



THE CHRONICLES OF YAHWEH, PART 4 • Rick James

The Book of Acts

After giving his disciples a Very Large Commission (to take the gospel to the entire world), you might assume that Jesus would have sent them packing and launched them out into the world with a sense of urgency. “Send a postcard when you get there. Don’t let the door hit you on your way out.” Instead, Jesus told them to do nothing and go nowhere (that’s my kind of commandment) but to wait in Jerusalem:

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. . . 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.” (Acts 1:4, 8)

Let’s begin with this historical point of reference: by the early fourth century, the entire Roman Empire had heard and—by and large—embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, how likely is it that a handful of uneducated fisherman could pull this off? Not very. In fact, Jesus had sent them on an impossible errand, its success achievable only through his power. And so they were told to sit on their hands until that power arrived. In Acts 2 power arrives:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

It was like the Tower of Babel, where God confused human speech, only in reverse: members of one kingdom praising God in an assortment of languages. This symbolized the impending proclamation to the nations of the world and their inclusion into the kingdom of God.

Dr. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, made the following observation concerning the Spirit’s empowerment for the mission:

But it is a fact of history that the people to whom Jesus gave His Great Commission were common, ordinary, working people, plagued with the same weaknesses that we have. The only difference between most of them and the majority of us is that two outstanding things had happened to them. First, they had complete confidence in a resurrected Lord triumphant over death. One who lived within them and was coming again to reign on the earth. Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Today, if enough Christians were completely committed to our resurrected and returning Lord, and were controlled and empowered by His Spirit, we would turn our world upside down, and experience a mighty spiritual revolution like that in the first century.

After reporting on the infilling of the Holy Spirit, the book of Acts treks with the disciples for the next thirty years as they moved out to fulfill Jesus’ command to proclaim the gospel to every nation on earth. By the close of the



New Testament era (roughly the end of the first century), the good news of the kingdom had spread through most of the Roman Empire, making inroads as far east as Asia; throughout eastern, western, and southern Europe; and down into north Africa. An impressive campaign for foot soldiers in sandals.

The Missionary Handbook

Besides reporting on the progress of the gospel as it spread from region to region and nation to nation, the book of Acts serves as a missionary handbook. Over the last two thousand years, churches, missionaries, pastors, mission agencies, and seminaries have turned here for a model and textbook on world evangelization. So, while we're here, we might as well take down a few notes.

Evangelism

I don't know what you picture when you think of the disciples going into a strange town and preaching the gospel. Many probably think it wasn't so weird for people to do that "back then." I don't know why we assume that about the past (The Emperor used to massacre farm animals by running over them in his chariot . . . but I guess people used to do that back then). No, there were a lot of things that were weird even back then, and walking into a foreign town to talk about a crucified convict being the Savior of the world would certainly have been among them. Though empowered by the Spirit, the disciples gave careful, prayerful consideration of how to address and contextualize the gospel to their audience. They assumed that God did not give his Spirit to replace wisdom but instead to animate it.

For example, the book of Acts relates that when the apostle Paul came to a new town or city he would typically speak first to the local synagogue. Good idea. Here you'd find Jews familiar with the Scripture, even anticipating a Messiah. You'd also find spiritually open Gentiles, those who had all but converted to Judaism, except for the festive initiation rite of circumcision. As a visiting rabbi and scholar, Paul would have had the synagogue meeting politely turned over to him—then violently taken from him as the congregation heard what he had to say. Still, in those initial meetings, Paul's preaching and the Spirit's conviction would stir the hearts of some. They, in turn, would become the first converts in that city and allow Paul, no longer welcome in the synagogue, to hold meetings in their homes.

Without a public forum, Paul's evangelism would travel along the tracks of relational networks. New converts would immediately share with their friends and family and invite them to meetings in their home where they could hear the message in its entirety from the apostle.

And so we note these same three modes of evangelism as the gospel traveled from town to town and as it has traveled down through the ages. First, there was the public proclamation of the gospel (an evangelistic outreach). Second, there was relational evangelism as new converts shared with their friends and family. And finally, there was "body evangelism"—the term given to inviting nonbelievers to participate in a Christian gathering, such as a church service, a Bible study, or prayer.

Missionaries

In the first few decades of the church everyone was a missionary, one of three varieties. There were full-time pioneers such as the apostles Paul and Peter, whose vocation was preaching the gospel and planting churches. There were short-term missionaries, such as Philip, Mark, and Luke, who jumped into the labor for a season as the Lord led. And there were lay missionaries, or people who simply transported the gospel in the course of their life and work and who provided funding for the ministry.

Every member of the body engaged in some way in expanding the kingdom.

Finances

Projects cost money. Big projects cost big money. MGM Mirage spent \$7 billion for a new City Center (read: casino and resort). If a casino is worthy of a \$7 billion dollar investment, I'm not sure what price tag you'd put on the construction of God's kingdom. Ideally, funding would be equivalent to the magnitude and magnificence of the structure—ideally.



The book of Acts introduces us to the less than ideal financial struggles and budgetary problems of kingdom expansion. A careful reading of the New Testament letters reveal that several of them had as a primary goal raising money for the mission. They were “support letters,” as here:

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? . . . If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:7,11)

While some of the early missionaries worked jobs on the side (Paul was a tentmaker) so as not to burden or hinder the new churches they were planting, this was an exception to the biblical principle. As Paul put it, “The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14).

The spirit of 1 Corinthians 9:14 is that missionaries have given of their lives to expand God’s kingdom and should not have to work two jobs because others are unwilling to give of themselves to fund it. The mission requires sacrifice from everyone.

Parachurch

The last observation is grounded upon this question: what church did Paul and his missionary band report to? What we see in the missionary endeavors of the disciples is the emergence of the first parachurch structure. Organizations such as seminaries, orphanages, book publishers, and mission agencies are not really churches, are they? Yet they serve specific roles in the mission of the church. Some have questioned the legitimacy of such structures, but they are biblically grounded here in Acts. As soon as the church moved out in mission, and anytime in history it has done so, the Spirit raises up such structures to provide focus, resources, and stewardship to the endeavor.

Well, you can read the book of Acts for yourself and add your own observations—our tour bus must move on. We have now traced the Bible’s story line through the Old Testament and into the New. Now all we need to complete the picture is an idea of where we stand today: Are we almost done? How many people still need to hear about Jesus? What nations have been reached with the gospel? How long until the words of Jesus are fulfilled: “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14)?

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The Compass is the discipleship curriculum for Campus Crusade for Christ’s Campus Ministry. It was created by Centerfield Productions, the field based division of CruPress. We’d love to hear your feedback on this lesson. Please write us at centerfield@uscm.org

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