come from in the book of Acts?^{14 15} From the filling of the Holy Spirit, the SAME Holy Spirit who fills us today. (*Can you imagine the book of Acts without Pentecost at the beginning? Can you imagine living the Christian life without the Holy Spirit in you?*) By the way, bold proclamation doesn’t mean that all of us have to become raging extroverts. Nor does it mean that we have to become pushy, or some kind of an obnoxious “evangelistic jerk.” Bold proclamation simply means that we’re not ashamed of the gospel. We are ready and willing to share the gospel, because the gospel is always on the forefront of our minds.¹⁶ Every day, we are carefully watching for opportunities, and then making the most of those opportunities, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We also need spiritually healthy churches...

5. That serve with their gifts. Throughout the book of Acts, we’ve seen a pattern of all kinds of different people serving. To put it more directly, many of these people were not Apostles. We learned about all kinds of different “fully Devoted Followers” of Jesus. People with names like Stephen, Philip, and Tabitha (who was known for

¹² See 1 Peter 1:22.

¹³ The church was growing, and the Sanhedrin was none too happy about it, especially because they were proclaiming Jesus. So the Sanhedrin warns them to STOP telling people about Jesus, or else! Then, they decide to let them go. Peter and John go back and report all of this to the church, and that’s when the church prays this bold and ambitious prayer.

¹⁴ Back when we still only knew him as Saul, **Acts 9:28** told us, “So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.” **Acts 14:3** says, “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.” **Acts 19:8** says, “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.”

¹⁵ See Romans 12:11.

¹⁶ See 1 Peter 3:15.

always doing good and helping the poor).¹⁷ The church was filled with all kinds of regular folks who followed Jesus. People with names like Cornelius, John-Mark, Silas, and Barnabas (the “son of encouragement.”) Names like Timothy, Lydia, Apollos, Priscilla/Aquila (the husband/wife team who served together), and on and on the list goes.¹⁸ All of these, not to mention Luke himself, the author who worked tirelessly behind the scenes recording all these details. Interviewing eyewitnesses and carefully investigating all of the historical facts and figures.¹⁹ (Praise God for Christian writers!) Each one of these men and women used their particular gifting to serve in the churches, which were spread all over the known world. In Acts 6, we learned about the choosing of the seven, the first deacons or trustees of the church. In Acts 14, they appointed elders in each local church.²⁰ As we noted earlier, many different people helped with the teaching. And with all the meals they shared together, you can be sure there was all kinds of cooking and cleaning to do. All kinds of tables/chairs to set up and take down. In other words, in a spiritually healthy church, each part of the church body serves with their gifts. Anyone whom God calls to salvation, He equips for Christian service and ministry. Each and every one of us has been commissioned to serve with our time, talents, and treasures. This is why virtual church can only have a limited impact on our spiritual growth and development. We can’t effectively deepen in our discipleship, if we just watch church online. We need to plug into a local church body, in person, if at all possible. We need to roll up our sleeves and serve!

The gospel’s continuing advance in Acts (also) reveals...

2) The need to send out and support global partners... The Antioch Church was the first church to officially set apart and send out global partners.^{21 22} And to be clear, the Antioch Church was itself a church plant, the result of Christ-followers who had traveled to that city and shared the Good News about Jesus. All of Paul’s first three Missionary Journeys were launched from this one same local church. The goal of sending out Paul and his companions was two-fold, to reach all peoples, and to reach all places. The gospel’s advance reveals the need to send global partners...

1. Who go to all peoples. Matthew 28:19 begins, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations....” That word “nations” there is referring to all “ethnos,” or all “peoples.”²³ Peter comes to a powerful realization in Acts 10:34-35, “...I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears

¹⁷ See Acts 9:36.

¹⁸ Romans 16 has another incredible list of names.

¹⁹ In fact, throughout the book of Acts, Luke shows up in the story. We know he’s there whenever he switches to the pronoun “we.”

²⁰ See Acts 14:23.

²¹ Acts 13:2-3 says, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

²² E-Free defines it this way: “Missions is a formal partnership in the gospel, between the local church as senders and supporters, and those who have been identified as called and gifted by God, for the purpose of global disciple-making.” Global Connections Missions Policy of E-Free Bemidji as of 2/8/2021.

²³ ἔθνος, = “① a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions, nation, people.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 276). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

him and does what is right.”²⁴ In the book of Acts we see a beautiful and powerful display of God’s loving concern for ALL PEOPLES. From Hebraic Jews to Hellenistic Jews, from Jews to Samaritans, from Jews to Gentiles. This is why we need global partners...

2. Who go to all places. In Acts 1:8 Jesus lays out an ambitious vision for His followers, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” With Jesus’ words in mind, let’s wrap up our journey through Acts with one more peek at our MAPS. (See back page.)

Map 1: The gospel begins by going forth from Jerusalem throughout Judea/Samaria. This is when people like Simon the Sorcerer encountered the gospel. As well as Cornelius, Tabitha, and the Ethiopian Eunuch, and others as well.

Map 2: The 1st Missionary Journey takes the gospel to places like Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe. The Journey begins at the Antioch Church, on the far right side of the map. And then it ends at the same place. They went back to the Antioch Church to report on all that God was doing, in the continuing gospel work.

The 2nd Missionary Journey begins by revisiting a few places from the 1st Journey but then pressing much further west and north, to places like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. You may remember that the Holy Spirit kept them from going to certain places, and Paul responded to a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come and help them.²⁵

The 3rd Missionary Journey once again revisited a few of the places from the 1st Journey, then they take a little different route west, straight for Ephesus. Paul stays there for over 2 years telling people about Jesus and doing extraordinary miracles.

Next is what some consider the “**4th Missionary Journey,**” **Paul’s voyage to Rome.** Officially, this journey began in Jerusalem, although it restarts after a long layover in Caesarea. They take a treacherous voyage west across the mighty Mediterranean Sea, past the island of Crete, and then Malta, and then north up to Rome, at last! On this map, we can see an overlay of all 4 trips. Thousands and thousands of miles of travels. To what end? To the ends of the earth, just as Jesus had said. And Jesus’ words “to the ends of the earth” still stand today: The Gospel’s Continuing Advance.

Map 3: This is the world as we know it today. That white oblong circle contains the area that was covered in the book of Acts. There are still many people in that circle who need to hear about Jesus, and many more outside that circle. *That’s why we need to send out and support global partners!*

²⁴ Did you catch this? Peter didn’t quite understand what Jesus was getting at during the Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. Even though he was standing right there with Jesus. But now, later on in history, as he is in the trenches ministering to the Gentiles, now he gets it!

²⁵ See Acts 16:6-10.

Here are some ways to get involved:

1) Join a Barnabas Team.

(Bring practical encouragement to our global partners out on the field.)

2) Give consistently to our General Ministry Fund.

(A portion of that giving goes directly to our Global Partners.)

3) Go on a short-term trip.

4) Get trained and go long-term.

Brother or Sister in Christ, we dare not fall into the trap of resting on our laurels. We dare not become content to simply maintain what we already have within these walls, and lose sight of the mission out there in the world around us. God has invited us into this incredible opportunity to spend our lives being part of "The Gospel's Continuing Advance!"



