

Acts 29

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Twenty-Nine)
Acts

Review (Slide): This morning we are concluding our series on Reimagining Church. It has been a journey together; here is where we have been...

August – focused on prayer and waiting...

September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November – focused on the Church's mission

January – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

February and April – focusing on the marks of a believer: a personal relationship with Jesus, being in community, a wall-break and bridge builder, a balcony person, and a pray-er...

May – Where do we go from here...

Message:

I didn't get Acts 29 up on the screen; so if you'd turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 29, we will be finishing up our series on Acts today. Next Sunday, we'll begin a new series for the summer entitled, "My Heart, Christ's Home."

Acts is Luke's great story of Christ's church; find Acts 29? It's kind of hard. It's not actually in your Bible; I know you knew that (you were just paging through your Bible just so the person next to you wouldn't feel foolish), but keep your Bibles open.

Lloyd Ogilvie coined the phrase "Acts Twenty-Nine" in his book, *Drumbeat of Love*, because there is no formal closing to the book of Acts like there is with the other New Testament books.

Lloyd Ogilvie notes the stories of the early church are not merely stories to read and say, "Wow! Imagine that!" they are blueprints to be emulated (Like we've been saying throughout this series). This book is unfinished because the Acts of the Apostles were not yet done. This book is unfinished because the Church was not complete. This book is unfinished because the Holy Spirit is still empowering the members of Christ's Church to advance God's Kingdom.

Sadly, there are churches today that are too **anemic** to **impact** their

communities for Jesus. They're paralyzed by fear; addicted to the culture's comforts; and content with the ways of the world. They've tidied up their faith, polished their pews, fine-tuned their services, focused on their budgets, and busied themselves with themselves. People like to play it safe, avoid taking risks, and find comfort in doing it like they've always done it. They resist the Spirit because they're afraid of change, of losing control, of doing something that isn't listed in the bulletin or they haven't done before. They've chosen the path of least resistance rather than follow the Holy Spirit.

So what about Acts 29? The New Testament book only goes through Chapter 28 in our Bibles.

The story of God's hope for a lost world is **still being authored**. The reality is, we're writing it today - you and me and the believers around the world. The reality is God is still at work reclaiming the lost and building his kingdom. He's not finished; he's not just treading water or sitting back and observing, he is fully invested. And he is fully committed to using ordinary people like you and me to turn this world right-side up.

Acts 29 is not only the unfinished story of Christ's Church, but also our story!

Let's make it personal: When the day comes and "His story" is finished, and all creation reads it, and we get to your name - because what you've done (or haven't done) to build Christ's church will be in there - what is it going to say? What would you like it to say? Is your story one of actively building the kingdom? Cheering from the sidelines? Or sitting on the couch throwing a nerf brick at the screen (Sorry, sport's analogy).

Let's go back to Acts 1 (Yes, there really is an Acts 1). It has been a while.

"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." **(Acts 1:7-8).**

This is the Church's **Mission** statement- a rewrite of **Matthew 28:18-20**; it sets the Church apart from every other organization in the world. We are The Church.

The "*you will be my witnesses*" applies to every follower of Jesus – and to us. I was talking with an elder from another church in the Renewal Lab. He was sharing their goals: "75% of our congregation will be witnessing in their neighborhood." A woman asked, "Shouldn't it be 100%?" His answer: Yes, it should, but it's a SMART goal (and the "R" stands for "*realistic*"). (Even 75% would be unrealistic in many churches).

In **Acts 2**, the **Holy Spirit** promised in chapter one shows up! The Church is **born**! The next five chapters (**3-7**) are devoted to the spread of the Gospel in Jerusalem. Chapters (**8-11.5**) are the story of witnesses going into Judea and Samaria. The rest of Acts focuses on being God's witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Incredibly, Jesus places the Mission of his church into the hands of his **followers**. A witness's job is to testify to the **truth**; it's a legal term; the case rests on the testimony and credibility of the witnesses. Jesus applies the term to his disciples - those who followed him through his ministry. Luke applies it to Stephen, then to Paul, and to others in the New Testament. Through the New Testament, it comes to refer to all followers of Jesus.

"Witness" is taken from the word "*martus*;" it refers to someone willing to **stake their life** on what they are saying; the word for "witness" is the root of the word "martyr".

We said repeatedly that Acts 1:8 is the thesis statement of the entire book of Acts; the rest of the book just shows us how God - through ordinary witnesses like us - made it happen. And the "book" is still being written; you and I can still be a part of it. God did it once; God can do it again!

In concluding this series, there are a couple things we need to notice...

...IN JERUSALEM...

In Acts 2:47, Luke noted the church was *"...praising God, and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Notice the witnessing here is being done close to **home** - our family, our neighbors, our co-workers; with those we are most familiar and most deeply invested.

Notice who is ultimately building the Church: *The **Lord** is adding to their number.* God leads, the church/members follow his will, seek his preferred future.

Notice the church members are not **passive** or just sitting around waiting for something to happen. They're devoted to the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. They're sharing everything, selling possessions and goods, and meeting needs. They're active, hard at work; speaking **boldly**; they're brazenly unapologetic.

Even in the context of their home, family and community, they're willing to risk it all. Paul will later say, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."* (**Romans 1:16**)

When was the last time you took a risk for the Gospel? Some took a risk a few weeks ago to pray for 1 person, for 1 minute at 1 (Thank you!). Being a follower of Jesus; being a witness in the community is risky. Everyone has the possibility of coming up short. Are we willing to embrace the risk?

You've been invited to pray on Sunday evening; you've been invited to pray for one person who is far from God for one minute; you've been invited to prayer walk. None of those really involve much risk; but are we willing to do something different, step out in faith and perhaps change someone's eternal destiny for the sake of the Gospel?

In **Acts 6:7**, Luke tells us *"The Word of God continued to spread the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."*

Notice who is joining the Church here? (Jewish) **Priests!** These are the last people you'd think would join the church. Being a priest is their occupation, their livelihood, their identity. They're responding to the Gospel and making a significant sacrifice by doing so.

In **Acts 10-11**, we saw people the disciples never imagined coming to Christ - Gentiles, foreigners, **Romans**, soldiers - and they also received the Holy Spirit. If they can come to Christ, is anyone too far from the Gospel? Is anyone beyond the Spirit's reach? The answer is an emphatic "no!"

Don't assume anyone - even the most fallen prodigal or adamant pagan - is **beyond** the **grace** of God, could not become a follower of Jesus, and isn't just one bended knee from the Kingdom.

...IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA...

After Stephen's stoning, Luke writes *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria...Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Christ there."* (**8:1,4-5**).

Notice that the "believers" and "witnesses" are staying in **Jerusalem**. It was comfortable; it was convenient; it was home. No one was going out anywhere. Something had to change to fulfill the Mission. Something always has to change...

By God's volitional or permissive will (you decide), persecution comes. What could have crushed the Gospel, spreads it; there is a "forced" exodus into Judea and Samaria. When they go, they take the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection along.

Notice the Twelve disciples (leadership) **stay** but the membership is

dispersed. Michael Green, early church historian says, *“One of the most striking features of evangelism in the early church was the people who engaged in it. Communicating the faith was not the preserve for the very zealous or the officially designated evangelist. Evangelism was the duty of every church member.”*

Who are the witnesses? Who’s responsible? All of us! You and me. So how is your contribution to **Acts 29** coming? What will others read that you’ve been writing? There are people in this world God has specifically designed you to reach.

Luke reminds us (**Acts 9:31**) that *“The Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”*

Notice the **strengthening** of the Holy Spirit and their **reverence** (fear) of the Lord.

Notice the increase in **numbers**. Acts is very careful about numbering **people**. In **Acts 1:2** (the 12 is down to 11); in **Acts 1:15**, the “Church” is at 120; in **Acts 2:41**, 3000 people were added in one day (Someone was keeping track). People say, “We’re not into numbers.” “It’s the quality, not the quantity.” (That’s the mantra of dying churches). It needs to be both: Outreach and Discipleship; more and better disciples for Jesus.

Don’t misunderstand; I’m not into numerical comparisons (the “My church is bigger than your church” thing). But it is important to ask, “How many have come to a saving knowledge of Jesus because of our life, testimony, ministry, service, sacrifice, investment?” It’s not really even the numbers; it’s the people the numbers represent; the souls of real people that will otherwise be spending eternity somewhere else.

Which one of your children would you be willing to give up? God doesn’t want to give up any of his children (“...God our Savior who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth; **I Timothy 2:4**)

Everyone matters to God! He created them. He sent his only Son to die for their sins to bring reconciliation. If they matter to him, they need to matter to us. When we pray for one, share the gospel with one, minister to one we are writing **Acts 29**.

...TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH...

In Acts 13, the early church intentionally commissions and sends people out. By the end of the chapter, Gentiles are embracing the Gospel, rejoicing, and becoming witnesses themselves.

Notice the church is **intentional** about making sure the Gospel **spreads** –

everywhere. Paul and Barnabas are willing to give up their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

The primary work of the church is transforming (saving) lives; the primary work of the Church is making disciples who make more disciples; the primary work of the Church is evangelizing the Gospel. This is not a casual issue; there needs to be a sense of urgency - the 29th chapter needs to be written!

The RMS Queen Mary was a magnificent cruise ship that crossed the Atlantic for decades. Primarily a pleasure vessel, it became a troop transport during WW2. Today the Queen Mary is a docked hotel and museum in the Long Beach Harbor. She has been stripped of her vitals; its gigantic engine has been removed. Shops line the deck to sell souvenirs. Actors play the parts of officers and crew. It still looks magnificent, but she no longer serves the purpose for which she was built. The greatest ship that ever went to sea is now the greatest ship to come and see.

Christ is calling his witnesses to be passionately praying for the harvest; willing to make sacrifices to change the world; being personally invested in witnessing to the Gospel and disciples-making.

One of the goals the leaders of Covenant embrace in signing the “Leadership Covenant” is the Biblical principle of everyone being a **disciple** and **discipling** someone (i.e., being mentored and mentoring). That’s not only important for leadership, but it is also the responsibility of every believer as we write **Acts 29**.

Have you ever shared your testimony with an unbeliever? Have you ever invited someone to Church with you who doesn’t love Jesus? Have you ever prayed with an unbeliever for their healing? Have you ever had a spiritual conversation outside of church? Have you ever led a small group or invited people in your neighborhood to dinner and then talk about Jesus?

In Acts 19:20, Luke says, “The word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”

Notice he doesn’t say, “The **Church** grew” He says, “The **Word** grew!” They became people of the Text. They were becoming a “*people to be reconciled to [God] through the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ!*”

God is not honored when we make excuses. “Too busy” or “not my gift” doesn't grow the Word, reconcile people to Jesus, or help write **Acts 29**.

In **Acts 28**, Paul finally makes it to **Rome**. Luke writes (**28:30-31**), “*For two whole years Paul stayed there [in Rome] in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

That’s where it ends. The last verses. What happens to Paul? Does he appeal?

Does he win? Does he live or die? Luke never tells us - because it doesn't really matter. It's not about **Paul**; It is not about you; it is not about me. It's about the **Gospel**. It is about the **kingdom**. It is about **Jesus**.

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Cutlerville, Gaines Township, Byron Center, Moline and Wayland - and to the ends of the earth (i.e., wherever you go).

History says all the disciples (save John and Judas) were martyred; thousands are still martyred every year simply for proclaiming Jesus as Lord. They are writing **Acts 29**. They believe Jesus is worth dying for, just like Jesus believed they were worth dying for.

I like how John Ortberg summarizes the entire book of Acts with a series of questions:

- 1) Who's at work? God!
- 2) Who's too far away? No one!
- 3) Who's called to be a witness? Me!
- 4) Who matters? Everyone!
- 5) What's at stake? Eternity!
- 6) What do I have to offer? The Word!
- 7) How do I know what to do? Pray!
- 8) What have I got to lose? Nothing!
- 9) What do I have to gain? Everything!
- 10) When do I need to do this? Now!

Imagine:

- Imagine drug dealers, gang members, racists, sex offenders being transformed by the Gospel.
- Imagine politicians, judges, and influential leaders taking stands based on the Word of God.
- Imagine the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the mute talking, and people being healed of their illnesses.
- Imagine hundreds, even thousands, of people being saved in a single church service.
- While for some it is almost impossible, imagine the **unimaginable**. Now imagine it has already **happened**. **It has**. In Acts!

God, do it again! Use **us**!