

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Week 7 - Day 1: The Multi-Ethnic Kingdom

“Paul had come to believe that Jesus couldn’t simply be added on to the earlier picture of God’s rescuing kingdom. The shocking unexpected events of the Messiah’s death and resurrection, coupled with the dramatic sense of personal renewal for which the only explanation was the outpoured divine spirit, meant that everything had changed. A new world had been launched. And if people were trying to live in that new world while wanting at the same time to put on a good face before people who hadn’t realized just how radical this new world was, they were precisely ‘putting on a face,’ playing a part, covering up reality with a mask. They were, in short, play acting.’ The Greek word for ‘playacting’ is hypokrisis, from which we get the English term ‘hypocrisy’.” - *Paul, A Biography* by NT Wright, p. 145-146

After the resurrected King Jesus ascends to take His throne in victory over the kingdom of sin and death, he proceeds to initiate the next phase of His kingdom mission that we have been tracing throughout this series: to bless all nations! We have seen how Jesus accomplishes **salvation** as the promised seed of the woman who crushes the serpent. Now, Acts shows us how Jesus turns the nations into His kingdom space by adopting them into the kingdom family and establishing his loving rule over them as the everlasting King.

The book of Acts seeks to answer this question; how would a strictly Jewish message about a Jewish King become good news that is truly “for the nations” considering the surrounding cultural and traditional diversity? Even Jesus’ disciples had a Jewish Kingdom in mind! However, here is the answer that Jesus gives his disciples when they ask the question about the kingdom:

Acts 1:6-8 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 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.”

Jesus is anticipating something BIGGER! Verse 8 outlines the journey the disciples would take as they proceed on their kingdom mission. As many Jews traveled from around the area to Jerusalem for the Feast of Firstfruits, this happens:

Acts 2:4 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

God establishes His kingdom space not by living in a tabernacle or a temple. His Spirit now resides in the hearts of His people! That is good news!

The Holy Spirit brings the same loving and relational kingdom authority that Jesus had on earth. Love, truth, and restoration begin to flood Jerusalem through the disciples. In the following chapters, we see Peter miraculously breaking out of prison, healing the lame, and boldly proclaiming the good news that cut to the heart of many listeners:

Acts 2:37-40 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

As the Holy Spirit drew more and more people to himself, small kingdom communities began to form offering a new way of life centered around the loving and purpose driven rule of Jesus. God’s kingdom space became a reality on earth as it is in heaven in the power of the Holy Spirit!

Acts 4:32-35 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

A new kind of multi-ethnic familial community centered full of love, generosity, and purpose!
That is good news!

The Jewish religious leaders, who had thought they had overcome this Jesus movement, were not happy that their religion was being undermined by someone who had claimed to fulfill it. Stephen, one of the men who was chosen to serve the growing “church” network, says this to his Jewish audience:

Acts 7:51 “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Stephen became the first martyr for these comments at the hands of the religious leaders forcing the now persecuted Christians to flee. Yet, the Holy Spirit could not be stopped! God used this persecution to bring the gospel to Samaria and an Ethiopian Eunuch through Phillip.

And oh by the way, Saul, the religious leader who led the stoning of Stephen, God miraculously grabs hold of him too!

Acts 9:3-9 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

From here on out, Acts shows how the kingdom of God begins to "break loose" as it moves into the non-Jewish (Gentile) world from the shackles of religious and cultural Judaism. Here is what Peter, one of the most prominent Jews, hears when dealing with Cornelius, a Gentile who had come to fear the God of the Jews.

Acts 10:15 But the voice spoke again: 'Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean''

The cleansing of sins is now available to all nations! That is Good News!

This "break" between the Jewish tradition and the Gentile world, however, was anything but smooth and easy. Paul writes in Galatians 2 about a confrontation between himself and the Apostle Peter over Jewish customs and traditions that Paul believed must now be seen in the light of the justification provided through Christ's death and resurrection.

Galatians 2:11-12 "But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision"

Galatians 2:14b-16 "I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?" "You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we

might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law”

It was going to take a special effort to reconcile the various cultures and traditions in order to unite the Jews and the Gentile world. Yet once again, the Holy Spirit could not be stopped!

The second half of Acts follows Paul, formerly known as Saul, who sets out on 3 different missionary journeys to share this good news to anyone and everyone who would listen across the empire of Rome! As a Jew, he is able to speak into their culture, yet as a citizen of Rome, he is able to empathize with the cultural influences that had been permeating each society in the Roman Empire.

1 Corinthians 9:20-23 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

This radical and revolutionary theme - the salvation of the nations - that the Holy Spirit unfolds in the book of Acts, as well as from my experience in cross-cultural missions in China, Cambodia and the Bay Area, I have come to love and celebrate the multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-lingual expression of the kingdom of God! I believe that this truth about God's kingdom has direct implications in modern-day American culture, as well. The kingdom of Jesus is not exclusive to any race, language or culture – it is truly composed of those from every tribe, tongue and nation. It is the reality that wherever you come from, the Holy Spirit cleanses you of your sin and you are adopted into God's kingdom family. Furthermore, you yourself become God's space and God's representative in your community!

The book of Acts concludes with Paul reaching Rome to preach the gospel in the midst of one of the most powerful earthly kingdoms the world has ever known.

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

The kingdom of God was being established right under the roof of the Roman Empire. We are left to wonder, would the most powerful earthly kingdom be able to quench the work of the Holy Spirit? Which kingdom would ultimately prevail?

-Randy Odom

Share the Gospel: As I think about the book Acts, as well as the passage from Galatians where Paul confronts Peter, I see that a fresh presentation and understanding of the gospel is sometimes as necessary for believers, as well as for unbelievers. Sometimes a recalibration of the perspective of believers is necessary as we can too easily fail to see the revolutionary aspect of the gospel we claim to believe and profess. Therefore, as the gospel confronts a non-believer to consider the claims of Christ on his or her life, it confronts the believer to more deeply consider the implications of those claims and how they apply to the way one interacts with the diverse world around them.

Personal Observations, Reflections, and Prayers: