March 19/20, 2022

Be the Church

Daring to Be the Church: Then and Now Series

Acts 1:8

Pastor Bryan Clark

If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, you are the church. Don't misunderstand me, I didn't say you should attend a church. You are part of the magnificent bride of Christ. Sadly, a lot of Christians, especially a lot of American Christians, with this strong, independent view of their faith—when they hear that, their response would be to shrug their shoulders and say, "Whatever, I don't really care." It's critical to understand, we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. So my job in the next few minutes is to review 28 chapters of the book of Acts, and walk you through the story of 2000 years of church history. This will set up some things we're doing in the weeks to come, that I think are going to be very exciting for us.

The book of Acts is the continuing story of the words and works of Jesus through His church, empowered by the Spirit of God. Acts 1:8 is the moment where Jesus gathers together His disciples, and He tells them that they must be witnesses for Him in Jerusalem, Samaria, Judea, and to the uttermost parts of the world. And the only way this can be accomplished is through the power of the Spirit of God, which will indwell them. Acts chapter two is the birth of the church—Pentecost—where the Spirit of God miraculously falls upon His people. Once in a while, you will hear Catholic people say that the Catholic Church goes all the way back to Jesus, but the Protestant church didn't start until the Reformation. That just simply isn't true. It isn't true biblically. It isn't true historically. There's only one church and the one church of Jesus Christ started in Acts chapter two on the day of Pentecost.

The Christians were preaching a message of not only a crucified, but a resurrected Savior. And because that message had so much credibility there in Jerusalem, the church exploded to over 10,000 people in a matter of months. This then got the attention of the religious leaders that didn't like this, so the persecution began. Stephen, in Acts chapter seven was the first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death because of his proclamation of the gospel.

In Acts, chapter nine we are introduced to Saul, the great Christian killer, who encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, experiences a radical conversion, and becomes the great church planter missionary. In Acts chapter 10, Peter has a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all these animals, with the message being that the Gentiles are now going to be included with the Jews in this new movement called The Church of Jesus Christ. In Acts chapter 13, Paul launches out on the first missionary journey where he's planting churches primarily around the Mediterranean, which then gets us to chapter 15, which is a critical moment in the story where the Jerusalem Council gathers together to determine whether or not Gentiles have to be circumcised in order to be saved. The real question was, does a Gentile have to in essence become Jewish in order to be saved? The conclusion was a resounding "NO". Salvation is by faith, no works needed, which then launched Paul forward on two more missionary journeys, strengthening and planting churches all around the Mediterranean.

In chapter 21, Paul comes to Jerusalem. There he is seized. He goes through a series of five trials that we've been talking about recently; finally takes the ship ride to Rome, and Acts ends with Paul in Rome. Haddon Robinson, who was my preaching mentor, used to say, "The conclusion should not, or a good conclusion should conclude, not merely stop." With the book of Acts, it doesn't conclude it just stops. And Josh talked about that last week. It's because Acts is not the story of Paul, it's the story of the Church of Jesus Christ, that doesn't end in Acts 28; it continues to go forth, as a matter of fact, all the way to Lincoln, Nebraska.

So how do we get from Acts 28 to Lincoln, Nebraska? It's important to understand church history is a long, complex, involved discussion; people have written volumes about this. So, I'm going to give you an over simplified version of the story. It's also important to understand that the church didn't grow and develop in a vacuum. It grew and developed in a world where things were constantly changing and happening, and the church was responding and reacting to other things that were going on in the world.

The Roman Empire was huge. When the book of Acts ends, Paul has planted churches all around the Mediterranean and to Syria up into parts of Europe, Northern Africa. The Roman Empire, then had trade routes that went literally all over the world. So, the missionaries used those trade routes from Jerusalem and Judea, out to the uttermost parts of the world. So, we know for example, if you think about countries today that you think of as Muslim countries, that we know very early on, the Christian missionaries arrived and established the church there. At one time, they were Christianized. So, countries like Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, Ethiopia; as a matter of fact, at one time, there were so many churches in these areas, that it was believed that ground zero for this area was going to be basically modern-day Baghdad. In about 622, Islam was founded, began to grow and in 800 they started to persecute the Christians. By 1000, they had pretty much driven the Christians out of these countries. But at one time, the gospel had penetrated all over these countries. Take India, for example. We know that Thomas, one of the apostles, made it to India. As a matter of fact, he was martyred just outside of the city of Chennai. I have actually stood on the very place where he was martyred. By about the 300's, it is said that churches were all over India.

Or take, for example, China. We know that the gospel got into China somewhere, possibly in the 400's, for sure, in the 600's. We also more recently have discovered that the gospel penetrated Asia in places we did not previously understand. The Gospel got into Myanmar, which formerly was Burma. It got into the Philippines. It got into Vietnam. It got into Korea. It even early on, got into Japan.

Japan's a very interesting story. There was a missionary by the name of Francis Xavier, who in the 1500's went to Japan and actually found a very warm reception, and Christianity began to spread. As a matter of fact, he wrote in his journal that he thought within 10 years, all of Japan would be Christian. At one point at the peak there were as many as 300,000 Christians in Japan, hundreds of churches, they even built a city in Japan for the Christians. The city was called Nagasaki. They built two Christian universities in Japan. But by the 1600s, Japan started to feel like this was some sort of an invasion, began to persecute the church and pretty much drove the church out. All of that, before America was America. We tend to think that America is ground

central for Christianity. But we have to understand we've been really late to the party, and it's already fading away for us.

Going back to the church in Rome, from Acts 28 on, began to expand and grow. In many ways the Roman church became ground zero for Christianity early on. A lot of that was because of the heavy influence of Rome itself. The church experienced levels of persecution, simply depending on who the emperor was. In the early part of 300, there was an emperor by the name of Diocletian.

When he inherited the Roman Empire, it was a mess, severely weakened. And over the next 20 years, quite remarkably, he rebuilt Rome into a world power. For the first 18 years, he pretty much just tolerated the Christians. His wife was a Christian, his daughter was a Christian. He just kind of ignored them. But for whatever reason, in his last two years, he determined to completely exterminate Christianity. So he wiped out their buildings, he burned their scriptures, and he began to persecute the Christians. It was an absolute bloodbath, as hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Christians were put to death. Ancient historians tell us that even the pagans were appalled at the bloodshed with these Christians. But the strangest thing happened—rather than exterminating Christians, it lit a fire under the Christians and Christianity exploded. As a matter of fact, one person supposedly told the Emperor, "If you don't stop the persecution, the Christians will take over."

Shortly after that, it moved to an emperor by the name of Constantine. It was early in the 300's. Constantine, as the story goes, was in a battle, had a vision: in the sky, he saw a cross and God spoke to him and said, "In this sign, conquer." He took that to be the voice of God and converted to Christianity. He became very favorable to the Christians, to such a degree, he did something that would change the church for hundreds of years. He wanted, essentially to blend together the Roman government with the church, and he would sit as head of the church. Constantine involved himself significantly in the matters of running the church. Now, there were some church leaders that favored that. They saw this as the way for Christianity to conquer the world. This began a divide that would eventually be called the Eastern Church. There was another group of church leaders that didn't like this; "What is the Emperor doing involving himself in church matters?" Which began then a development of the west, or the Roman church. This progressed, then until towards the end of the 300's, when Christianity was actually named to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. To not be a Christian had serious consequences. People really didn't have a choice. If you were going to run a business, if you wanted to flourish, if you wanted to avoid persecution, if you wanted any kind of career in politics, you had to become a Christian, which had significant issues with the church. The church became corrupt in so many ways. It was about power. It was about politics. It was about running the government. There were hundreds of people who were Christians who didn't know anything about Jesus, didn't know anything about what Jesus had done, couldn't care less. You just had to be a Christian, in order to be a Roman. So this had a significant corrupting influence on the church.

About 476, the German barbarians came in, they conquered Rome, but this blend of church and government would remain for hundreds of years. About 1000, about halfway through our story, there was a final divide between the east which would be known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, which didn't really spread much. And the West, the Roman church, which we would know as the Roman Catholic Church. That was followed by a period of time called the Crusades. They're

often called the Holy Wars. It's really important to understand when we're talking about Christians, this is a really diluted definition of Christianity. Christians in the sense this was about land. This is about geography. This is about government. This is about wars and soldiers and fighting. You had all kinds of weird dynamics, like the church sending armies into war and declaring battles. So this all became really confusing within the power of the church. Primarily, it was Christians versus Muslims in that war.

By roughly the 1300s, you started to have brave, courageous voices that started to identify there are a lot of things about the church that are inconsistent with the teachings of the New Testament. One of those brave voices was a man by the name of John Wycliffe. Wycliffe, was a brilliant scholar. He began to speak and mostly write against many of the practices and beliefs in the church that were contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. He had a passion to translate the New Testament into English, in order to distribute copies of the New Testament into the hands of the people, so the people could themselves, read the New Testament, decide for themselves what was true, but this was strictly forbidden by the church. Wycliffe began to recruit young men whose heart was for the ministry. They referred to them as his "preacher boys". He would bring them in, he would train them and he would teach them the New Testament. He would unpack this truth to them, and he would send them out to preach. It is said that it took Wycliffe roughly 10 months to produce one copy of the New Testament, because all of it had to be done by hand. So these "preacher boys" would go out, typically with one or two pages of the New Testament, and from that they would preach the gospel and tell people what the New Testament says. These "preacher boys" were also referred to as the Lollards. The Lollards was a derogatory term that basically meant mumblers. When these "preacher boys" were sent out, not only were they sent out to preach, they understood for many of them, they were sent out to die. What they were doing was strictly forbidden by the church. The church did not want the Bible in the language of the people. So many of these Lollards were ultimately burned at the stake. The reason they were burned at the stake is because the church declared that they were going to hell, and they wanted to give people a glimpse of what awaited these "preacher boys". So many, many, many were burned at the stake. If you were to visit England today, you would find a piece of ground that is still called the Lollards' Pit, which is a place where so many of these "preacher boys" were burned at the stake.

John Wycliffe was followed later by a man named John Huss, who also was a brilliant scholar who discovered the writings of Wycliffe and began to realize Wycliffe was right, that there were so many things going on in the church that were contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. He began to preach and primarily to write about the corruption and the excesses in the church. Ultimately, John Huss was burned at the stake.

He was followed by an absolutely brilliant man by the name of William Tyndale. Tyndale spoke fluently seven languages. It is said that he was so fluent in all seven, you could not tell which one was his first language. Tyndale had a passion for the New Testament, and a determination to translate the entire Bible into English to put into the hands of the people, so the people themselves could read the Bible and decide for themselves what is true. But again, this was strictly forbidden. So Tyndale lived as a fugitive on the run, while trying to translate the Bible into English. In 1526, Tyndale finished an entire copy of the Bible in English. By this time, the Gutenberg Press had been invented, and these Bibles were copied in mass and smuggled into England and distributed throughout. Tyndale was the one who famously said, "When I am done with my project, even the

plow boy will know more of the Bible than the Pope." Tyndale, 10 years after his Bible was completed —1536—was also burned at the stake.

You know, isn't it interesting, we sit here this morning, we don't even think about this. We have an English Bible on our phone, we have it on our computer, we have stacks of them in the hallway, most of us have stacks of them at home. We take it all for granted, and don't realize it wasn't that long ago—five to 600 years ago—all of these people died horrific deaths, because of their commitment to make it possible that you could have your own copy of an English Bible to read for yourself and decide for yourself what is true.

In this same time period, arose another familiar name—a man by the name of Martin Luther. Luther first objected to what are called indulgences. By the time of Luther this practice was extremely corrupt. It basically was the idea that you paid money to the church in order to have some of your sins forgiven, in order to not have to do penance, or if you have a loved one who has died and gone to purgatory, you could give a sum of money and get them out of purgatory and on into heaven. Initially, indulgences were used to fund the Crusades. But by the time of Luther, it was used to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther had a lot to say about how he felt about that; but it moved from there to some other core beliefs like the head of the church was not the Pope, it was Christ. That salvation was in Christ alone. It was by faith alone and no other religious practices, and that the authority of the Church was not in the traditions of the church, but in the Scriptures alone. In 1517, Luther famously nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. Eventually, this led to a split, what's called the Protestant Reformation. Protestant meaning protest, the protest reformation of things that were believed to be inconsistent in the church with the writings of the New Testament. So now we have Eastern Orthodox; we have the Roman Catholic Church; and we have the Protestant church. These are still the three major divides today. It's important to understand going forward, both the Catholics and the Protestants simply did not allow any nonconformity. They simply didn't allow people to disagree. And both sides did a lot of things that Christians shouldn't be doing, because people didn't conform to what they believed to be the truth.

This then moved to the 1700's-ish, a period of time in Europe known as the Enlightenment and Age of Reason of thinking—of individually thinking for yourself. This combined with the distribution of scriptures in the language of the people, led to a great awakening, a revival as people read the scriptures as they reasoned and thought for themselves. This was a time of great preachers who declared the message of the New Testament to huge crowds and mass conversions. It was also the time when people were leaving to this new country called America. People came to America for lots of reasons. But one of those reasons was they wanted a freedom of religion. They wanted to live in a place where they had the freedom to believe what they believed to be true. There wasn't one state religion that everyone was forced to believe. They also believed it was possible within the umbrella of Christianity, that Christians could have some differences in some of the beliefs. So they would group people according to these differences which became known as denominations, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and others, but still under one umbrella, the church and separate from the state. So under the state, but separate from the state. This also created another dynamic, which they referred to as voluntaryism. What's gonna happen now when the state no longer funds the church, builds the churches, provides leadership for the church, but the church is on its own? You have to build your own buildings. You have to raise

your own money. You have to hire your own people. You have to do your own ministry. So it created this movement of people in the body of Christ realizing this is our Church. This is our responsibility. We're gonna need to do this, which again, lit a fire under the church and created a revival, a great awakening here in America.

George Whitfield came from England to America, did revivals, and especially among the colonies, there was a great awakening among the Americans. In addition to that, people began to read the scriptures and realize that the mandate from Jesus was to go into all the world. At the beginning of the 1800's, Protestant Christianity was pretty much limited to Europe and to America. But they began to realize this message must go to all the nations, which launched what we call the modern missionary movement. People like William Carey went to India, Hudson Taylor to China. You have David Livingston to Africa. The strategy was an understanding that we're not to force these beliefs on anyone, but rather we're to open up the scriptures to them, we're to teach them, we're to help them understand what it says that they might choose to believe. It was also believed that these churches must be relevant to the cultures in which they're planted. So to understand and study the cultures and figure out what makes this relevant, how does this help people flourish in these different cultures.

This strategy then became a critical part of the movement west in America. As people began to move west and settle America, it's estimated only maybe 5%, at the most 10% of those people were Christian. So many missionaries begin to go with them. Not with the mindset of forcing someone to believe something, but with the mindset of opening up the scriptures, of teaching them, of proclaiming the message, of helping them understand that they might believe; but also with a mindset of, "Can we help them understand what makes this relevant? What does the gospel bring that can help people flourish?" So in America, it was the church that first started schools. It was the church that taught literacy. It was the church that built hospitals. It was the church that advanced agriculture. It was the church that built universities. It was the church that brought people together in communities as they settled. And in both the UK and America, it was the church that was the driving force of the doing away of slavery in both countries.

It is believed that the gospel first came to the state of Nebraska in 1833 in Bellevue, Nebraska, and from there slowly spread across the state of Nebraska. Now stop and think about this. Again, we as Americans tend to think of ourselves as ground zero for Christianity. But this has been going on for 2000 years, and the gospel only came to Nebraska 200 years ago. We're late to the game, and sadly, it's already fading from America. At one time, we were ground zero for a very short period of time. Experts today would tell us it has moved from America to what they call the global south—Asia, Africa, India, Latin America. So for example, in 1910, 80% of the Protestants in the world were either in Europe or America. One hundred years later in 2010, it was about evenly split between Europe and America and the global south with the global south having somewhat of a majority. It is now estimated that in a couple years, 2025, 70% of the Protestant Christians in the world will be in the global south—Latin America, Africa, Asia, India.

China is a very interesting country. It is estimated that in 1980, there were roughly 3 million Christians in China. It was estimated in 2018, that there are over 100 million Christians in China. It's estimated that on any given Sunday there are more Christians that attend church in China than attend church in America. Even though the church is fading in America, it is flourishing in places

around the world. One of the interesting things about the story is that in many of these places where the church is flourishing, they're places where the gospel initially went, where there was an initial response. And then it seems the church went dormant for hundreds of years. And in many of those places, they're experiencing a new awakening to the gospel.

What the future is, for the church in America, I don't know. We will see. What I do know is this is our moment. This is our time. We are part of something that is so much bigger than ourselves, something that God has been doing in the world for 2000 years, and whatever the story of America will be, this is our moment. This is our season. This is our part of the story. And I do know that no matter what happens, that the Church, for all her flaws, all her warts, all her wrinkles, all her confusions, all her struggles, will ultimately triumph in glorious fashion. Not because the church finally gets their act together and figures it all out; but because the church is a gathering of people, sinners and misfits and losers, who have been made right, only on the basis of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and by the grace of God, Jesus will finish what He started and the Church ultimately will triumph. This is the promise that one day people from every people group, every tribe, every tongue, every nation, everywhere in the world, will come together as the glorious bride of Christ, properly adorned for her Husband. And then this glorious moment will be presented to her adoring Husband, who died for her, Who gave His life for her, and will present her utterly glorious before the Father, and will invite us to the most magnificent celebration in human history, the great wedding feast of the Lamb. And our Groom will usher us in to the new heaven and the new earth, where we will dwell with Him forever, in a place our souls have always longed for. But until that glorious moment, we have an assignment. We have a job to do. The assignment is not to attend church. The assignment is to be the church. Whatever else happens in America, this I know: this is our moment. This is our season. This is our turn to be part of this grand story and to do our part, to be faithful to proclaim the life changing message of Jesus. This is our moment, and we must dare to be the church.

> *Our Father, we're thankful this morning that for all the struggles and imperfections and messes the Church has experienced over these years she will ultimately be glorious. All based on Your grace, and the finished work of Jesus. Lord, may we be Your church in such a time as this. In Jesus name, Amen.*

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Winter 2022 // WEEK 10

Life Group Questions

Acts: Daring To Be The Church // March 19-20, 2022

Be the Church // Acts 1:8

Introduction

To close out our Winter session of Life Groups, Pastor Bryan takes us on a flyover tour of the book of Acts as well as the continuation of the work begun by the Church of Acts. What a ride! Our hope is that your group time this week will be one of reflection and celebration about how we are *daring to be the Church*.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over the questions below and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

Here are some suggestions to get your conversation started:

1. What is a trip or experience that had a big spiritual impact on you and why?

2. How have you been challenged personally through this study in Acts?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
    c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
2) Invite someone to read the passage in the group.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

1) Imagine that you are given an opportunity to write chapter 29 of the book of Acts, a narrative about Lincoln Berean Church in 2022. **What would be the title of your chapter? What role do you see our church playing in furthering the gospel here and now?**

2) Read Luke 24:46-49 and Acts 1:1-8 to review the mission Jesus gave to His Church. **Based on that, what do you think Jesus expects us to spend our time and resources pursuing as part of His local church?**

   How does understanding the mission of the Church as an outpost of the kingdom of God inform the way you view various parts of your life? Discuss ways you might live on mission in each of these areas:

   - **Work**
   - **Relationships**
   - **Income and resources**
   - **Time management and priorities**

3) If we're honest, most of us find it much easier to define the mission of the Church than to actually practice it in daily life. That's one way your Life Group can provide a safe place to help you focus each week. Think back over the past 10 weeks of this session and consider which of these questions relates to you. Share with the group.
   - **What has it meant to you to have a safe place to share your story with others?**
   - **When has your group helped you redirect negative thinking and instead focus on the Truth of God's Word?**
   - **How has praying for your concerns met a need in your life?**
   - **What new spiritual exercises have you tried that you want to continue?**

4) From Acts onward, the Church has been about proclaiming the life-changing message of Jesus Christ to a lost and searching world. There's no greater witness to this message than seeing people from all walks of life coming together as a unified "body" to celebrate and worship Jesus in a weekend service**. As you've looked around our congregation in recent weeks, is there someone you've missed seeing in a service? While not everyone may be ready to return in person yet, what might you be able to do to reach out as part of the community of faith?**

5) Pastor Bryan's recounting of the key movements of Church history can give us a greater appreciation for what we experience today. Are you satisfied with how often you exercise the freedom you have to read your Bible? Explain your answer.

What ways might it benefit our city to have a diversity of Bible-believing churches to choose to attend? What difference does it make when churches are united in sharing the gospel rather than competing for attendees?

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of "coming together" is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say "Amen" aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves – mind, body, spirit – we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts.

Setting Your Mind on the Truth – choose a verse or passage that speaks to a particular struggle or need in your life, then begin integrating it in a way that is meaningful to you.

Exercise 1: Write out Colossians 3:2 (or other verse of your choosing) and put it in your pocket, stick it on your mirror, or any place you see often throughout the day.

Exercise 2: Set your verse as wallpaper on your phone or computer. Many Bible apps have this feature; www.youversion.com, is one.

Whenever you find your thoughts drifting negatively, recite your chosen verse to set your mind back on the truth.