

The Ever-Expanding Gospel

B Y C H A D H A R T S O C K

The book of Acts re-calls us to a radically selfless gospel whose mission is to reach the ends of the earth. It reminds us that the “ends of the earth” can be in a land far away, or among the socially marginalized neighbors who live in our shadows every moment.

The book of Acts is significant because it explores core, identity-shaping questions about how the Church came to be what it is. It asserts the centrality of the Holy Spirit in shaping the identity of the Church. It also highlights the controversies involved in the shaping of the Church—both dangers emerging from the surrounding environment (like Jewish religious leaders or the threatening Saul on the prowl) and internal controversies that the Church must resolve, the greatest of which is the question of what to do about the Gentiles. Acts does not paint a picture of a pristine and idyllic Church, but of one being forged in the fires of conflict.

With the Gospel of Luke, Acts shares a gospel that targets the outsider, a gospel that is the necessary plan of God, rooted in antiquity and Scripture, and a gospel that disarms and defeats the spiritual forces of evil. Yet for Acts, no theme is more important than this one: the ever-expanding mission of the gospel. The kingdom of God is on the march, both geographically and sociologically, to the very ends of the earth, and its divinely-guided progress will not be halted.

The theme of an ever-expanding gospel appears immediately in Acts. Christ’s final instructions to the apostles before his ascension—“you will

receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8) – serves as a kind of geographical thesis statement for the book. Christ's death and resurrection has Jerusalem as its epicenter, but its effects will radiate in all directions, ultimately to the very edges of the map. For the first audience of this book, Jerusalem was in the center of their maps in much the same way that Americans have North America in the center of theirs, or instinctively turn their globes to the western hemisphere. Christ sets the tone for the book (and for the story of the faith) by telling the Apostles that the gospel cannot be stagnant, is not to be locked down in the holy city, and is not to be selfishly hoarded for themselves. Indeed, this is a gospel intended for everyone everywhere, and the job of all the disciples is to keep it moving. In fact, as Acts unfolds, the reader can watch this geographical thesis fulfilled step by step.

The gospel does not leave Jerusalem immediately. The apostles return to Jerusalem (1:12), sequester themselves in the upper room, and await the Spirit. Among the many things that happen when the Spirit arrives is that the "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" (2:5) hear the gospel proclaimed in their own language; this is a sort of promissory note of the gospel's ability to communicate anywhere. Yet this Pentecost audience is a melting pot of people living in Jerusalem, and they may or may not have taken that message to distant homelands. The apostles certainly remain in Jerusalem, seeking to proclaim Christ as fulfillment of the Jewish covenants and scriptures in Jerusalem and the Temple. As they proclaim the same message as Jesus did and do many of the same signs and wonders that Jesus performed, they meet opposition from the same opponents as their Lord did.

It is not until the Stephen incident that the gospel is effectively spread beyond Jerusalem by a considerable number of Christ's followers. Stephen, one of the seven deacons chosen in 6:1-6, is arrested, tried, and executed for the same trumped-up crimes as Jesus – blasphemy against the Temple and the Law (6:11-14). What is notable about these events is what happens in their aftermath: "That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of *Judea and Samaria*" (8:1b, emphasis mine). The geography mentioned here, which recalls the words of Jesus in 1:8, shows the gospel is now leaving town. Although the believers are fleeing the streets of Jerusalem, they are not retreating underground into bunkers; they are running to other synagogues in every town and village: "Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (8:4). The

Jewish religious leaders intended through Stephen's execution to stomp out the fires of this aberrant movement, but all they managed to do was pour kerosene on the flames. The movement that so recently had been contained in the upper room of a house or a single porch in the Temple now took to the highways and byways; what was once a semi-contained campfire now threatened to ignite the whole forest. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem" – done. "In Judea and Samaria" – done. "And to the ends of the earth."

Philip, a Hellenist who like Stephen had been appointed to "wait tables" (6:2), soon joins the apostles' work of expanding the gospel. He is called by the Spirit to meet a certain Ethiopian eunuch who is leaving Jerusalem. Those two adjectives say a lot about the man: as a eunuch, he is an outcast in any culture and probably not welcome in the very temple where he came to worship; as an Ethiopian, he hails from the very edge of the map. (On maps of the day, the southernmost reaches to the south of Egypt were called "Ethiopia.") Here we find a character who is not only an outsider socially, he is also from one end of the earth. The story of Philip "starting with this scripture [viz., Isaiah 53:7-8]" and proclaiming to this man "the good news about Jesus" (8:35) is another down payment on a gospel that is ever-expanding.

The focus turns next to Saul/Paul in chapter 9. Saul is dispatched to find those expansionists who are spreading this gospel and drag them back to Jerusalem. Saul seeks to corral and tame the gospel, but he can no more harness it than one can un-ripple a pond. Indeed, Saul who is sent to stop the gospel becomes its greatest missionary, doing more to carry it to the ends of the earth than anyone who ever lives. Even the enemy of the gospel is not beyond its reach.

The end of the book of Acts is curious as well. Acts concludes with Paul in Rome under house arrest. We do not see his day in court, and are not told how his life ultimately ends. In a very significant sense, however, those things do not matter to this story. Paul himself is not the point; the ever-expanding gospel is. It does not matter what happens to this main character; the expansion of the gospel is fully in motion now, whether Paul lives or dies. Thus Acts ends with an odd line: Paul is "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:31). The final word in Greek is an adverb that means, literally, "unhinderedly." It is an unusual grammatical construction to end a book, yet it fits this one perfectly. Acts is about the ever-expanding gospel, and it most appropriately ends with a description of that mission being fulfilled. It is open ended, leaving the reader to

find his or her own place in the story of this gospel as it spreads to the very ends of the earth.

The book of Acts' call to the reader is clear: carry the gospel to everyone in every place. Yet the frustration of the contemporary church is that more often our gospel builds bigger cathedrals, hunkers down in our own selfishness, prays for the expansion of our own territory (whether this be names on the church roll or acreage owned), and acts as if some people simply do not belong in this kingdom. Acts reminds us that such a gospel is wrongheaded, misguided, and antithetical to the one Christ envisions. Acts re-calls us to a radically selfless gospel whose mission is to reach the ends of the earth at any and all personal cost. It reminds us that the "ends of the earth" can be in a land far away, or among the socially marginalized neighbors who live in our shadows every moment. May our gospel be ever-expanding.



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