

# The Church is Born

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message One)

Acts 1:1-8

**C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, is a compelling, yet challenging, satire.** It's a series of imaginary letters written by the devil, Screwtape, giving advice to his nephew, Wormwood, on how to deal with Christians and the Church.

One of the consistent themes running through these letters is that the Devil is not at all concerned about most Christians and most churches:

So many Christians and Churches, he says, are in neutral. Their engine is running, the car is warm, but nothing is happening; no progress is being made. Churches/believers once passionate about their faith have drifted into mediocrity; duty, obligation, and habit have replaced gratitude, dedication and spiritual fervor. Their faith has become comfortable; their passion to impact the world gone...

Churches are closing permanently; memberships are declining - not one county in America has experienced an increase in over twenty years... Churches, outside of attendance and financial support, no longer expect much from members. They are getting what they expect. Few churches are impacting their community; but for many, it's no longer a significant concern - as long as the church's members are being cared for. There is little talk of making an eternal difference, no risk-taking ministries being saturated in prayer, few sacrifices being made for the sake of the Gospel

Screwtape's repeated advice to Wormwood: *"They're of no consequence. Don't waste your time on them - just be careful you don't wake them up!"*

**I've been thinking about that: I don't want my life and my ministry to be of "no consequence" - nor would I want to be part of a church of "no consequence,"**

Why are some churches of "**no consequence**" and others are **transforming** lives? Why is it that some are stuck in mediocrity while others are spiritually vibrant? Why are some growing by drawing people from their community and others are slowly losing their current members? Why are some nurturing fully devoted followers of Christ, while others are little more than a religious gathering on a Sunday morning?

It's important to ask these questions periodically because there is so much at stake. The Church is God's primary instrument to **advance** his **kingdom**. The Church has been entrusted with the eternity-altering **message** of the **Gospel**.

You've heard it said: *"The church is the hope of the world."* I believe that's true! Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can transform lives - call people to

repentance, offer salvation by grace alone, and embrace us into the family of God.

This world desperately needs churches that **boldly** and unapologetically **proclaim** the good news of God's redeeming grace. Nothing is more strategically and urgently needed in our world today - people's eternity literally depends on it. I.e., churches discipling believers into fully devoted followers of Christ. I.e., churches fully engaged in the trenches of life making an eternal difference

## **SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?**

**(What has happened to the 21<sup>st</sup> century church in N.A.?)**

**The First Problem is we have forgotten **whose** we are**

In the original Greek, "church" it's not a worship gathering, it is **Christ's** community (it is the Family of God with Christ as our head)

**Ephesians 1:22-23** - *"And God placed all things under his (Jesus') feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."*

Nor is it our church - even though we often say "my church" and act like we have final say when it comes to decision-making. It is **Christ's** church. It's his ministry.

**The Second Problem is We have forgotten **why** we are here.** That is, we've lost sight of our **mission**, or what has often been referred to as the Great **Co-mission** (i.e., the mission we're called to do together)

Christ, the head of the church, said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"* (**Matthew 28:18-20**)

Notice it's a command. It's not negotiable or debatable. It's essential to being church. I.e., churches make disciples. If it's not making disciples, it's not a church.

The gospel is something - by it's very nature - that needs to be **shared**.

John Stott, a British theologian - *"The church is not a religious club. So many view the church as kind of a country club, except the common interest of its members happens to be God rather than golf. They see themselves as religious people doing religious things together. They pay their membership fees and are entitled to certain privileges. They focus on the privileges and forget that one of the primary reasons for its existence is to reach their non-members for Jesus."*

In our consumerist age of church shopping, we've forgotten Christ's Church is called to be a *faith community* ministering to the spiritual needs of a lost world. A church can have plenty of activities and programs - even programs that engage the community - and still fail to focus on building eternal relationships with Jesus and never get around to *making more and better disciples*. There are myriads of church members are neither being discipled nor discipling someone else; myriads of churches neither growing spiritually nor numerically

## **SO WHAT'S THE SOLUTION? (Let's turn to the first chapter of Acts)**

**A significant part of the answer is opening, reading, and obeying the Scriptures.** We'll be immersing ourselves in the Book of Acts (we'll table it during Advent and return to it in the New Year); Bring your Bible, write in the margins; take notes...

There are five primary things we'll focus on in our journey together into Acts...

**(1) Gaining a more intimate acquaintance with the **primary character of the Book**.** So who is that? Let's be very clear who this is? The answer is in **Acts 1:1-2, 4-5, 8.**

*1:1-2 - "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all what Jesus began to do and to teach until the day when He was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen."*

*1:4 - "...while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

*1:8 - "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Who is the main and most prominent character in Acts? The **Holy Spirit**. As a result, many have called this book the "Acts of the Holy Spirit." The significant fact for Luke is that Holy Spirit is now available, is now present and active in **all of God's people**, and allows us to live in the kingdom of Christ. Luke underscores these believers will become witnesses to the ends of the earth

Luke notes Jesus says: "*Don't leave Jerusalem, but wait.*" Wait for the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will be worth our wait - we will receive power! In the meantime, don't try to do these things on your own. You can't

There are many people - maybe even some in this room - who don't know the Spirit very well, or don't know much about him, or haven't yet tapped his power. We know a lot about the Father; we know a lot about Jesus, but the Spirit for many of us is quite vague - off our radar. We'll get to know more about the Spirit and deepen our relationship.

## (2) We will talk about **community**; we will practice **community**

Like the Gospel of Luke offered the story of the birth of Christ and the growth of his ministry, the Book of Acts is the story of the birth and growth of Christ's church. When the Spirit came in power into the lives of Christ-followers, the church - the body of Christ - was born. The Church is the community of Jesus' disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit fully devoted to disciple-making and community transformation.

Community is not a vague thing in Acts. Community is not just a feeling of good will towards others; Community is not just keeping a set of certain "approved" behaviors.

*Community* throughout the Book of Acts is defined by one primary word. Listen:

**1:14** - *"All these were constantly together, devoting themselves to prayer."*

**2:1** - *"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place"*

**2:44** - *"All who believed were together and had all things in common."*

**4:24** - *"When they heard this they raise their voices together in prayer to God."*

**5:12** - *"The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade."*

The common word - "**together.**" Throughout Acts, it's not about going to church together, it's about doing life together, facing life's challenges together, praying in one accord, encouraging one another, being on mission together...

Christian History magazine talks about the church in the fourth century: *"In those days, indeed, until modern times, people did not sit in pews when they worshiped. Instead, they stood, or walked around greeting people and exchanging news. It was to such relatively unruly congregations, lively congregations that teachers spoke. And the people often responded to the teaching with applause, or on occasion, with boos, silence, and (I'm not making this up) hisses."* (Thankful not a preacher then)

One fourth century teacher, John Christosthum, observed that Christ

didn't seem to have to contend such with ill-disciplined ears - that His disciples always waited quietly and politely until He finished. So this teacher concluded in his sermon saying all applause should henceforth be forbidden. His listeners responded with enthusiastic applause!

At the heart of this new community is the building of Christ's kingdom through an impassioned desire for the **glory**, honor and **praise** of Jesus Christ...

**Rev. 7:9a** - *"After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language..."* (No racial hostility, no barriers between male and female, no ethnic cleansing. Not in this great multitude that no one can count - that's community)

**Rev. 7:9b-10** - *"...standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes, with palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces and worshiped God."*

That's the vision John lays out for the seven churches. God longs for His church, for His people, to be this multitude that is beyond counting -- that pours out their hearts in love and adoration. God deserves that. What do we have to do that's more important than doing that?

What do we long to be a part of that matters more than being a part of that?

We have not yet reached our **potential**. To reach that potential, we'll have to pour out our hearts in **prayer**, seek his face, make some hard decisions, and take some uncomfortable steps...

### **(3) We'll learn how followers of Jesus deal with **conflict** and **tension** - and there was plenty of it already in the early church.**

There are ways to resolve conflict that build community instead of destroying it.

Acts is very blunt about the fact that members of the early church were ordinary people like us: they sometimes **struggled** to get along. In **Acts 6**, there's conflict between Hebrew-speaking Christians and non-Hebrew-speaking Christians about whether all of the widows were being taken care of.

In **Acts 11**, Peter extended his ministry to the Gentiles and was heavily criticized. In **Acts 15:36f**, Barnabas wants to take John Mark on their next missionary trip, Paul doesn't. They conflict. They split. Hard feelings.

The early church had issues, yet they learned to live in **one accord** by

learning to deal with conflict in ways that promoted community

**(4) We'll be challenged to champion the irrepressible **spread** of the **Gospel****

In **Acts 17**, Paul is in Athens meeting with pagans! He explains the Gospel to Biblically illiterate, unchurched people interested in God. He puts it in their setting, in their language; he doesn't even quote Scripture

The early church had an unconditional commitment to **making disciples**. Today most believers have never had the excitement of leading someone to Jesus. It likely scares us; we're afraid of rejection, being embarrassed, or messing up.

Even Paul wasn't always well received. In **Acts 22:22**; after sharing the Gospel, the people shouted, "*Away with him. He should not be allowed to live.*" The early church (i.e., its members) is called to **champion the Gospel** of Jesus Christ and enduring the resulting consequences

**(5) We will be encouraged by the ultimate triumph of **hope** over **hardship**.**

Paul went to **prison**; he was bitten by **snakes**; he was **shipwrecked**. In **Acts 28**, Paul is in Rome facing death (Far as we know, that's where he died). **28:30** - "*He lived there two years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness and without hindrance.*"

The **hope** that will get us through life is not a hope that our little agenda - i.e., get the right job, the right spouse, the right house, the right friends, make some money and life will be good - but the hope of the triumph of the Gospel.

Some Christians are focused on the signs of irreversible deterioration... all they can see is how bad the world is getting. Other Christians are focused on the growing abundance of evangelistic and discipling opportunities - both realities are true.

But the Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit tells us - in no uncertain terms - the future belongs to God (to **Christ** and to his **Spirit**). The future -- yours and mine - belongs to Christ and to his **Spirit**. The future of Christ's Church belongs to Christ and to his **Spirit**; Christ Spirit is at work in us...in his Church...and in this world

Thanks to Him, the **Gospel** cannot be stopped; Christ's Church will be **built**