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*The Unstoppable Church*  
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**Review Acts 1-14**  
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I am sure you are well aware that this weekend is the beginning of the football season; college and high school. Over the next several months lots of opinions will be shared on what the right way to run a football team is—this offense and that offense, this defense and that defense. The reality is there is not just one way to run a football team. There isn't just one offense or one defense. It is a lot more complicated than that, and there are lots of different ways to do it. The bottom line is that whoever gets the most points on the scoreboard wins. It just comes down to that.

The same thing is true in church. There are a lot of people with a lot of opinions on exactly how church should be done as if there is one biblical model and that is exactly the way it should be done. But that really is not true. There are core doctrines that the church has to believe. There is a central mission that certainly defines the church. There are certain core values but there are lots of different ways to *do* church. If you travel around the world, you find that church looks very differently in different countries of the world. The bottom line is accomplishing the mission that God has given us to accomplish.

The reality is there is nothing new under the sun. The seeker movement was not new. The house church movement is not new. If you study church history, all of these things have been done before and the church just looked different at different times and different places.

Last fall, we started a study in the book of Acts and went through the first fourteen chapters. We reminded ourselves that that is really the record of the church from its birth and infancy all the way through a growing process that actually continues to this day. A lot of people like to go into the book of Acts and take a certain point of time, or in essence a snapshot and say, "That is what God intended the church to look like." But it is really nothing more than that. It is a snapshot in a point in time. The church was constantly in a state of change. That would be like me going back to a snapshot of me when I was ten years old. You think, *That is the way Bryan is supposed to look*. No, that is just the way I looked when I was ten years old. That is not how I have looked my whole life. The church is the same way. As you go through Acts, you realize it is constantly changing and evolving in order to be effective in accomplishing the mission that God has given all of us.

Last year we went through chapter 14, and we took a break at Easter. This morning we are going to do a quick review of where we have been. Next week we pick it up in chapter 15. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Acts 1. We are not going to have time to read a lot of this but we will just hit some of the highlights and get ourselves back to thinking about Acts.

If you go to the end of the gospels, Dr. Luke wrote the book of Acts and he also wrote the Gospel of Luke. If you go to the end of the Gospel of Matthew, there are clear statements that Jesus gave His apostles their marching orders. They would become the leaders of the New Testament church. It is not really complicated. Jesus said that their responsibility, their mission, was to proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and that they would go and make disciples of all nations. That is really what it boiled down to.

In Acts 1, Luke picked up on that. I do want to read the first eight verses because they really set the tone, not only for the book of Acts but actually for the rest of the New Testament.

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

It is an interesting statement. He is saying that when he recorded the Gospel of Luke, it was the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. What he is implying by that is that the book of Acts is the ongoing ministry of Jesus and of course that continues to unfold even today.

**...until the day when He was taken up to heaven, and after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. [Those were their marching orders.] 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. 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.” So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 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.” (vs. 2-8)**

There are several things there that I want to highlight. One is in verse 3 when it says that He appeared to His disciples and offered them many convincing proofs. We talked about the fact that Jesus was not asking these men to do this as a hobby. It was not a once-a-week commitment. He was asking them to lay down their lives. He knew this would be costly. We know for sure from history that at least ten of the eleven men were executed for their faith and the eleventh one was exiled to an island. Jesus knew He was calling them to die for this mission. The only way that would happen is if they were convinced it was really true, that what Jesus had promised was true—that He died for their sins, He was buried and He rose again.

So for forty days, He offered them convincing proof, and of course the ultimate proof was that He was with them. He was no longer dead. He appeared to them. He appeared to over 500 people at one time. He was giving them their marching orders and telling them what they needed to be about. This is a reoccurring theme in Acts.

In the first half of Acts, we saw this over and over again. There was a high level of emphasis on the historical details of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. There were people who lived in the lifetime of Jesus. There were people who lived in Jerusalem. They could easily go back to the tomb and see if it was empty or not. There were eye witnesses to the crucifixion. Many of these were the eye witnesses to the resurrected Christ.

The message of the gospel was proclaimed in the first century—that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and rose again and He was alive today. If there was ever a group of people in the history of the world that would ever have not believed, it would have been the people in the first century. They had every opportunity to disprove this message if it indeed was not historically true.

But what happened was the opposite. People by the thousands came to know Jesus as Savior. The reason there was such a tremendous movement was because these people were right there. They had witnessed the resurrected Christ. They knew people who had seen Him alive. They checked the tomb and it was empty. They knew He died, and so thousands upon thousands of people

immediately came to Christ, which reminds us that the message of the gospel is true and that is the theme throughout the first part of Acts especially.

It is interesting that Jesus tells them to wait. He says the same thing in the Gospel of Luke in the final chapter. He gives them their marching orders and He gets them all revved up but He says, “You have to wait. You have to wait, in essence, because you are not adequate for the task. You have to wait until the Spirit comes and the very presence of Jesus Himself will dwell within you and will empower you to fulfill your calling. But until He comes, you cannot do anything. You just have to wait.” It reminds us that it is only the power of Jesus that makes us adequate for this calling. I think we all feel the inadequacies within ourselves and the reality is that we are all inadequate. That is accurate, but He has given us His Spirit, and the Spirit empowers us to be a part of changing the world.

In verse 6, the disciples ask a distracting question. **“Is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom?”** It is a fair question but Jesus’ answer is, “You let me worry about that. It is really not your problem to worry about those things, but this is what I want you to be about.”

It is a reminder that it is very easy to get distracted with secondary things or things that are not really related to the mission that God has given us. Sometimes in getting distracted, we fail to accomplish what God has given us to do. Those words are important to remember. This is the mission, and these are the marching orders. This is what we need to be about. Let’s not get distracted with a lot of other things that creep into our lives.

Then in verse 8 He tells them that the Spirit will come. It is still future in that moment. He tells them that the Spirit will empower them to spread this message to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the entire world. In essence, Jesus is saying, “I am calling you to a mission to change the world.”

It is very interesting starting in verse 12 that Luke takes the time to name the remaining eleven apostles. Of course, Judas is gone. What is interesting about that is that Luke is known for his brevity of words and you really have to question why he took up such a chunk to record the names of people. Everybody knew who they were. If you read the gospels they are listed there. Everybody in the first century knew who they were. There was really no need to list them other than he was trying to make a very important theological point. That is that these men whom God was going to call to change the world were not superstars.

As a matter of fact, if you were a newspaper reporter and you were reporting this, you would probably pull Jesus aside and say, “Are you aware of the fact that 40 days ago, every one of these men failed miserably to stand with you in your hour of need. There is no way you are going to change the world with these guys. These are a bunch of losers and misfits.”

But the reality is that once they were empowered by the Spirit of God, they were radically changed to accomplish the mission. That is part of the story of Acts as God uses the most unimaginable people to change His world. That is exactly what He is going to do through these men. As a matter of fact, the fact that the church is thriving around the world today tells us that they were highly effective and successful in their mission because they were indeed empowered by the very presence of God Himself.

In verse 14 it says, **“These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer...”** What is interesting about that is that if you go back through the list of the eleven remaining apostles, they were very different. As a matter of fact, in the ordinary everyday stuff of life, they would have been men who were in tension and conflict with one another. There was really

no way you could have brought this group of people together and had them operate in unity if it was not for the Spirit of God. But what caused them to be unified was just what it says here. They were of one mind. In other words, they were willing to set their own differences and their own opinions aside and have the mind of Christ. They were united with one Spirit. And even though they were not alike, even though they had lots of different opinions, they came together with the fact that they had been given a job to do. They needed to come together with the mind of Christ and accomplish that.

The church is filled with very diverse people with lots of opinions and lots of ideas on how things should be done. What unites us is not that we sit around in focus groups and try to always work out our differences. What unites us is the mission that God has given us. Understanding that we do have differences, and we do not always see things the same way—but we have been given a mission. We have to have the mind of Christ, united by the Spirit of God, to accomplish that which we have been given to do. That has to be what unites us together as the people of God.

Of course, this does not just apply to our local church. It is an understanding that we are just one expression of the church in our city. We would never imagine that we are the most effective church, the most important church or the best church. We are just one of the churches in the city of Lincoln. It is very important that we understand we are in this together with the other evangelicals, the other churches that name the name of Jesus within our community to accomplish the mission.

This past Easter many of you know that we did a commercial to try to communicate to our community that we are the church of Jesus Christ and we are in this together. If you didn't happen to see it, it looked like this.

*We come from different congregations in Lincoln. Still we are one church, affirming together our belief in the life-changing power of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior. We are pastors...we are friends...and we are in this together.*

It is very important that we do not view other churches in town as our competitors. They are our partners in ministry. I have said over and over again, I will do anything in my power to help any of those churches grow and be effective because we are in this together to accomplish the mission that Jesus has given us. We do not always agree on everything, especially in some of the secondary issues, but we are united on the core doctrines that define our faith and we serve together.

In Acts 2, you move to the day of Pentecost, the promised day when the Holy Spirit came upon them in a magnificent fashion. Pentecost was fifty days from the resurrection of Jesus. As a matter of fact, it was an event so spectacular that God includes some over-the-top special effects with a rushing wind and flames of fire and smoke. It is a magnificent event meant to communicate that something very new and special had occurred—that the promised Holy Spirit had come upon them. It was evidenced by the miraculous speaking in tongues. In chapter 2, Luke even lists the different languages represented at Pentecost, which is reminding us that Jesus said, “Hey this mission is not just for Jerusalem but Judea, Samaria and around the world. Pentecost reflected that by having these different languages and these different nations represented, that this would now be this magnificent new thing called the church.

It really is quite a spectacular thought when you think about it that the very presence of God Himself, the presence of Jesus Himself, would not just come visit us but would actually live within us, would dwell within us and would pull us together as the people of God. We are a supernatural gathering of people. It is very important to remember that we are not just another group. We are not just another club. We are not just another organization. This is a supernaturally-charged gathering

of the people of God called His church. If that is true, then there should be a radical difference in the people of God and how we live and what we are about.

The gathering was so confusing to the onlookers, that they thought that people might be drunk so Peter steps up and delivers his sermon at Pentecost. He goes back through the Old Testament and unpacks God's promises and that this is the fulfillment of what God had said. That is the first of what we will see as the theme throughout the book of Acts and that is these recorded sermons that go back into the Old Testament and unpack what is happening, what the church is, and how it is the fulfillment of God's plan.

One of the things that reminds us of is that the teaching of truth, the teaching of the Scriptures, was always front and center in the church. It was what defined their mission. It is what defined the core doctrines. It was very important that they not lose their way somewhere along the path, and so the teaching of truth in the book of Acts is always front and center.

When Paul is writing to Timothy in I Timothy 3:15, he says, "The church is the foundation and the pillar of the truth." In other words, we are the guardians of the truth. If we don't guard it, nobody will. The culture is always going to try and marginalize it. It is always going to try to minimize the significance of the Scripture and truth, and the church has been given the mandate to be the guardians and the proclaimers of that which is true. So the Scriptures always have to be front and center as they guide us along our way.

In Acts 2:41, there is a reminder that those who received Peter's word were baptized. This again is a common theme throughout Acts that people believed and were baptized. There was this sense that believing was an internal private decision, but baptism was a public declaration that I am now a Christ follower. It was a very important part of their movement.

I am sure there are some of you who have trusted Jesus as Savior, but you have never been baptized. You have never made a public declaration that you are a follower of Jesus. What a great way to start this second half of Acts to take a step of obedience and identify yourself as a follower of Jesus. We do have a Baptism Service coming in two weeks. If you would like to be part of that, we would urge you to prayerfully consider that. You can get more information from the Worship and Arts booth, but we would certainly encourage you to be a part of that if you have never been baptized.

In the last part of verse 41, it says,

**And that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship [which is the community of the saints], to the breaking of bread [which is worship] and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.** (vs. 41-43a, 47b)

There are several things here. One is just the reality of the awesome presence of God. God was doing a significant work in the lives of these people so that thousands and thousands and thousands of them in these first months were coming to faith in Christ, being baptized and becoming a part of the body of Christ.

In verse 43, "**Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.**" How could they not feel a sense of awe? It was the very presence of God within them, and God was doing something magnificent and thousands of people were coming to faith in Christ. There was a sense of excitement as the movement of the church was gaining ground.

Statistics today show that 70% of churches in America are stagnant or declining. You really have to ask the questions, “How could that be? How can that be when the mission is so clear? When we have been empowered by the very presence of God, how could we as a church not have a sense of awe? How could there not be a sense of God’s presence? How could there not be something significant happening?” That does not make any sense. There needs to be a sense that God is here. God is here, we have a job to do and we need to be about it. God is going to do something special among us because that is who God is.

It is interesting throughout the book of Acts how many times we are told that three thousand people responded and two thousand people responded or five thousand people responded. People would say about Dr. Luke, “He is just about numbers.” That is one of the things that we hear all the time. “You Bereans are just about numbers.”

Okay I will be the first one to tell you in some ways that is exactly right because every number represents someone who will spend eternity somewhere. Would I love to see that new auditorium packed with 10,000 people? I absolutely would. That is 10,000 people whose lives have been radically changed by the gospel of Jesus, and they are heading to heaven rather than hell. That is what God wants. Every number represents a person that will spend eternity somewhere.

It is not possible for a church to be faithful without aggressively proclaiming the message and reaching new people and discipling them to be like Jesus, so that they can reach other people. When you boil it down to its simplest terms that is what we are about. We are not about running programs. We are not about methodologies. We are not about some sort of a club for Christians. We are about the mission—that means reaching people. That means more people and that means trying to accommodate space for more people to gather as the people of God. That is the only reason we built this building, the new auditorium, because we want to reach more people because God wants to reach more people. That is His heartbeat. Buildings are nothing more than tools for ministry, and as God provides the tools He will be faithful to continue to allow us to reach more people because that is His heart. That is His mission.

Every time I go through that auditorium and I look at what will be all those seats, the only thing that runs through my head is that the only reason God would give us such a tool for ministry is because He plans to fill those seats with people who need to know Jesus. Those are people who today walk in darkness. These are the people who live next door. These are the people who you work with. These are the members of your family that over the months ahead are going to come to know Christ, fill those seats and become worshipers of God. That is an expression of the mission of the church.

When you read through the first three chapters of Acts, it is pretty spectacular. It could give you the impression that this is a ride on the love boat, but starting in chapter 4, all of that begins to change. The persecution begins to set in and we are reminded that we have an enemy that wants to stop this mission, and that becomes very evident. As a matter of fact, from Acts 4 to the last chapter, chapter 28, there will only be three books in the book of Acts that will not include persecution. So that is a major theme in the book of Acts—that this is war. This is not a cruise on the love boat. This is a battleship, and this is all out war to accomplish the mission of Jesus Christ. Persecution has always been a part of the life of the church.

Just because we, in the United States, do not experience persecution, do not let that lull you to sleep. Today there will be Christians all over the world who will be thrown in prison. Some will be executed because of their faith. The reality is that in places like China and the Middle East it is a real part of the life of the church on a daily basis. We have reminded ourselves before that more Christians died for their faith, were martyred for their faith, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than the previous 19

centuries combined. The reality is the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a bloodbath for the church. We need to remember these are our brothers and sisters in Christ. One day we are going to stand with them shoulder to shoulder, and we are going to know the price they paid to accomplish the mission. What will we tell them was the cost for us to follow Jesus? What is the price that we pay compared to the price that these people are willing to pay?

Persecution was a significant part of the church in the first century. In chapter 4 Peter and John are arrested and what actually happens is that, rather than discouraging the church, it throws fuel on the fire and the church just explodes all the more. The enemy tried to destroy the church from the outside. That did not work.

Chapter 5 tries a different strategy and tries to destroy the church from the inside through Ananias and Sapphira, through their hypocrisy and their lies. God had to deal with them. They were disciplined and put to death by God. Then the chapter goes on to talk about more persecution and life in prison.

The one verse I want to point out is Act 5:39. The religious leaders have Peter, John and the apostles in prison. They are grilling them and then they are trying to think of what they need to do to them. Gamaliel, one of their leaders, makes this statement, **“But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.”** That is a remarkable statement. If the church is something from God, there is no way to stop it. That is why we call it the unstoppable church.

In places in our world today such as China, every effort to stop it only causes it to explode all the more because it is of God. When we give ourselves to the mission of the church, when we give ourselves to what God is doing, we are guaranteed this is a mission that will ultimately triumph. We are a part of something that ultimately will win the day because it is of God.

There is also a reminder in this that even though we do not always agree with other people’s methodologies or the way they are doing things, we need to be very careful that we do not find ourselves fighting against God. The reality is that God can accomplish His mission through whoever He wants and however He wants. If God is doing a work, we need to celebrate that, even if it is not exactly the same way we would do it. That is equally true within a local church. We may not always run the programs we think we should. We may not always make the decisions you think we should make, but I do not think there is any question that God is doing something here, and God is changing people’s lives. Be very careful that you do not find yourself fighting against what God is doing, or you end up fighting God Himself. I am sure none of us want that.

In chapter 6 there was a reminder that the church needs to be organized in order to be effective. We don’t need a lot of bureaucracy. We don’t want to get in the way of what God is doing. We just want to be as effective and efficient as possible. The church is not a bunch of individuals scattered in a community all doing their own thing. The church is a body and we are all members of a body. We function together in unity and in an organized fashion.

In Acts 6:7 is the theme. **“The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem.”** Again, you have that reminder that the church is growing and expanding. God is doing a significant work.

In chapter 7 is the stoning of Stephen. Stephen delivers this lengthy sermon right before he is stoned. And our conclusion was that as Stephen talked to these religious leaders who had reduced God down to religious rituals, traditions, programs and doctrines that what Stephen was saying is

that you cannot do that to God. Go back through the Old Testament history. God has never been predictable. They have never been able to put God in a box. God is constantly doing the unexpected. He is doing the unimaginable through unimaginable people. God has always accomplished His mission *His* way according to *His* purpose. You just cannot reduce God down to programs and methods. You just cannot put Him in a box and define Him that way.

One of the great examples of that is in the story of the stoning of Stephen. You get a glimpse of Saul. The coats of the executioners had been thrown at his feet. The statement was that Saul was in hearty agreement with what was done. Now really, who in their right mind in that group that day would have ever imagined that Saul would become a believer in Jesus and become the greatest missionary in the history of the church? But that is exactly the point Stephen was making. God uses people no one would expect and does things no one could have anticipated because that is always how God has operated because He is God.

We have to be very careful as a church that we do not fall in love with our programs, with our methods, or with our traditions and end up boxing God in. I don't know what God wants to do. I do not know what the next five years are going to look like. We have to be willing to approach it with open, soft hearts and say, "God, whatever You want to do, however You want to accomplish the mission, we just want to be faithful." I don't know if things will look the same way five years from now or not. God is free to accomplish the mission however He deems best in our community and around the world.

In chapter 8, in the first part of the chapter, we are told that Saul was busy about his business of persecuting the church. He was imprisoning Christians and probably executing Christians. The effect of that was that the church was scattered. It is really the first church planting movement, as the church was literally forced out of Jerusalem and into Judea, Samaria and around the world.

Our expression of that in the last year, of that heart for church planting to accomplish the mission happened in two ways. One was that a number of families from this church went downtown to start Abiding Grace church that started last January. The pastor is Evan Brown. I just talked to Evan this past week. He said they are doing great. They have been meeting at 27<sup>th</sup> and O. They have just moved down to the Malone Center. The church continues to grow. They continue to see new believers come through the door. He says that it is all very exciting, and we are very encouraged by that.

Another expression was that a year ago this month was the planting of North Pointe Community Church. We hived off a couple of hundred people from this church to plant a church in north Lincoln. I just had lunch with Dick and Andy this week. They are very excited. The last two weeks they have averaged 320 people. The giving is very solid. As of this month, they are completely self-sufficient and self-funding. They are a sister church in town. They have been able to purchase fifteen acres of land right behind the Saturn dealership off Superior, which is a great location for them.

God is clearly doing a work in north Lincoln but again it all comes down to the lives of people being changed. That was the driving reason for planting a church. There were people in north Lincoln who needed to know Jesus and we think it is going to be more effective if there is a presence up there in that neighborhood. We thought you might want to hear the story of one person's life that has been changed. Listen to the story of Darin.

*Darin:* I am an electrician and we are some pretty hard-core cats. This guy, Dave, started there and he started playing some K-Love and listening to 88.5. He says a prayer in the morning before we

get going, and he says a prayer at lunch before he eats his meal. I thought it was all really weak until I saw how the guy worked, and man he was hard-core. He killed himself to get a job done. He was like a 3-man working crew.

I started looking at how he lived his life, how he related to my boss, and how he was really family-oriented. Just everything in his life seemed to have so much more depth than what I was used to seeing in other people. I thought maybe there was something to how this guy is living. I started asking questions about it.

My whole life I have lived to see what I could get or how I could be accepted by somebody or become successful. I have lived my life for myself. Dave said God created all of us and if it is true that He created us, I am sure it is for something more than what I have been living for.

The things that I talked to Dave about, the lyrics that I heard in the songs, and the stuff I heard on 88.5, really got me to thinking on a deeper level and asking him a lot of questions. It made me wonder if there is really something to this.

One night I went home and I prayed, "God if you are real, show Yourself to me. I need to know You on a personal level." Sure enough He did. With the people I ran with, it was really cool to see how outlandish and wild and crazy you could be.

I had this one buddy who believed in Christ too. He told me I needed to be part of a church. I argued with him about it, and he told me not to do drugs, not to have sex outside of marriage and not to do all these things. I argued with him all the time and he kept bringing up this church issue and how I needed to get into a church. I told him, "I've got 88.5 and K-Love that this guy turned me on to at work, so why do I need all that other stuff." And he said, "That is great but how can you contribute to that?"

That got me thinking, so I asked God in the same way, "If You want me to be a part of church, I need to know that it is You that wants me to be there. There is no sense in me going and wasting my time." So I went to a church and it was really evident to me that that was not the place for me. They kind of let me know that I did not belong there, so I ended up at North Pointe.

I remember telling somebody there that you can really feel the Holy Spirit in this place. It was like everybody was a friendly family. It does not seem like a bunch of believers getting together telling you how bad you are and what you need to change. It is more that we are all just relating what we have learned in our relationship with God and relating that together so we can learn from one another.

Today I think that God cannot love you anymore than He already does. In the past, I took advantage of that. I think it is like a radio. That station is always there, but you are not always tuned in to it. I want to learn how to hear that voice on my heart and obey it—to live my life by it. I just really want to get to know that so my life is meaningful and has a purpose to it.

I grasp very little of this. I know very little of it, but I know I am sick of being a chameleon and trying to please people. I want to please God. I struggle with even this video and trying to look cool and be somebody I am not. It just does not want to flow for me. But five years from now, I hope to know what God is laying on my heart and being more obedient, so that I can have a purposeful life.

If you remember it was just a year ago that we had everybody going north up on the stage and we commissioned them. What we said is that there are people today who are living in darkness and because of the witness of these people going, they will come to faith in Jesus. Darin was one of those people living in darkness but through the witness of Dave, who is one of the worship leaders at North Pointe, he has come to faith in Christ and is connected with that church. He is beginning his process of becoming complete in Christ. And that is what church planting is all about.

In Acts 9, is the conversion of Saul. It is quite a remarkable event. As a matter of fact, it was just stunning to everybody in the first century, so much so it is a challenge to the believers to even accept Saul—that his life could be so radically changed. But in that, there is a reminder that God can change anybody. There is nobody beyond God's reach. We need to remember that regardless of where people were in the past, God's power can change people. Sometimes we chain people to their

past, as if God does not have the power to truly change them. What they were in the past is irrelevant to who God is making them into through His power. And Saul, of course, is a classic example of that.

In chapter 10, we start to understand the challenge of what God was asking for this church as it moved outside of Jerusalem and Judea into reaching Gentiles. It is hard for us really to understand how hard that was for these Jewish believers to believe that God could actually love the Gentiles and include them in this movement called the church. God has to work Peter over with a vision for Peter to start to understand that it is okay to talk to the Gentiles. It is okay to welcome them into the family of God.

In the process of that, we asked ourselves who are the people that we intentionally avoid? Who are the people that we don't talk to? Who are the people that we don't want to spend time with? Who are the people that irritate us? Those might be the very people that God is calling us to reach. Those are people who need His love, and people that Jesus died for. We need to be diligent to cross the boundaries and the borders. We cannot expect them to do that. It is our calling that we would cross those boundaries and borders and love them and introduce them to Jesus.

We move on into chapter 12, and there again is persecution. James is arrested by Herod. He is put to death, and the people like that. Herod has finally found some way to win the favor of the Jewish people. So then he arrests Peter, and you get the impression he is going to work his way through the leadership of the church. Of course, God has other ideas. God miraculously sets Peter free. He turns around and puts Herod to death because of his pride and arrogance.

There is a reminder in this chapter again that this is the unstoppable church. Government and individuals can pass laws. They can do anything they want to try and stop it, but it cannot be stopped because it is the power of God, and God will build His church. Again, that is a reminder that when we invest ourselves in what God is doing, it is an investment in that which will ultimately triumph. You cannot stop the unstoppable church.

Then in chapters 13 and 14 you really get the beginning of what is called the missionary movement. There was an understanding that this was not just for Jerusalem and Judea, but we are supposed to go to every corner of the earth. God was calling out missionaries and those missionaries would be commissioned, supported and sent by the church to reach every corner of the earth. That begins with Paul and his team in chapter 13, and we will see a lot of that then in the chapters to follow in these next several months. There is a reminder here that God has a heart for the world. It is really not possible to be faithful as a local church and not have a heart for the world because that is God's heart. That is what God wants, and every missionary that goes out is an extension of this local ministry somewhere else in the world accomplishing the mission that God has given us.

We continually pray that God will call out people from this body to go somewhere else in the world and to be a proclaimer of the message. Over the last couple of years God worked in the heart of Rick and Patty Sticher. We thought you might want to hear a little bit about their story.

*Rick:* Patty became a believer just shortly before I met her when I began my undergraduate studies at Northwestern University in Chicago. That would have been in 1974. She came to faith and tried to explain to me what this radical transformation in her life was. I was not understanding this and not really grasping it. Shortly before I finished my studies and was to enter medical school, I understood what that meant and made a profession of faith in Christ at that time, which Patty told me was necessary before we would be married. But as I got into medical school and progressed through my studies, now looking back in hindsight, it was a profession that never reached my heart

if I truly understood what it meant even cognitively. Our lives became very separate. Patty grew in her faith, and her faith became very central in her life. My faith was non-existent. I made no place for God in my life. Through a series of conversations with Doug Shada and many people praying for me over years at Lincoln Berean, I understood that there indeed was a God and that Jesus Christ was the only way to that God. I understood at that point as I professed faith in Jesus what that meant, and that truly was a profession of faith that changed my life forever. I was given the opportunity to do attend a short-term medical mission trip to Mexico with Christ's Place Church here in Lincoln. I just loved the opportunity to help people with my profession, as well as the opportunity to touch lives with the spiritual hope that comes from Jesus. Lincoln Berean Church approached me, and we starting sending teams to Ecuador. It was during those trips to Ecuador that I began to realize that this was where my greatest joy was coming and began to consider the idea that this would be a career change for me to go into full-time missions.

*Patty:* I was very happily involved in ministry at Titus Women and Roots and Wings. I had no intention of going on a mission trip except with the high school group that I was also involved with. Ernest Lott talked me into going on my first mission trip with Rick to Ecuador and look where it got me.

*Rick:* The cost initially was to walk away from a very successful medical practice, but it became very clear to us that additional costs were going to be involved in this at this time. We made the decision that we would sell our home. God worked to prepare us to leave family at a point in time when they really could use us, our sons and my parents. We left friends who were in very significant need in their own lives that we were ministering to. When we left, the first period of time that we were in Ecuador was without doubt the most difficult times of my life. I was extremely devastated and even depressed at times because I could not communicate. We struggled through language. We struggled through culture differences. We struggled through political turmoil and just the everyday processes of life. Patty and I got to a point where we had only God. We had nothing else. God's work, above all else I think, was what He did in our own lives and our own hearts. From that we have had tremendous opportunities to walk alongside men and women and to mentor them. Many of them are missionaries and many of them are Ecuadorian nationals. There are people with significant needs in their marriages, in their personal relationships and decisions in their lives. We have seen people make decisions to accept Jesus as Savior from our guards, to patients, to hospice patients, to teachers and to men and women that we have just met and established relationships with as well. As I drive through the chaos of the traffic in Quito, I talk to God aloud now. I tell him, "This makes no sense Jesus, if you are not with me. It has no meaning unless You are the one who is doing the work through me." My preparation is surrender. It is asking Him to lead in everything and to protect in what is going to be a very challenging environment.

*Patty:* So we're here, and it is not to do a work. It's just about Him because the work will be very different than what we thought it would be. But we hear the Lord and we are following. That is a day-to-day decision, and it is costly. We miss our family and our friends, but I don't believe we would have it any other way.

There are those today seeking to convince you that to follow what Jesus wants for you is a life of health and wealth and prosperity. When you read through the book of Acts you quickly realize that is not true at all. What God calls us to is a mission to change the world. Is it costly? Yes, it is costly. Is there a price to be paid? Yes, there is a price to be paid. But God has called us to be about something that will matter forever. Rick and Patty heard the call. Is it fun over there? Is it healthy? Is it wealthy? Is it prosperous? No, it is not. It is hard. There is definitely a cost. But they are about something that will matter forever.

I don't know if God will call you overseas or just next door. But I do know God calls you and God calls me to accomplish the mission. It is not complicated. We have been given the mission to

proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin that Jesus as Savior offers in eternal life and an intimate relationship with Him both now and forever. Our calling is to take that message to the streets—to the person next door, the person at work, and the people around the world.

As we get back into the book of Acts, I want to give us just a minute here at the end of the service to give you a little quiet time before God and really be honest. What are you doing to accomplish the mission? When was the last time you shared Jesus with somebody? Do you really understand that is why we are here and that is what we are to be about? It is easy to get distracted with a lot of other stuff. I will give you just a minute to be quiet before God to refocus your heart, and I will close the service with prayer.

*Our Father, this morning, we are thankful for the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus our Savior. It is a gift of grace. We can have our sins forgiven, step from darkness to light, have an intimate personal relationship with You, both now and forever. Lord, all of that is simply received by faith. But Lord, we have a calling to be proclaimers of the message. Lord, there are people next door, people who walk the halls of school with us, people in the workplace, people in our family, that at this moment are walking in darkness. They live lives of despair, and they wonder if there is any hope. And You have called us to be proclaimers of this life-changing message. Lord, our desire is that we would not be side-tracked, that we would not be caught up in methods and programs and traditions, that we would be diligent about the mission You have called us to that we might be faithful as your church. This we pray in Jesus name we pray. Amen.*

\*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
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September 2/3, 2006

**Study Questions**  
*The Unstoppable Church*  
**The Unstoppable Church**  
**Review Acts 1-14**  
Pastor Bryan Clark

## Opening Discussion

1. Share your experience with churches. What have been the greatest joys and what have been your greatest frustrations?
2. Why do you think 70% of churches in American are stagnant or declining?

## Bible Study

1. Read Luke 24:44-49, Matthew 28:18-20, and Acts 1:1-8. What is the mission of the Church?

In your experience, do churches seem to clearly understand this mandate from Jesus? Why or why not?

Why do so many seem to have lost their sense of mission?

2. Why was Jesus so adamant about the disciples waiting for the Spirit before they went about the mission?

What do we need to learn from this?

Why did Jesus give us His Spirit?

3. People try to identify the biblical model for church from Acts by taking a snapshot of the church at a point in time and making a case that that's what church should be.

This is like taking a picture of your 8 year old child and saying that defines that child. A snapshot doesn't capture the reality of a child's growth from infancy to maturity. It only captures a point in time.

Acts gives us many snapshots of the church growing from infancy to maturity but they are only snapshots. Looking at the big picture in Acts from chapters 1-14, what are the core values that emerge?

What should be true of every church in every culture in every time period?

4. It is very popular today to preach the gospel disguised as a message of health, wealth and prosperity. The impression is that what God wants for every believer is to make life on this earth a little slice of heaven. How does that teaching line up with what we read in Acts with the early church?

Did coming to Christ make their lives harder or easier?

5. What do you think happens to the church when it becomes more popular than persecuted?

## **Application**

1. The mission of the church is the mission of each individual believer since we together make up the church. On a scale of 1-10, how are you doing in being diligent to accomplish the mission of the church?

What one area do you need to work on?

2. How can you as a small group be more proactive this year in doing your part to accomplish the mission? Brainstorm some ideas, then select one specific focus for your small group this year to keep you focused on the mission.