

**Ripples: The Gospel Spreads in the Book of Acts**  
**Overview Themes of the Book of Acts, Part One:**  
**The Lord Acts (1.1-2)**

**January 26**

As you know, this has been something of a year of focusing on outreach for us as a church family

Several of the messages in our II Corinthians series this fall had this theme, including:

II Corinthians 4: we preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake

II Corinthians 5: we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us

We've also had a couple of equipping events:

In the fall Doug Pollock on how to be aware of the people God has put on our route and how to have spiritual conversations

Have just finished our Confident Conversations weekend with Paul Copan, Paul Gould, on how to answer questions and objections

Hopefully this summer, Heather Holleman to equip us further on living a life of love across lines of difference

It makes sense we'd have this focus, because part of what it means to life of love and seek God's best for a person is introduce those we love and care for to the most important person in our lives. Living a life of love will always lead eventually to wanting to help that person find his or her home in the love of God.

Augustine says that when we love our neighbors.

We ought to desire ... that they should all join with us in loving God, and all the assistance that we either give them or accept from them should tend to that one end. (Chapter 29, *On Christian Doctrine*)

What better way to love our neighbor than to help them discover the love of God for them?

We continue this spring with our focus on outreach by starting a series on the Book of Acts.

The book of Acts is sort of the obvious place to turn. Looking over the shoulders of the men and women who made up the first church, studying a book that describes the spread of the good news and the growth of the early church – evangelism is at the heart of all of that.

Let me tell you how we'll approach this series.

If we started at the beginning and just marched our way through the book from story to story it could be easy to just see it as a collection of thirty years worth of exciting tales from the earliest days of the church.

But Luke wrote this with a lot of intentionality and purpose. Starting last fall, when I knew this would be our focus this spring, I printed it off and read and reread it a bunch of times with pens and highlighters in hand, circling and highlighting key words and places and themes.

As I did so, I began to see clearly five key themes:

The Lord Acts - how central the role of God is in the spread of the faith and the growth of the church

The Word Spreads – I was struck by how important our words are in witnessing to God's work in our lives and communicating the content of the gospel and strengthening those who become followers

The Church Thrives – there are clear markers of church health and growth and faithfulness that we can look for

The Believers Grow – the church doesn't just grow numerically, it grows spiritually, and there are important things we can learn about that

The Kingdom Advances – the church is made up of limited and flawed human beings, and it faces significant limitations and persecution, and yet the kingdom of God advances and spreads, eventually touching every corner of the globe

So what we're going to do is take several Sundays to look at these themes first, and then with that as a framework we'll begin to walk our way through the book this spring and maybe this summer too.

\* \* \*

This morning I'd like to zero in on who the main characters are in the book. Who are these stories about and what are they up to?

You may be aware that Luke, likely a non-Jewish physician who spent a lot of time with Paul, wrote both the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. In fact, Luke wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, even Paul – more than a quarter of it.

So in his second book, who are these stories about and what are they up to?

In his first book, the gospel of Luke, he gives us what seems like an obvious clue about what the focus of the second book will be. Right near the end of the book of Luke he records these words from Jesus to his followers before he ascends to heaven

Luke 24.46-48

Jesus said, “It was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.’ You are witnesses of all these things.”

So what we would expect to see in Luke’s follow-up book is the story of the disciples doing just that – going out and proclaiming to all the nations that there is forgiveness and peace and new life to be found for all who turn from a life centered on themselves to a life centered on Jesus.

And in fact that’s just what we see. In the first chapter of Acts, in the second half of verse 8 in chapter 1, it has the risen Jesus saying to his disciples

Acts 1.8b

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

And the rest of the book describes the disciples doing that.

Peter is the main character in chapters 1 through 12, but Mary and the women who followed and supported Jesus and John and Barnabas and Philip and Stephen and several others all factor in the first half of the book as well.

Then starting at the end of chapter seven we are introduced to a new apostle, one who didn’t follow Jesus before his death but who encountered the risen Jesus after his resurrection and became his follower – a Jewish leader named Saul, whose name is later changed to Paul.

In the second half of the book, from chapter 13 on, there are others who are highlighted: Peter some, and Timothy, Silas, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, and others – but from there to the end of the book in chapter 28 the story really focuses on Paul and his ministry.

But do you know who is mentioned more in the book of Acts than Peter and Paul and all of the apostles and disciples and followers of Jesus combined?

God is. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

The book is known as the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, but that's not really who it is about most of all. And, in fact, it wasn't even called that until about a hundred years after it was written.

The book could be called, maybe should be called, the Book of the Acts of God. More than anything else, this book is about what God does, how *the Lord* acts.

Some of you have noticed the tricky hook Luke sets at the beginning of his second book. He writes:

Acts 1.1-2

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

He doesn't finish the thought directly – “and this book, O Theophilus, Lover of God, is about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach right up to the present day.”

He doesn't say that directly, but it is implied, and it is, in fact, the case.

True, Jesus sent his followers out in mission. And off they went.

But whose mission was it really?

Look at Acts 24 again, where Jesus commissions the disciples to be his witnesses. Here's the last verse in the commissioning speech Jesus gave to his disciples. I left it off of Jesus' commission to the disciples:

Luke 24.49

And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.

And now look at Acts 1.8 again, this time seeing the whole verse.

Acts 1.8

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.

So what we learn is . . .

Luke is about how Jesus *began* his ministry

Acts is about how Jesus *continues* his ministry, not only during the first thirty years of the church, the period of time captured by Luke, but by implication, from then on, right up to today.

So let's look a bit closer at that idea: that the book of Acts is about Jesus continuing his ministry right up to the present. When you think about the implications of that, I think these might be some conclusions you land on.

### **1. God's heart is to be in relationship with the human beings that he created and who bear his image.**

God made us to be in relationship with himself. It's what he wants from us. It's why he made us. It's what he desires for us.

Scriptures tells us that our living our lives for ourselves instead of for him has broken the potential of relationship with God, but amazingly, God sends Jesus to repair the breach from *his* side.

So in Acts 10.36, Peter says

This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

And in Romans 5.1-5 Paul elaborates on that. He writes

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. . . . And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

The Book of Acts is about the heart of God toward humanity. Because he loves us, Paul tells his listeners, he provides for all of our needs:

Acts 14.17

He never left them without evidence of himself and his goodness. For instance, he sends you rain and good crops and gives you food and joyful hearts.

Acts 17.25

He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need.

And he provides for all of our needs so we will see his hand and turn our eyes toward him.

Acts 17.27-28

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.

He cares for us because he loves us, and his desire is that by providing for us he will turn our hearts toward him, so that we can be in relationship with him.

***Is that how you understand the heart of God toward you? And toward the neighbor who lives next to you, the coworker or fellow student who sits next to you?***

\* \* \*

So the Book of Acts is about the heart of God toward humanity, and his desire to be in a relationship of love with us. But it isn't just about what he *desires*.

**2. And second, the Book of Acts is also about how *the Lord* acts to bring that relationship about.**

I went through and made a list of everything that God the Father, God the Son, or God the Spirit do in the Book of Acts. Here is a summary of the over five hundred verses that talk about what God has done to bring us into relationship with himself. Just listen to this summary and see how active God is in his pursuit of relationship with us.

In love, the Father:

- Makes and fulfills redemptive plans toward humanity (chapters 7 and 13) in his perfect time by his power and authority (2.23) – that is, he hatches a plan and conspires to draw us to himself

In love, the Father:

- Prepares the way, promising the coming of the son (3.18, 13.32) and the coming of the spirit (2.38) to fallen humanity through his prophets and through his word

In love, the Father:

- Sends his son to suffer and die for humanity in order to redeem humanity (3.18, 13.22)

In love, the Father:

- Raises his son to life and exalts him as the Lord and King (2.36, 5.31, 28.31), and invites humanity to enter his kingdom and place themselves under his loving rule (1.3, 8.12, 14.22, 19.8, 28.23)

In love, the Father:

- Pours out his Spirit to accredit his Son with signs and wonders (2.11, 2.22, 15.12, 15.22, 19.11)

In love, the Father:

- Sends his spirit (2.33, 8.20, 15.8) to individual human beings to awaken faith and to draw people from all nations into relationship with himself (2.39)

In love, the Father:

- Establishes and grows the church (20.28), adding daily to their number (2.47)

In love, the Father:

- By his spirit he gives his word (2.17, 7.2, 4.31), the inspired Scriptures, to his people so that they can know and trust and follow and obey and serve him

***Have you ever noticed before all the steps God has taken to get rid of the obstacle of our sin and spiritual indifference and to clear a path for us that leads us to himself?***

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As we've said, the Book of Acts reflects the heart of God for humanity. He loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. We are the objects of God's loving affection.

And not just that. The Book of Acts is about how *the Lord* acts to bring that relationship about. We are the objects of God's loving designs in human history.

The book of Acts describes the lengths God will go to bring us into relationship with himself. God is the first and greatest evangelist

**3. The Book of Acts also reveals God's desires to work in us and through us as his followers to help bring that relationship about.**

On top of all that we have already mentioned, about all that God has done to reach us and draw us to himself, we discover in the book of Acts that God mobilizes the church to

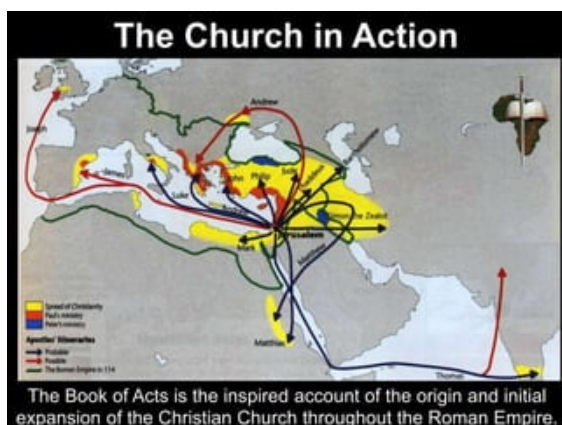
serve as his representative, his ambassadors, in his project of reconciling humanity to himself.

When we read through the book of Acts we see that in love the Father

- Sends the church to bear witness to his son (1.8)
- But he also pours out his spirit to empower the church in its mission (1.8), guiding his followers by his spirit in the particulars of their ministry and mission, speaking to them, directing them, empowering them and filling them as they go and bear witness to him and share the good news (1.2, 11.12, 13.2, 13.52, 16.7, 16.10, 18.21, 20.22-24, 22.18, 23.1)

And in this way their work becomes his work.

Here's a map that shows the spread of the gospel by the end of the first century.



Look at all of the arrows spinning off from the center in Jerusalem and heading out north, south, east and west, going to the some of the farthest reaches of the known world in a period of only fifty or sixty years.

This map demonstrates tangibly that God moves toward those he loves in order to draw them into relationship with himself.

You may remember Romans 15.7, where it says, “*Accept* one another, just as God in Christ has accepted you.” The word accept can be translated welcome or extend hospitality or receive. The word is made up of two other Greek words, and together they mean, move toward the other person and draw them in toward you.

When you have that word in mind, you realize this isn’t just a map of the Acts of the Apostles. This is a map of the heart of God toward us.

It captures the way God literally moves toward us, relentlessly pursuing humanity in his love for us.



It also captures the mystery of the way God includes the church in his redemptive purposes, reflecting the way God desires to work in and through us as his followers to help make other followers.

Somehow, in the mystery of God, the work of living out and sharing our faith involves our full participation, but it is not ultimately our work. It isn't what we do. It is what God does in and through us.

Paul understood this clearly. Remember II Corinthians 5? "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, *as though God were making his appeal through us.*"

It turns out that is exactly what is happening. Look at these three intriguing verses.

The first one comes at the end of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey.

Acts 14.26-27

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Then some of the followers from Jerusalem began to catch wind of their ministry, so they asked Paul and Barnabas to come meet with the council.

Acts 15.4

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then at the end of his second missionary journey, Paul again returns to meet with the believers in Jerusalem.

Acts 21.17-19

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

It isn't just in the Luke's record in the book of Acts where this comes through. Look at these passage from I Corinthians and Romans, written by Paul himself.

I Corinthians 15.10 NLT

I have worked harder than any of the other apostles; yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace.

Romans 15.17-19

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done— by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God.

God invites us to live out our faith and to speak about our faith in ways that don't come out of our own strength and wisdom, but that make us conduits of the love and power of God who resides within us.

God by his Spirit does not merely equip us from outside; he inhabits us within. He is in residence (John 14.23-26, Romans 8.9) and at work in us and through us.

He is the principal actor, using me as his vessel, his conduit, his body, his hands. This does not preclude my full participation, of course. But it is ultimately his work. The fact that it is mysterious does not make it less true.

Peter captures this idea in I Peter 4.11

If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

God uses us, with our full engagement and participation

Let me share an example with you.

I had an eye appointment last week. Let me just say again how grateful I am for your faithful prayers and for how so many of you ask about how I'm doing.

The encouraging news is that they feel like they have finally put their finger on what has caused the multiple images that I've had in my eye for the past year, that have slowly been getting worse, and they think the fix could be as simple as glasses or contacts now and possibly lazik surgery once my cornea finally settles down

Well, during my appointment I met with three doctors during my visit, one of whom was a visiting doctor from Canada I'd not met before. He was doing a fellowship on cornea transplants. His family comes from the western part of India, and he is a follower of the Sikh religion.

What a delightful, warm, open hearted man he was!

We just had fifteen minutes together, and you know I'm seeking, as you are too, to learn how to be intentional in showing regard and interest to the person in front of me, but most of which was spent just talking about my eye. But somehow something more was taking place during those moments.

At the end of the appointment he grabbed a post-it, scribbled down his name and cell number and said if I was ever in Toronto I should give him a call so we could get together.

Later that day I felt the Spirit prompting me to text him a thank you note, and to be unguarded and open, so I did.

I texted him back and told him how blessed I was to meet him and what a wonderful doc I thought he was – generous with his time, regard, listening, encouragement, and expertise.

I also told him what a gift he was to his patients, both here in North America but also in western India where he goes to serve short term each year.

I ended by saying, "God bless you as you use your capacious heart and considerable gifts to love and serve others."

Several days went by, just enough time to begin to wonder if I had overstepped my bounds. Then he texted back this message:

It was a delight to meet you and feel your warmth

Interestingly, as a preacher of faith, there are multiple forms of impact that you have. One is your direct word from a sermon. Then there is the other version where your lifestyle exemplifies the sermon. A passage from the Sikh scripture is: "The Master is remembered when observing the follower."

Often, seeing the pious and warm nature of the Lord's servant will cause the person interacting with that servant to remember the Lord.

Your nature grows my admiration for Christianity.

Fifteen minutes. And that is what God is doing through us, all of us, all the time, wherever he takes us. Glory to God.

"The secret of the missionary," according to Oswald Chambers, "is – I am His, and He is carrying out His enterprises through me." (*My Utmost for His Highest*, p 83)

***What if that was the way we understood our interactions with others? I draw close to them in order that God in me might move toward them and draw them to himself?***

Reflecting on these things a few days later, as I was praying for the doctor who so lovingly took care of me, I wrote this poem.

Love from on high

Love from on high

Love from above

Love is the soft dove

Descends from the sky

Love is the hand that stretches

that reaches

that stretches and reaches and reaches and touches

Love is the hand

My hand is the glove

It is, it is not, I

Would you pray with me?

Lord, we belong to you.

You are with us

You are for us

This is your work in us and through us

With joy we make ourselves available to you, that you might pour your love through us to those you place around us.

We pray in the name of Jesus our King.