

Turning the World Upside Down

Acts 2:41–47

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Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when we remember and celebrate God's sending of the Holy Spirit upon the church gathered in Jerusalem, the day where the mission of the church to be the witnesses of Jesus and spread the gospel to the entire world began. It is astounding when we consider the impact this day has had upon history, so today we're going to spend some time investigating how this first group of believers began to turn the world upside down.

In Acts 1, Jesus had ascended to heaven after giving his approximately 120 followers the instruction to be his witnesses to the world, but telling them to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Then in Acts 2, we read that "*On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. ² Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. ³ Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴ And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*"

Now this wasn't just any day in Jerusalem, it was Pentecost, the Jewish festival that took place 50 days after Passover, and Jews from all over the world were present in Jerusalem. A crowd begins to gather because they are confused by all the commotion of the jumbling together of all kinds of different languages, and then they are astonished to see that the source of the noise are men and women from the backwater province of Galilee speaking a host of different languages about God's deeds of power, so that these Jews from all over the world are all hearing the gospel in their own native tongue. The cynics in the crowd simply write off these Galileans as being drunk (when was the last time you heard of a drunk person speaking a language they didn't know, let alone over 100 of them?)

Peter then steps forward to address the crowd and to explain that they are not drunk, but what they are witnessing is from God, the same God who raised from the dead, Jesus, whom they had crucified. Peter then gives the first altar call in history and 3000 people are added to the church that day. Talk about an assimilation problem! In a single day, the church goes from 120 to over 3000.

As we go on in the book of Acts the church continues to grow rapidly. The conclusion of Acts 2 tells us that as these first Christians met together, prayed, studied, and met each others needs, "each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved." By Acts 4, we are told that "the number of believers totaled about five thousand men, not counting women and children." Later in Acts 4, we read that the Jewish religious leaders are afraid to do anything to Peter and John because they fear that there are so many Jesus followers that it will cause a riot. In Acts 6 we read that the church's continued rapid growth is taking the Apostles away from their ministry of teaching and preaching, so the church begins to appoint individuals, called deacons, to ensure that all of the people have enough to eat. Later in the same chapter, we read that "God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too."

After a serious effort to eradicate the church begins with the stoning of Stephen, the church begins to flee out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, sharing the message of Jesus everywhere they go, and everywhere they go, more people are baptized and become followers of Jesus. As Acts continues onward, the gospel crosses over to the Gentiles, and through the efforts of Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others, Christian communities begin popping up all across

the Roman Empire, in Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Egypt, and North Africa, Macedonia, and even in Rome itself.

And as more and more people all across the empire become followers of Jesus, persecution intensifies because its growth threatens the religious, political, and economic foundations of the Roman Empire, yet the church continues to grow and grow and grow until it is so large that persecutions cease and Christianity is legalized, idols are cast down, and Jesus worship becomes the official religion of the Roman world. Today, over 2 billion people call themselves “Christian.”

It is amazing to think that when the sun rose on the day of Pentecost, there are only 120 followers of Jesus, and yet from these few spawns a movement that alters the course of history. So how is it that this handful of Jesus followers manages to turn the world upside down? How is it that the message of Jesus spreads in spite of persecution and martyrdom? How is it that the movement grows and become stronger instead of becoming weaker and more diluted as it is dispersed?

It seems almost unbelievable and unimaginable, that such a few people could have such a powerful impact upon the world around them. It can be easy for us to confine what they did to the pages of history, that such a thing couldn't possibly happen today, but 2000 years later the mission hasn't changed. Like these first followers of Jesus, we are called to be Christ's witnesses, to make disciples everywhere we go, to impact and transform the world in which we live.

Since we are on the same mission, I want us to take a few moments today and examine some of the things that seem to be keys to dynamic nature of this first church, because I believe that there are things we can learn and apply in our lives today and in the life of our church as we seek to fulfill the disciple-making mission in the twenty-first century.

The first thing we need to remember is that the growth and spread of the gospel is not a human endeavor. This should be freeing for those who find the sharing the good news with others intimidating. It should be freeing for those who are overwhelmed when we think about the size and scope of all the problems in the world, the sheer number of people who need to hear the good news about Jesus. The growth and spread of the gospel is performed by people, but it is the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost that enables these early followers of Jesus to do what they did. It is the Holy Spirit who enables them to proclaim the good news in a host of languages on the day of Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit who emboldens Peter, the same man who just weeks before had denied Jesus, to stand before the crowd and proclaim the news of what God had done. It is the Holy Spirit who enables the Apostles to perform miracles, signs, and wonders. We read elsewhere in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit is at work within the lives of believers shaping and transforming them into the image of Christ, helping in prayer, and giving the words to speak.

Jesus does not simply give his followers the task of being witnesses and making disciples, then says “good luck with that . . . I'll be back in a bit.” Jesus provides the Holy Spirit of God to enable his followers as they are faithful to proclaim the message and live out the gospel.

As we faithfully live out and proclaim the message of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is at work alongside of us, and we can have confidence even when we don't know what to say or do. Jesus has not left us to fulfill our mission alone.

Not only is the Holy Spirit at work in and around us as we seek to follow Jesus, but the message that we carry is compelling and powerful. It is easy to reduce the message about Jesus to “do this, that, and that, and don't do that or that.” But the good news about Jesus isn't

just a set of moral teachings. The good news about Jesus is that the Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead by God. The abundant and eternal life, the restored relationship with God that Jesus came to offer isn't just a fairy tale, it is reality, because death and the grave were conquered by the risen Christ. It is upon the reality of the resurrection that the church makes its stand, for without a risen Jesus, there is no good news. When we forget this fact, or fail to proclaim it, the gospel loses its power, hope, and authority and is reduced to just another way to live life, just another set of teachings.

The Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15: ¹² *But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead?* ¹³ *For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either.* ¹⁴ *And if Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless.* ¹⁵ *And we apostles would all be lying about God, for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave, but that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead.* ¹⁶ *If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised.* ¹⁷ *And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins.* ¹⁸ *In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished!* ¹⁹ *And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world. But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again.*¹

It is the resurrection of Jesus that gives Christianity credibility, that says that Christ has conquered sin and death, that new life is possible, that hope is real, that death is not the end, that God is making all things new just as he has said.

The message of Jesus is powerfully compelling good news that through the power of the Holy Spirit is capable of transforming lives. Proof of the compelling nature of the message of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, is the overwhelming response to the gospel throughout the book of Acts and down through history.

Further, the gospel message is doubly compelling when it is coupled with a community that is committed to not just talking about the gospel, but to living it out. In Acts we see that these early Christians are not just committed to the message of Jesus, they are committed to one another. Acts 2:41-47 tells us:

⁴¹ *Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church—about three thousand in all.* ⁴² *They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer.* ⁴³ *A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.* ⁴⁴ *And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had.* ⁴⁵ *They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need.* ⁴⁶ *They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.*²

These believers aren't simply seeking to proclaim the gospel and talk about Jesus, they are living it out and obeying everything that Jesus has taught the apostles. They are devoting themselves not just to the apostle's teachings, but to fellowship. They are devoted and committed to one another, such that they are meeting together each day. Their love for one another is so deep that those who have are sharing with those who do not. People are even selling what they have to make sure that everyone is cared for. The fact that no one in the community has any needs is attracting attention and drawing people into the community. It's

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:12-20: New Living Translation.

² Acts 2:41-47: New Living Translation

not that they are communists or socialists, or believe that riches and possessions are evil, but rather that they are so committed to loving one another as Christ has loved them that they are willing to do whatever it takes to meet every need.

One might say that they are as committed to each other as they are to Christ. Maybe one way to measure one's commitment to Christ is to measure one's commitment to their fellow believers. Jesus says that loving our neighbor is an expression of our love for God. John tells us that whoever loves God must love their brothers and sisters and that those who do not love their brothers and sisters do not really love God. So then the question falls to us . . . if we can measure our commitment to Christ by measuring our commitment to one another, how committed are we?

As I've studied and wrestled the book of Acts over the last several weeks, this truth keeps jumping out at me. When the church lives out the gospel, and loves people as much as it loves Christ, the world notices. And yet, many of us know people who have rejected Christianity and turned away from the church not because they rejected the gospel, but because their experience with church, their experience with Christians was less than positive, less than loving and compassionate, and their response to the gospel is, if that's what it looks like lived out, I don't want it.

The challenge for us is not to merely talk about and proclaim the gospel, but to put the gospel on display as we live it out. This is what these early followers of Jesus are doing, and people are so amazed that they are flocking to join the church in droves.

One last thing I want to note as we look at the rapid growth of the early church, is how they related to the world around them. Generally speaking they are viewed favorably, while they are sometimes viewed by those in authority as a threat to the status quo of religion/politics/economics, it doesn't appear to be because they are disrespectful or disparaging, but because living out the gospel is having an impact upon the society around them.

We find that in Acts 2, Luke says that the believers enjoyed the goodwill of all the people and in Acts 5, *"No one else dared join them, though everyone had high regard for them."*³ In Acts 19, Paul is in Ephesus, and the people of Ephesus are rioting because of the threat that Christianity poses to the worship of the goddess Artemis, which is the biggest industry in Ephesus.

The mayor addresses the crowd and says: *"Citizens of Ephesus," he said. "Everyone knows that Ephesus is the official guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, whose image fell down to us from heaven."*³⁶ *Since this is an indisputable fact, you shouldn't be disturbed, no matter what is said. Don't do anything rash.*³⁷ *You have brought these men here, but they have stolen nothing from the temple and have not spoken against our goddess.*³⁸ *If Demetrius and the craftsmen have a case against them, the courts are in session and the judges can take the case at once. Let them go through legal channels.*³⁹ *And if there are complaints about other matters, they can be settled in a legal assembly.*⁴

Note here that the mayor, judging by his position and his comments about Artemis, is not a Christian, and yet he says that Paul and the other believers haven't dishonored the temple of Artemis or even spoken against her! Further, in spite of the fact that religion and culture in the time the New Testament is being written is dominated by the worship of gods and goddesses from Greek and Roman mythology, and later the worship of the emperor, the New Testament makes no direct mention of them. Now there may be a practical reason for this, that if they had

³ Acts 5:13, New Living Translation

⁴ Acts 19:35-39, New Living Translation

taken on the Roman religious system directly, it would have meant major trouble, because to challenge Roman religion, was to challenge Roman politics, economics, and culture, and Rome didn't have a reputation of treating dissenters kindly.

Instead, what do Paul and the other apostles talk and write about? Jesus. Nothing but Jesus. Luke simply summarizes their message they were teaching everyday at the end of chapter 5 this way, "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus."

These early Christians are so convinced of the goodness of the gospel that they don't even waste their breath talking about anybody/thing else. Rather explaining the inadequacy and sinfulness of the worship of Artemis, Jupiter, fill in the blank, they're busy talking about Jesus. They aren't negative or condemning. They don't bash or belittle when they are addressing those outside the community of faith. They just want to talk about how great Jesus is. They are confident in the Holy Spirit and in the compelling and powerful nature of the gospel of hope, both as they proclaim it and as they live it out. They simply believe if they talk about Jesus and love other people that others will be flocking to join them.

The world is a bit different today than it was for these first followers of Jesus. We have the ability to communicate with people around the globe instantaneously via telephone, television, and internet. We can travel almost anywhere in the world in 24 hours. Here in America, we have financial resources and a standard of living unimaginable to them. We have the freedom to gather for worship and the freedom to speak all we want about Jesus without having to worry about whether people were going to come and arrest us or kill us. What would these earliest followers of Jesus say to us today? Like them, we have the Holy Spirit at work in and around us, the compelling and powerful message about the risen Christ to proclaim and to put on display.

I think they would say to us: You can do it. Finish the job. Have confidence in God in the Holy Spirit and in the powerful and compelling nature of the gospel. Proclaim the good news of our risen savior Jesus and live out the gospel by loving one another as much as you love Christ.