

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Paul In Rome
November 12th, 2023
Acts 28:17-31
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 28:17; that’s on page 937 in your pew Bibles. This morning we come to the END of our journey through the Acts of the Apostles; a journey we BEGAN a little more than a year ago. We’ve been using this series as an opportunity to evaluate ourselves against the pattern of the early church. Are we still committed to the same things they were committed to? Are we worshipping the same God? Are we preaching the same Gospel?

For the last several weeks we’ve been tracking Paul’s journey through the Jewish and Roman court systems. In the Providence of God Paul has been given an opportunity to make a defence of the Christian faith before Senators, Governors and Kings and this week, in the closing scene of the book, we see him waiting for his audience before the Emperor in the capital city of Rome. Hopefully you have your Bible open to Acts 28; I’ll begin reading at verse 17.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18 When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 19 But

because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. 20 For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” 21 And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. 22 But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

23 When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. 24 And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. 25 And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

26 ““Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

27 For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

28 Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

30 He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:17-31 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well, I think the first thing we need to say here is that this is a somewhat unexpected ending to the story. Reading R.C. Sproul’s commentary on this passage made me laugh. He said:

“If I were to purchase a novel and find after reading to the end of it that I am not told what happens to the hero, I am going to complain to the publisher.”¹

Of course, as R.C. knows very well, the Acts of the Apostles is not a novel, it is a work of theology and history, and as I’m sure he also knows, it would be highly inadvisable, in this case, to complain to the publisher.

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 386.

Nevertheless, he makes a fair point. It is ODD that we are not told how this story ends. Does Paul get to make a defense of Christianity before Nero? If so, how does that go? Is Paul exonerated? Is he executed? Is he torn to pieces by wild beasts in the Colosseum? We need to know!!!!

Our best reading of the Pastoral Epistles and our best sources on Christian history would seem to indicate that Paul DID have a hearing before Nero, about which we know net to nothing, he was then released whereupon he resumed his missionary travels for about two more years before being re-arrested, summarily condemned and executed by beheading just outside of Rome in the year AD 64.

Fair enough.

But why doesn't Luke TELL US about any of that?

Our best guess is that Luke wrote the ending of Acts during Paul's two-year delay in Rome. He had no idea how long that delay would last and there was an urgent need for this book in the churches. By AD 62 the Christian church was starting to experience the CRISIS of leadership transition. The Apostles were starting to die out. Many of them were being killed, others were far away planting congregations in distant lands – where they would eventually be killed – and so there was an urgent need for an inspired narrative telling the story of the first generation of the church.

Remember, Christians are not supposed to be innovators!! We're supposed to be STEWARDS!! Paul said to Timothy, one of the second-generation leaders:

“what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2 ESV)

So Christianity is a giant RELAY RACE, or if you are more into home renovation than sports, the Christian life is like hanging wallpaper. Each NEW STRIP is supposed to line up precisely with the one that came before. Thus the need for the original strip – and that's what the Acts of the Apostles WAS. It functioned like a plumbline, and so Luke, having no idea how long they

would be waiting for Paul's part of the story to be completed, finished his manuscript and released it to the churches as it was.

Now, perhaps he intended to revise and re-release it AFTER he knew the outcome of Paul's trial. He could have done that. Church history says that Luke died in AD 84 – about 20 years AFTER Paul – so he could have re-released it, but he didn't, which suggests that the story as we have it is the story as the Holy Spirit wanted it told.

It lands where it is supposed to land.

I. Howard Marshall puts it this way:

“Thus the final picture which is presented to the reader is of Paul's last appeal to the Jews and his acceptance of a call to the Gentiles. The impression conveyed is that Paul felt throughout his ministry the duty to go first to the Jews and that it was when they refused the message that he went to the Gentiles. All this fits in with the emotional expression of Paul's feelings regarding his call in Romans 9-11. It also gives a climax to the book in that the missionary programme of Acts 1:8 is now brought to a decisive point: the gospel has come to the capital city, and it is proclaimed without hindrance to the Gentiles; the church is on the brink of further expansion, with Paul's hope of reaching Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28) in the background and indicating the direction for further advance. The church is thus given its marching orders: Rome is a stage on the way, and not the final goal. In principle it is free to ignore the Jews, at least for the time being (Luke 21:24), and to go to the Gentiles.”²

‘At least for the time being’ – what does he mean by that? He cites Luke 21:24 where Luke cites Jesus as saying:

“They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, **until** the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21:24 ESV)

So in Luke's mind, these two issues are connected. The Jewish people will be HARD toward the Gospel throughout most of our mission to the nations and then, near the end of that mission, the disposition of the Jewish people will suddenly change. And thus, in the Providence of God, the ending of Acts as we have it, serves as the perfect hinge between the first generation of the

²I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 441-442.

church and all those that follow. The story leaves us with the distinct impression that our job from this point on is to take the Gospel to the Gentiles – to the nations - but it also telling us that we are NOT to give up hope for the Jews.

It makes sense then for us to conclude our journey through the Acts of the Apostles by paying attention to these twin themes: our present mission to the Gentiles and our future hope for the Jews.

Let's begin with our mission to the Gentiles.

Our Mission To The Gentiles:

Look again at Acts 28:28. Paul says:

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

And of course, that reminds us of the Great Commission given by Jesus to the disciples just prior to his Ascension. He says in Matthew 28:19-20:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20 ESV)

That's the mission of the church in a nutshell! It's very straightforward. As you may have heard before, there is only ONE IMPERATIVE VERB in the Great Commission – only one command, strictly speaking – the command to MAKE DISCIPLES. The other verbs are participles, meaning they support the main imperative, so the mission of the church is to MAKE DISCIPLES BY going, baptizing and teaching.

But what about prayer? What about worship? What about fellowship? Those things are really important too – as we've seen again and again and again over the course of the Book of Acts – so how do we think about those things? Those things are better understood as THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH. That is what a church DOES – that is who a church IS. The church worships. The

church prays. The church loves and cares for one another. But the mission of the church is about EXTENDING THAT OUTWARDS!!! As John Piper said famously:

“Mission exists because worship doesn’t.”³

The mission of the church is to reach OUT and to bring others IN and we do that by GOING, BAPTIZING and TEACHING. Let’s take a few minutes and talk briefly about each of those things in turn.

What does it mean for us to be GOING?

The “going” of course is related to the “of all nations”. The church in Matthew 28 is being told to SPREAD OUTWARDS. It is being told to CROSS BORDERS. It is being told to REACH OUT beyond the traditional boundaries of kin, class and tribe - and that is exactly what the first generation of disciples did.

In *The History of the Church* written by Eusebius in the 4th century it says:

“Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered over the whole world. Thomas, tradition tells us, was chosen for Parthia, Andrew for Scythia, John for Asia, where he remained until his death at Ephesus. Peter seems to have preached in Pontus, Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia, to the Jews of the Dispersion. Finally he came to Rome where he was crucified, head downwards at this own request. What need be said of Paul, who from Jerusalem as far as Illyricum preached in all its fullness the gospel of Christ, and later was martyred in Rome under Nero?”⁴

That’s a lot of going!

Christianity is by design a multinational, multiethnic movement and there is absolutely nothing else like it in the world.

“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11 ESV)

³ John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 11.

⁴ Eusebius, *The History of the Church* translated by G.A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 65.

Can you say amen to that?

Amen!!

We need to fight for this again in our generation because our culture is becoming increasingly RACIALLY and TRIBALLY divided. The devil is trying to turn us against each other, and he is making skillful use of Social Media in order to do it. He wants us to think of ourselves as CANADIANS first and Christians second. He wants us to be fearful of the immigrant. He wants to show us videos that confirm our secret suspicions about the people from other groups. He wants to simplify, exaggerate and divide.

Why?

Because that's a great way to shut down the Great Commission.

Don't be taken in by that.

Never forget:

“our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”
(Philippians 3:20 ESV)

That's who you are. You are first and foremost a citizen of the Kingdom of God. You are a Canadian SECOND. A distant second. Now, it's ok to be patriotic. It's ok to sing O Canada and to remember our veterans. The Bible says to outdo one another in showing honour, so that's fine. But we must never forget that our primary loyalty is to the family of God and our primary mission is to gather other people INTO the family of God from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth.

So we make disciples by GOING and we make disciples by BAPTIZING. What does that mean?

What does it mean for us to be BAPTIZING?

Well it means calling on people to DIE to their former allegiances and identities so as to LIVE for Christ. That's what baptism is. The word "sacrament" which we use to describe both baptism and the Lord's Supper was a word borrowed originally from the Roman Legions. A sacrament was a pledge of allegiance that soldiers took to the Emperor first and foremost and to their Legion secondarily. The Christians took that over because they believed that Jesus, not Caesar, was LORD. So BAPTISM is you saying: JESUS IS LORD! Baptism is you saying JESUS IS MY HIGHEST AUTHORITY. JESUS IS MY COMMANDING OFFICER. JESUS IS MY GOD AND KING.

You know, maybe we'd have fewer nominal Christians if we did a better job of explaining that to people before they undertook to get baptized in the first place!

Baptism is your initial pledge of allegiance and then the Lord's Supper is your perpetual pledge of allegiance. It is you saying week after week, month after month: "I'm still on Team Jesus" and it's us saying when we pass you the plate, "We still accept you on Team Jesus. We CREDIT your pledge of allegiance." And then it's all of us together saying to God: "Lord in your mercy, grant unto us food for the journey and grace for the day."

Amen!

Making disciples is about bringing people into the rhythm and cycle.

So we make disciples by going, by baptizing and also by teaching. What does that mean?

What does it mean for us to be TEACHING?

Specifically, Jesus said that we are to teach people all that he commands, and of course, as the Word of God in the flesh that means EVERYTHING! It means teaching people the whole counsel of God, with a particular focus on the person and work of Christ. If you are reading the Bible such that you are maximally excited about something other than the person and work of Jesus, you are reading it WRONG. Can you say amen to that church? Amen.

So that's what we were told to do. That's what Jesus sent us out to do and that's what the Acts of the Apostles ENDS by reminding us to do.

We are to make disciples of the nations by going, baptizing and teaching – BUT we are not to lose hope for the Jews.

So let's take a few minutes and talk about that. What exactly is our hope for the Jews?

Our Hope For The Jews:

Well of course, we've been talking about THE hope for the Jews for the last couple of weeks. In his defense of Christianity before King Agrippa Paul said that he was on trial for believing in the hope of the Jews.

I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:6-8 ESV)

Paul believed that the HOPE OF THE JEWS was now being realized through the person and work of Christ; he was the FIRST FRUITS of the resurrection that had been promised! He was the Cornerstone upon which the whole house would be renovated and rebuilt! He was the BRANCH from which the new tree would sprout, grow and be established.

Jesus WAS and IS the HOPE OF THE JEWS – but for some reason, in the dark Providence of God, after the first generation, the Jews generally began to harden toward the Gospel. The ground floor of the church was almost entirely Jewish, but here at the transition between the first generation and the second, we are told that moving forward, the Jews will not make up the majority of new disciples and that will continue until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Luke recorded Jesus saying that in Luke 21:24:

“They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, **until** the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21:24 ESV)

The Apostle Paul was clearly impacted by that; he wrote to the Romans saying:

“I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” (Romans 11:25 ESV)

So, the hope seems to be that ONCE the fullness of the Gentiles has come in – once a significant number of people from every tribe, tongue and nation has been converted – THEN the hardness will be removed and the Jewish people as a whole will turn and embrace their Messiah.

“in this way all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26 ESV)

That seems to have been Paul’s hope for the Jews, and it explains in part, his commitment to the Gentile mission. In the same chapter of Romans he says:

“Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.” (Romans 11:13-16 ESV)

Paul says there that he is working as hard as possible on the Gentile mission SO AS to STIMULATE the JEALOUSY of the Jews, which he believes, at some point, will encourage them to turn in faith toward their Messiah, and when that happens, Paul expects nothing less than life from the dead.

Why?

Because he believes in the biblical principle of first fruits. One faithful Jew has already risen from the dead and therefore in the Providence and timing of God, the rest will surely follow.

That was Paul's view and it appears to have been the majority view of our spiritual ancestors. William Carey and Andrew Fuller for example, two of the founders of The Baptist Missionary Society, both looked forward to a general conversion of the Jewish people prior to the return of Christ. Fuller wrote on this topic at some length in his *Expository Remarks Relative To The Conversion Of The Jews*. Iain Murray has written convincingly that this was the dominant view of the Puritans in general, citing for example the venerable Richard Sibbes:

“Let no man therefore despair; nor, as I said before, let us despair of the conversion of that are savages in other parts. How bad soever they be, they are of the world, and if the gospel be preached to them, Christ will be ‘believed on in the world’. Christ’s almighty power goeth with his own ordinances to make it effectual... And when the fulness of the gentiles is come in, then comes the conversion of the Jews.”⁵

That was the hope of our Great Grandparents: they expected the Great Commission to be successful and near the end of that they expected to see the mass conversion of the Jewish people – thanks be to God!

So what are we supposed to do with all of this information?

6 weeks ago, I suspect that this portion of the sermon would have BORED many of you, but all of the sudden, after the HORRIFIC ATTACKS by Hamas upon Israel on October 7th, and the threat of full scale conflagration in the Middle East right now, the HOPE OF THE JEWS, for many of us, is very much top of mind.

So again, what is a believer to do?

It cannot be denied that the nation of Israel is in a very precarious position. They are surrounded by nations and peoples who hate them, AND they are currently estranged from their covenant Lord.

And Bible readers know what that means! Even in the Old Testament, whenever Israel was NOT in right relationship with God they found themselves at the mercy of their enemies. That's why they were defeated by the Assyrians. That's why they were defeated by the Babylonians. That's

⁵ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1971), 92.

why they were defeated by Rome - because God is not some kind of CAVE TROLL on a chain that Israel can drag out whenever they find themselves in political peril.

HE IS THE LORD – and his blessings and favour now are mediated exclusively through the person and work of Christ.

So if you want to see peace in the Middle East then you need to PRAY for Jews and Muslims to be reconciled to God through Jesus. There will be NO PEACE, NO STABILITY and NO LASTING PROSPERITY in that region until that happens.

But it will happen.

At some point in the future, it will happen.

So, what should we do in the meantime?

Exactly what the Apostle Paul did. We should pour ourselves into our mission to the nations because that's the part of the process that was assigned to us. The mysteries of Providence, the opening of long-closed eyes, the softening of iron hard hearts – all of that lies significantly above our paygrade – as a great many things in this universe do!

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33 ESV)

My friends, there are things going on right now in the spiritual realm that we cannot see and that we cannot understand. There are actions of Providence taking place at this moment behind the curtain and beyond our sight. We can't control those things; so we just need to pray, trust and carry on. To borrow a line from Ed Stetzer: “The moment we are in, does not pause the mission we are on.”

And we are ON A MISSION. Jesus said:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:19-20 ESV)

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.