

The Purpose of the Church

Acts 1: 1-11

Pastor Bryan Clark

For whatever reason, churches seem to be notorious for falling in love with their programs and methodologies and being unwilling to change. One day they wake up and find they are both ineffective and irrelevant.

Leith Anderson, in his book *Dying for Change*, tells this story:

The Church was desperate. Years of decline had taken a painful toll. “What we need,” they said, “is a dynamic new pastor.”

A blue-ribbon search committee did everything right to find the perfect leader. He was young but experienced, serious but witty, articulate but not intimidating, spiritual but worldly-wise. If anyone could turn this problem-ridden congregation around, he was the man.

When the pastoral candidate first addressed the congregation, he gave an inspiring description of his qualifications, experience, vision, and plans. His final line summed up his stirring presentation: “With God’s help, I intend to lead this church forward into the nineteenth century!”

Surprised and embarrassed by the candidate’s apparent mistake, the chairman of the search committee whispered loudly, “You mean ‘the twentieth century’!”

To which the candidate replied, “We’re going to take this one century at a time!”

- from *Dying For Change* by Leith Anderson, (Bethany, 1990) p. 9.

There is great truth to that. According to national statistics, 80% of the churches in America are stagnant or declining. The average size of a church in America is around 70 people.

When I drive around the city, I am often reminded of the churches that were the thriving, dynamic, flagship churches in our city when I was a boy here in Lincoln. Many of them today have reduced themselves to only a handful of people. I am reminded that we have no guarantee of tomorrow. If we lose our way, if we lose our vision, we could be just a memory of what once was.

What does it mean to be a faithful church? There are many different philosophies regarding church. If we were to put them on a scale, one end of the scale is what I would call the “fortress church.” This is the church who believes their mission is to survive, to hunker down and keep the world out. They identify so closely with the church building that pretty much everything that happens, happens within the walls of the building. In essence the walls keep the world out. They tend to be very rigid; they tend to be very legalistic. They justify their dwindling numbers by believing they are the faithful remnant and everyone else is a compromiser. They look out at other churches that are thriving and are convinced they are thriving because they compromise. And they believe they are the one group who is true to the call.

As you are well aware, every weekend we pray for a different church in our city. A couple of years ago I received a letter from one church that I would put in the category of a fortress church, asking us to please stop praying for them. They were convinced that we were guilty of so much compromise they did not even want us praying for them. So we took them off the list.

At the other end of the scale from the fortress church would be the “chameleon church.” This is a church who instead of trying to keep the culture out just accommodates the culture. They become like whatever is happening in the culture. Their main value is: *We don’t want to upset anyone. We don’t want to ruffle any feathers. We want everybody happy.* They like to talk about the love of Jesus, but they never really proclaim the true message of salvation. They cease to be what God has called the Church to be.

Somewhere in the middle of all of that is the faithful church—the church that understands her mission. We are beginning a lengthy study of the Book of Acts. Our study will remind us: What is our calling as a church? What are we to be about and what does it mean to live out that truth on a daily basis?

The Book of Acts was written by Dr. Luke. Luke was a first-century physician. He was a Greek and highly educated. He was a dear friend of the Apostle Paul. We are not exactly sure when that friendship transpired. When you read through the Book of Acts, you find there are times when Luke was actually on a missionary trip with Paul. He refers to the group as *we*. Other times he is dealing with eyewitness accounts and, of course, the inspiration of the Spirit of God.

In 2 Timothy 4, where Paul is talking about his upcoming execution from a Roman prison cell, he makes the statement, “Only Luke remains with me.” Obviously Luke was a dear, loyal friend to the Apostle Paul right up to his moment of execution.

If I were to ask you which New Testament writer wrote the largest portion of the New Testament, who would you say? Most people would say, “Well, that’s easy; that is Paul.” But the answer is not Paul, but Luke. If you take the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other one writer.

In Acts 1:1, Luke says:

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach. (*NASB)

He makes reference to his first writing. It is helpful to go back and read the first couple of verses, in essence the introduction, of the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 1:1 he identifies his purpose in writing the first account.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke refers to Theophilus with the title “most excellent.” Most people think he must have been some high-ranking government official. Luke says that his purpose was to investigate the information and to write an exact account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Take that to Acts 1 and he again is writing to Theophilus, but his wording here is very carefully chosen.

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach. (Acts 1:1)

If you read the Gospel of Luke, you find that he wrote the story all the way through the ascension of Christ, but he did not claim that was the end of the story. He did not say, "I wrote to you to write the completed story." But rather, the terminology he uses is: "the beginning of the life and ministry of Jesus." In essence what he is implying is that the book to follow, the Book of Acts, is the ongoing, continuing story of the life and ministry of Jesus. Because Jesus rose from the dead, because Jesus ascended to the Father and sent His Spirit, His story continues. His story does not end in the Gospel. His story does not end in Acts. His story continues to unfold today, as Jesus through his Spirit, through the vehicle of His Church, continues to write His story day by day in our generation.

...until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. (Acts 1:2)

Jesus ascended to the Father. But before He ascended to the Father, He gave His leadership team, His apostles, their marching orders. That word "orders" is the word that would be used for military orders. It is a commander to a soldier. Jesus did not just disappear from the scene and the leadership team had to have a committee meeting and meet for months to try to figure out what they were supposed to be doing. Rather, Luke is saying that Jesus was very intentional in gathering them together and giving them exactly what it was He wanted them to be doing until He returned.

Again, it is helpful to read that from the Gospel of Luke:

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. "You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24: 44-49)

Then he records the ascension of Christ. In essence the marching orders were very simple and straightforward: "It is your assignment to proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to proclaim that those who repent and trust Jesus as Savior experience forgiveness of sin and eternal life." That is the mission of the Church. It can be worded in a variety of ways, but the essence of our calling is to take the message to the streets and to the world, that they might know there is a Savior who offers them life eternal.

To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)

It is very interesting that Jesus understood that in order for His leadership team, His disciples, to accomplish the mission they had to believe with all their heart that this message was true and that Jesus indeed had done what He said He would do. He had conquered sin and death and He lives again. This message is the life-changing message of the gospel.

Jesus understood, when He stood before these people, that He was not asking them, "Would you be willing to do this in your spare time as a hobby?" He was not asking them, "Would you be

willing to do this once a week and kind of play church together?” He understood that if they took up the call, the majority of the people standing before Him would eventually be executed for their faith. The reality is that almost every one of these people that Jesus is speaking to in the first chapter of Acts would ultimately die because of their commitment to the gospel.

Can you imagine what it would be like to stand before a group of people and convince them to take upon themselves this mission, knowing that ultimately it would cost them their lives? The only way they would be willing to do that is if they believed with all their heart that this is true and that this is not just information. This is the life-changing power of Jesus Christ that offers a dying world hope forever. They had to believe that. Luke says that Jesus offered them many convincing proofs. The Greek actually means “beyond any doubt.” He convinced them absolutely that the message was true.

A lot of religious leaders make wild claims, and years later their followers will recite those—but nobody really knows if those things took place or not. Jesus was not like that. He made the most remarkable claim that He not only would be crucified for sin but He would be buried and would rise again. For forty days after the resurrection, Jesus spent time with the people convincing them that what He said was absolutely true, so that they would not have the slightest doubt that Jesus indeed won the victory over sin and death.

Let me ask you a question: Do you really believe this? Do you really believe that this is the life-changing, all-powerful message of the gospel? It is not just religious information. It is life-altering. It is the only hope for a lost and despairing world. If we believe that with all of our hearts, why would we not shout it from the rooftops? Why would we not be compelled to tell anyone who would possibly listen to this magnificent message of hope? The reality is that deep in our heart, what fuels our passion is a belief that this message is true and life-changing.

Kent Hughes, in his commentary on Acts, tells this story.

When George Whitefield was getting the people of Edinburgh out of their beds at 5 o’clock in the morning to hear his preaching, a man on his way to the church met David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic. Surprised at seeing him on his way to hear Whitefield, the man said, “I thought you did not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I do not, but *he does*.”

- Clarence Edward Macartney in “Exposition of Holy Scripture” Volume 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), p. 228 as quoted in *Acts*, by R. Kent Hughes (Crossway, 1996) p. 17.

What he was saying is that Whitfield’s passion and belief was so evident that it compelled him to listen to what he had to say.

One of the most effective means of accomplishing the mission is that people can sense our passionate belief—that we really do believe this. I am not interested in whether my neighbors do or don’t. *I* believe it and that fuels my passion to proclaim the message. That is exactly what Luke is talking about here.

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (vs. 4-5)

I am sure once the disciples heard these words, they believed they were called. They were fired up and ready to go. Jesus had to say to them, “Now, hold it a second. You need to just slow

down and wait. I will give you what you need and what I promised you in order to accomplish the mission I have given you.”

If I were a first-century reporter tracking the life and ministry of Jesus, at this point in the process I would have pulled Jesus aside and said, “You know, Jesus, I really appreciate what You are trying to do here but Your strategy is greatly flawed. You will never pull this off with this group of people.” The reason I would say that is that 43 days earlier they had their first major test and they failed miserably. They could not have failed the test any more miserably. This is not 43 years later. This is 43 *days* later. Nobody changes in 43 days.

When Jesus was with them in the upper room, they promised that no matter what, they would be loyal. No matter what, they would stay true to the cause. If necessary they would die with Jesus. And yet, just a matter of hours later when Jesus was arrested, they scattered and hid like cowards. Frankly, they probably had been hiding ever since. Now Jesus is telling them He wants them to take this message to the streets and change the world. I, as a bystander, am saying to Jesus, “This is not going to work.”

Jesus understood that of course, and that is why He told them to wait. “What is going to make the difference is what I promised you. When I ascend to the Father, I am going to send back My Spirit and My Spirit is going to immerse you. My Spirit is going to clothe you. My Spirit is going to change you and give you the power that you need to accomplish the mission.”

Notice the text says, “As John was baptizing with water, they would be baptized with the Spirit.” The Spirit is not the agent; the Spirit is the substance. They would be immersed in the Spirit. In Luke 24 He said, “clothed in the Spirit.” Jesus was telling them, “The Spirit will take over and give you what you need to accomplish this mission. It is not enough just to understand the assignment. It is not enough just to believe it. You have to be surrendered to the power of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish it.”

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6)

This is a recurring question. We would say this is a soapbox issue for these disciples; it is a big deal. When you read through the Gospels this comes up over and over and over again. They understood enough of the Old Testament to understand that one day Israel would be united and Jesus would reign as their King. They believed that when the Messiah showed up on the scene the Messiah would re-establish them as a nation, He would reign, and they would live like they did under the reign of David. They longed for that day. That was their priority. That was their soapbox issue. So throughout the ministry of Jesus they kept asking, “Is it time yet?” That is what Palm Sunday was all about.

Now Jesus is giving them their marching orders and telling them what He wants them to do, but they can’t let go of this thing. This is still front and center, and one more time they say, “Is this the time that You are going to set up an earthly kingdom and we will have our nation again and we will rule and reign?” What does Jesus say to them?

He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs [*seasons*] which the Father has fixed by His own authority...” (v. 7)

In essence what Jesus is saying is: “You know, men, I know this is a big deal. I know you keep bringing this up. I know this is something you are stuck on. But I am asking you to give it up—

to lay it down and let it go. That is not the point.”

Jesus understands that for them to be faithful to the mission they have got to understand this issue they cannot seem to get over; it has got to be laid aside. “Let God worry about that. God, in His timing, will take care of that. For now, that is not the mission, so let it go. Give it up, men, and focus on what I have called you to do.”

“...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (v. 8)

Jesus says, “Men, that isn’t the point. That isn’t the issue. Would you just let that go? Here is what I want you to do. I want you empowered by My Spirit.” The word “power” is the Greek word from which we get our word dynamite. It is an explosive power of the Spirit. “You will be my witnesses.” The word “witnesses” is the word from which we get our word martyr. “You will be my witnesses. You will be so committed to Me, some of you will give your lives for Me. I want you to take this message to Jerusalem. I want you to take it to Judea and Samaria. I want you to take it to every corner of the earth. That is your assignment.”

I appreciate the question that the disciples asked from the standpoint that I find myself to be very much like them. Frankly, we all tend to be very much like them. We have those issues upon which we get stuck—little theological soapboxes, little issues about programming and changes and the way things used to be. “I like this and I don’t like that”...this worship style and that worship style. We tend to just get stuck there. Because we are stuck we tend to justify sitting on the sidelines and watching the mission accomplished.

Stop and think about that. Someday you will stand before God and give an account of your life, telling Him why you chose to sit it out on earth. “It is because they changed the program. It is because I did not like the way they ran this. I didn’t like this and I didn’t like that.” Are you anticipating Jesus is going to say, “I understand. That is okay. I wasn’t crazy about that program either”? You can picture Jesus looking you in the eye and saying, “That wasn’t the point. I don’t care about those programs and methods and all that stuff. I don’t care about all those theological soapboxes you people get on. I gave you an assignment. The assignment was to take the life-changing message of Jesus to the streets and around the world. That is what I wanted you to do.”

It is easy to get stuck. I will grant you the changes we make are not always for the best. We don’t always run the greatest programming. Fine...we are fallible; I understand that. If I were sitting in your seat, I would probably think the same thing: *I wouldn’t do things that way and I would probably do this a little differently.* Fine...let’s make a note of that and then give it up. Get over it. Get past it. Do you understand the people you work with, your friends and neighbors are lost and going to hell? You have the assignment to proclaim the life-changing message of Jesus. That is the mission. Don’t get stuck with your own stuff that in the end really isn’t very relevant.

Several years ago, three of us senior pastors in town decided that it is unacceptable that the evangelical church in Lincoln cannot get along. So we began to meet together. We made a covenant that we would do everything in our power to help one another’s church thrive. We pray for one another. We help one another. Today there are eight in that group. We meet monthly. We love each other. We pray for one another. I would do anything in my power to help one of those churches thrive. We have theological issues that we disagree on. We have

charismatics, we have Presbyterians, we have Southern Baptists, and we have the Christian church. We have quite a lineup of churches, and we understand there are areas where we disagree. But we are not going to get hung up on those issues. We are going to lift arms and be about the mission of the Church because that is what matters to Jesus. I know there are those who have all these hang-ups about para-church organizations but frankly, if you have trusted Jesus as Savior, you *are* the Church. If you are helping with the mission we are happy to lift arms with you and accomplish what God has called us to do. That is the mission of the Church.

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (vs. 9-11)

In these 40 days, Jesus would come and go. It is very important at this point to understand this is not just another coming and going. This is the promised ascension when Jesus said He would go to His Father and He would send back His Spirit to empower them to accomplish the mission. It is a very dramatic moment, as Jesus is literally ascending into the heavens and into the clouds.

As they are staring into the clouds, two angels show up and say, “Men, why are you standing there staring into the sky? You have a job to do.” It is interesting that they said, “And by the way, Jesus will come back in just the same way as you have seen Him go.” What is being said in that is: “This is the ascension. There will come a return. In between there, you have your assignment. Wait for the Spirit and get with it.”

As far as I know, Jesus has not yet returned—unless I missed something. Therefore, we are still on assignment to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to every corner of the earth. That is the essence of what we are about as a church. We aren’t about programs. We aren’t about methods. I think most of the time God works in spite of those things. God blesses those who are focused on His mission, who are surrendered to His Spirit and are desirous of accomplishing what He has called us to do.

I want to ask you this morning: Do you understand that? Do you understand what the mission is? Do you believe with all your heart that this is true and that this is not just religious information—that this is life itself? This is the essence of everything that will last for eternity.

The past week we have watched with horror at the devastation down South from the hurricane. It is overwhelming. But do you realize the plights of your friends and neighbors for all eternity will make that look like a walk in the park if they do not know Jesus. If we could take a fraction of the passion that is often aroused through pictures of that suffering and pour it into the proclamation of the gospel, we would change the world.

A year and a half ago we introduced to you in the Purpose Campaign the four initiatives we believe God is calling us to accomplish in order to fulfill the mission. Having gone through the first eleven verses of Acts, it is fair to go back to those and say, “Are we on track? Are those in alignment?” If you can identify one of those that is not in alignment, that one must go. Let’s think about that for a minute.

We talked about building a new auditorium and a youth complex in order to strengthen the base, in order to continue to reach our community. We will have a place for people to come in; they

will be built up in their faith and then they will go out and reach more people. It is a process of multiplication: They come in, they get built up in their faith, and they go out and reach more people. About twenty years ago a philosophy was articulated that is still embraced today: *You have to strengthen the base to lengthen the outreach.* That philosophy has been tested many times and it has been demonstrated to be on track.

The second thing is a church plant in north Lincoln. This morning is the last morning that the North Pointe people are with us. In just a few moments we will commission them to planting a church in north Lincoln. Why? Because we want to take the life-changing message of the gospel to north Lincoln to have a more effective witness there. Hopefully this will be the first of many such church plants in our community.

We talked about a Christian leadership college so we could be more effective and efficient in raising up people who are called to vocational service, that they might be trained and equipped to have this focus of the mission and then be spread out to multiply the church in our region and beyond.

Finally, we talked about planting 100 churches in India. Not just 100 believers but *churches* that would multiply more churches to effectively accomplish in India what we are seeking to accomplish here. I ask you: Do those four initiatives seem to be in alignment with Acts 1:1-11?

Over the last year and a half, I have tried with all my energy to persuade you to get on board, to say, “Yes, it is for this purpose that I will live.” I have asked you to get on board financially, to get on board prayerfully, and to get on board with your service. I have asked you to ultimately say with your life, “Yes, it is for this purpose that I will live because I understand this is the mission.” I have sought to persuade you to get on board because I believe this is in alignment with what God has said the Church is to be about.

I will tell you in the months to come I am going to continue to give it everything I have to convince you to get on board, because I believe this is what God has called the Church to do and to be. It is not to run a bunch of programs. It is not to have a bunch of methods. It is to reach lost people; to build them up in Christ so they may reach more people with the life-changing message of the gospel.

I believe that the Church is unstoppable. Jesus said, “I will build My Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Local churches come and go. But the Church of Jesus Christ will ultimately triumph. The Church is unstoppable. The only question for us is whether or not we as a local church will be a part of what God is doing in our generation.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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Study Questions

The Unstoppable Church: A Study in the Book of Acts

The Purpose of the Church

Acts 1:1-11

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What do you think of when you hear the word “church”?
2. What defines an *effective* church and what defines a *dying* church?
3. What is the biblical purpose of the Church?

Do most churches really understand their purpose? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. Read Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-11. What is the significance to the church today of the statement “...all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” in Acts 1:1?
2. According to 1:1-5 and Luke 24:13-53, what did Jesus do with His leadership team before He ascended?
3. What is the purpose of the Church according to Acts 1:7, 8?

What did Jesus mean by “My witnesses”?

What does it mean in practical terms to live for this purpose?

4. What did Jesus believe was necessary for His Church to fulfill her purpose according to Acts 1:1-8?

What are the essential ingredients in order for the Church to be faithful?

5. Why was it important that Jesus ascend to the Father according to Acts 1:9-11; John 14:16-18, 26; 16:7-15 and Ephesians 1:15-23?
6. Write a one sentence summary of the mission of the Church and how the Church is to accomplish that mission according to Acts 1:1-11.

Application

1. What do you personally need to be doing to fulfill your calling as a member of the Church?
2. Choose one specific area you need to address in your life to be a better “witness” of Jesus.
How can you grow in this area?
3. What do you consider to be the greatest potential barrier to Lincoln Berean Church doing her part to accomplish our purpose?

How do we prevent this from happening?