

God's Unstoppable Mission
Stories from the Acts of the Apostles

September 17, 2006

Acts 1:1-11

THE MASTER PLAN¹

Acts 1:1-11

¹ In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will

¹ I am grateful to the wonderful teaching of Ray Stedman. What I have written about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is taken from his book **When the Church was Young**, in a chapter entitled "Out of the Shadows" I have also found invaluable insights in a sermon preached by the Rev. Kim Swithinbank from the Falls Church based on this same text. The quotes from the Pope, John Stott and William Temple were taken from his sermon as our the ideas found on pages 10ff.

receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." - *nrsv*

Last week I introduced the Book of Acts by having us consider our place within the History of Grace. I was talking about how this story in Acts can so shape our own lives, individually and corporately that as we allow it to speak to our hearts, minds and souls, we can be strengthened by the Spirit to live in a way that exemplifies the example we have here set by our earliest ancestors in the faith.

As we read this story in Acts we notice that there is intense conflict throughout the book, but a conflict met by a ringing confidence that is wonderful to see. It is a record of power exercised in the midst of persecution; an account of life and health pouring from a living Christ into a sick society through the channel of obscure men and women, very much like you and me.

We could never understand the New Testament if we did not have the book of Acts, for it fills the gap that would exist between the Gospels and the book of Romans, which follows. At the end of the Gospels we find a handful of Jews gathered in Jerusalem talking about a kingdom to come to Israel. In the book of Romans we find an apostle who is not even mentioned in the

Gospels, and who was not one of the twelve, writing to a band of Christians in the capital city of Rome, talking about going to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts tells us how this happened, and why this change occurred.

To understand the structure of this book we need to look no farther than verse 8 of chapter 1. There Jesus instructs his disciples to wait in Jerusalem where they will receive power to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. This is a very important verse that acts like a table of contents for the Book.

Chapters 1-7 concentrate the story in Jerusalem. This section of the book ends with the stoning of Stephen, the church's first martyr. When we then turn to chapter twelve we read about the martyrdom of James one of the original disciples. His death then leads Luke to describe the church's further expansion as it moves northward to Antioch, in modern day Turkey. From there the Church will eventually spread all the way the Rome.

What I found interesting as I studied these verses is that it was in the context of mourning the death of a beloved member of the early Christian family that resulted in the expansion of the church. It was in a state when the early Christians were grieving that God by His Spirit enabled the church to continue witnessing to Jesus, while facing great opposition.

In chapter 8 verse 1 Luke tells us:

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Luke is able to honestly reflect on the sorrow experienced by those who loved Stephen and mentions the threats of Saul, soon to become Paul.

At the end of chapter 12 we read of the death of one of the original twelve, James, the brother of John at the hands of King Herod. Herod also dies and as we turn to chapter 13 we read:

1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

As we then come to the end of the book, in chapter 28:30-31 we read of Paul in Rome, where under house arrest he is still witnessing to Jesus.

30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

So even though the earliest Christians faced great opposition God's Mission was unstoppable.

The first eleven verses of chapter one give us the key to understanding why this was so. Here we have revealed the essential strategy by which Jesus Christ proposes to change the world, a strategy which is the secret of the revolutionary character of the church when it is operating as it was intended to operate around us.

Indeed here is the Lord's Master Plan.

As we look at this plan we are to affirm to bedrock truths that govern this book.

Jesus is alive.

Because Jesus is alive we are empowered by his Spirit for a very specific calling. If this was true for the first century church I want to suggest to you that it is also true for the 21 Church. If we want to become more and more the church He wants us to be we don't have to scratch our heads wondering what this is. I don't have to sit in my study tomorrow morning asking "Oh what's the plan for the church?" He has given it to us right here in Acts 1:1-11.

Jesus alive!

That incomparable fact is what thrusts Christianity ten thousand miles ahead of its nearest competitor in the field of religion. There is nothing else like it. Jesus alive, risen from the dead!

One, he appeared to them during forty days. The word here is one from which we get our word, ophthalmia, i.e., the word for the eye, or literally, the eyeball. If we were to use the modern vernacular, what Luke says is, these disciples "eyeballed" him for forty days. They saw him again and again, not merely once, but many times during this period. Each time he looked exactly the same. It is hard for an hallucination to accomplish that.

Then, second, he spoke to them: "speaking of the kingdom of God." Why, says Luke, we even remember his subject matter. He talked about the kingdom of God. We saw him and heard him, two objective sensual experiences that confirmed to us that this was no fantasy, no hallucination.

Finally, third, the ultimate proof was, "he ate with us." The word, "staying" has a marginal reference which gives eating as the actual Greek word used. "He ate with us," says Luke, and those who were there saw him eat. They saw the food disappear. It is surely terribly hard to get an hallucination to eat! Luke says, "This is the proof; he ate with us, so we know he is alive."

As 21st century Christians we are to be unequivocal in our claim that our faith is rooted in events that are factual. Now we need to remember that even though we were not present when these events took place, neither was the man to whom Luke wrote his Gospel account and Acts, Theophilus. If you remember the beginning of the Gospel, Luke writes that he wants Theophilus to know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

This is so important for us to affirm as well. In an age of such skepticism when to suggest when it comes to certain about spiritual matters Luke wants us to know that we can have assurance.

With the certainty of know that Jesus is alive were are not coming to remember some long lost buried saviour. Because Jesus is alive we are empowered for a specific calling.

Let's look at what he has to say:

⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NRSV)

There is here a four-fold characteristic of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

First, he indicates that the Holy Spirit's coming would not be ritual but reality. John, he said, baptized with water. That is a ritual, a shadow, a picture. But the reality will be the actual Spirit himself, coming to live in you. The promise that was made to Abraham two thousand years ago (i.e., prior to that point in history) will be fulfilled in you. If you want to read that promise you will find it in the twelfth chapter of *Genesis*. There God said to Abraham, "I will bless you, and make your name great, ... and all nations shall be blessed through you," (*Genesis* 12:2-3). We are not told exactly what that blessing is when we read this in *Genesis*. But in Paul's letter to the *Galatians* he tells us very explicitly what the blessing consisted of. In the third chapter of *Galatians*, Verse 13, Paul says,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us -- for it is written "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" -- that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (*Galatians* 3:13-14 RSV)

There we learn what God promised Abraham; he promised to give him the Spirit and, through him, to give the blessing (that same Spirit) to everyone who believes, even to the Gentile.

Thus our Lord stresses the reality of this. The Holy Spirit is given now, immediately when anyone believes in Jesus. There is no sign, no feeling, no emotional indication of it. It occurs, as Jesus said it would, when any believe on him. It is the means by which the risen life of Jesus becomes available to us, continuously and constantly. All that he is made available through all that I am.

Now notice that Jesus points out that not only is this not ritual but reality; it is also not a program, but power. These disciples said to him, "Lord, are you going to at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were thinking in terms of timetables, schedules and programs. "What are you going to do? When is this all going to happen? How is it going to happen? The Lord Jesus said, "That is not for you to know. Time and schedules and programming is not for you to know. That is all in the Father's authority. Your task is to be the manifestation of power, not the knowledge of a program. The Father will take care of that. You content yourself with exercising the power that is given to you, and the Father will put it all together and work it all out just right."

Here has been the mistake of the church. The church has thought it had the task of programming the work of God, that it was up to us to set up timetables and establish the structures and framework by which the work would go on; to carry it all out consistently and systematically across and around the world. But we have never been able to do it. The reason is because that is not in our authority. The times and the seasons are not for us to know. The Father has kept that in his own authority. But, said Jesus, though I am not going to let you know the program, I will

give you power. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

Now, says Jesus, it will not result in propaganda, either, but witnessing. You shall not be propagandists, but "my witnesses," he said. Christians are not like salesmen going out to peddle a product, nor are we recruiters, going around trying to get people to join our religious club. When the church becomes that it has always become a false thing and lost its power. But this has a personal note about it. Jesus says, "You will talk about me, because you will have experienced me. What you will talk about will be what I have done for you." That is always what a witness talks about. "You won't be talking about yourselves," he says, "you will be talking about me."

The mark of the false church is that it loves to talk about itself. These early Christians never witnessed about the church at all; they witnessed about the Lord, what he could do, how we would work, what a fantastic person he was, how amazing was his power, what he could do in human hearts. The twentieth-century church is too often talking about what the church is, how great it is, what it ought to be doing. It has its eyes focused on itself. But that was not true of the early church. Its eyes were focused on its Lord, and it was a witness to him.

Fourth, this promise of the Father will not be restricted at all, but will be universal. It will begin in Jerusalem and Samaria and go to the uttermost parts of the earth. It will include all places, and all times and ages, all classes, all races, both sexes, slaves or free, it makes.

So, this is just a helpful way to think about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. When we know that he empowers us to know the reality of Jesus' presence in our lives, then in turn we are given

His life flowing through us so that we can be his witnesses thus drawing others to himself.

The early church understood this.

Because Jesus was alive we are empowered for a specific calling, which bring us to the second main point.

The church is not *only* for evangelism.

Rather, and hear this carefully,

The church is *all* for evangelism.

There is nothing we do in the church that does not have a missional aspect.

Let me illustrate that. Personal holiness: all of us should be striving for the holiness without which we will not see the Lord. Holiness of life has value in itself. Our purpose in life is to become like Jesus. Where did Jesus teach most about personal holiness? The Sermon on the Mount. What does he say of the purpose of holiness in the Sermon on the Mount?

He says we're to be like a light on a hill. "Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Well, what about our love for one another within the church family and our care for one another? Jesus gave us a new commandment that we should love one another just as he has loved us. But again, listen. In that same context, what does he say but this:

"*By this* shall all people will know that you are my disciples: If you have love for one another."

That is, holiness and love have value in themselves , but are most effective in mission.

Friends, we need to know what the church is for. We need to know and understand that evangelism, or reaching the lost, or if you prefer the word mission, is not an activity that the church *does*. It is what the church is *for*. Let me repeat that. Evangelism is not an activity the church *does*. It is what the church is *for*. The Ford Motor Company makes cars. The church makes disciples. It is what we are for.

Spirit, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, and all Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Let me quote from Pope Benedict XVI. It's amazing to have a pope who gets this He seems such an evangelical pope, it's extraordinary. He's not just orthodox, he's missional. Listen to this, to what he said towards the end of his homily:

It is really true, as we follow Christ in this mission to be fishers of men, we must bring men and women out of the sea that is salted with so many forms of alienation, and onto the land of life, into the light of God.

This is the piece I want us to hear clearly;

It is really so. The purpose of our lives is to reveal God to people.

- through our lives individually and our life as a church together. If you prefer John Stott as a contemporary authority rather than Pope Benedict XVI, John Stott describes evangelical Christians in this way:

First as Bible people and second as Gospel people. We are Bible people; that is our foundation and authority. We are Gospel people; that is our purpose - to take the good news of Jesus to the world.

But why is it so vitally important that we understand the purpose of the church? Two reasons, in closing.

First, mission gives shape to the church; that is, we see how different things fit together - how ministries complement one another and don't compete with each other. The Ford Motor Company has many different divisions. They make engines; they make body parts; they make wheels; they make axles; they make all sorts of different parts that go to make a car. And all of those different divisions know that they are working towards a common aim - to make motor cars. Once we understand that the church is about mission, it brings shape to every ministry and helps us fit the different ministries together. If we understand the evangelistic priority and mission of the church, it does not make other ministries less important, it makes them more important.

So mission gives shape to the church. We see how things fit together.

Mission gives direction to the church

Mission also gives direction to the church. It helps us keep our focus. The default mechanism of the church is always to turn inward. We will see that in this series from the Book of Acts. It happened from the beginning. The Holy Spirit again and again and again has had to reform us and turn us inside out. The church is not a private affair. It is not a closed club. It was Archbishop William Temple who said:

The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of non-members. The church is here to bear witness to Jesus in a lost world.

One final quote from the new pope, if I may, in a moment; but first, a word of introduction to it. For many of us, and for all sorts of reasons, evangelism is something of a dirty word. If you would rather talk about reaching the lost, or mission, or any other word you want to use, I don't mind. It's the principle that is vital. The church is *for* mission. But the principle is also beautiful. And that's the thought I want to leave you with. Evangelism is a beautiful thing, seeing people move from darkness to light. Seeing people come from death to life. It's one of the most beautiful things we can ever do.

Listen again to Pope Benedict XVI:

There is a man I have know for fifteen years. This man has been an unbeliever for most of his adult life. He is dying of cancer. I had the privilege of sitting with him on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. As we sat together I was able to share a little bit more each day about Jesus, His Kingdom and the promise of heaven.

After I had spoken with him about the life that is to come I asked "So sir, do you understand what I have said? Does it make sense to you?"

He said "Yes I do, and I believe."

As I went to share the *Gospel* with this man who is dying and he heard the good news and experienced afresh what Pope Benedict so beautifully expressed is the words with which I end.

"There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the *Gospel*, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him, and to speak to others of our friendship with him."

Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

May the Lord Jesus help us to be not only hearers, but doers of his words. Amen.