

The Spreading Flame: Introduction

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Have you ever asked yourself why Christianity spread like wildfire across the globe? Why did people flock to join the faith? Why among the many charismatic prophets and powerful world religions did this unlikely movement not only survive but triumph while others faded and fell?

We begin with a small group from the backwaters of the Roman Empire and after two or three centuries, lo and behold, they have somehow taken over the world. That is a truly remarkable development. That is the story of Acts. That is the story of the spreading flame!

For two millennia, the birth of Christ has been the greatest event in world history. The moment Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, God became man, and eternal salvation became possible. This date has been the separation point of mankind's time on earth, with B.C. designating the era before Christ, and A.D., anno domini, in the Year of the Lord, the years after.

It is amazing to re-live the heady days of the first few centuries and examine the personalities and strategies that led to this incredible coup! Remember the cry? "These are the men who have turned the world upside down, and now they have come here!" Firebrands like Peter and Paul are heroes in the hall of faith! Hundreds followed them, and thousands followed their followers; each of them willing to lay down their lives, if necessary, to see the triumph of the Cross.

What made them do it? What would make you lay down your life for the faith?

The main impelling force came from above and within! It drove simple fishermen to become flaming evangelists! It converted angry Pharisees and transformed them into mighty Apostles!

If you are going to change the world, you don't do it through legislation, social programs or military action; it must come from deep within the heart and soul of a man. When you convert the heart of a man, you have changed the future of nations!

That's what made Christianity great! It took the whole man and the whole woman and transformed them completely. Every word, every act and every thought of the individual was converted to the Lordship of Christ!

They were no longer Pharisees or Zealots (In our language it would mean they were no longer Republicans or Democrats, Conservatives or Socialists), instead they completely identified themselves and their ideology with Christ, and completely converted their values and viewpoints to Jesus.

They became known as Christians first! Christians only! Christians through and through! The rest is details. The rest just does not matter. What can possibly compare to eternity?

They submitted every whit of their ideology to Christ and to His Word. They Christianized their values, Christianized their worship, Christianized their politics and Christianized their entire world!

That incredible change produced an invisible revolution! Men and women, slaves and masters, rich and poor, people from every background and every strata of life quietly revolted against the status quo and changed sides overnight. They left “the world” and pledged allegiance to Jesus.

It is our aim to take you through the book of acts a few verses at a time, so that you can learn the philosophy of Jesus and the Apostles.

The Books that Luke Wrote

The good Doctor Luke traced this explosion from its inception.

1 The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 2 until the day in which He was taken up,

Luke Wrote the book of Acts to a person, whom most believe was a fictitious man named Theophilus. The name Theophilus is a compound word meaning a friend of God, or one who loves God. The point being that if you love the Lord Jesus Christ, you’re going to love the book of Acts. You are going to love the spreading flame of the Gospel. And you are going to keep that fire burning and spreading.

The first account

Luke wrote an original work. It is an account of all the Lord began to do and teach.

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of the things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had a perfect understanding of all things from the very beginning, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed

Luke wrote the Words and Works of Jesus Christ, so that we could understand the historical truth of Jesus life and be transformed by the message of the Gospel. The book of Luke included the life and times of Jesus the Messiah up until the ascension.

The sequel

The Book of acts is the Sequel to the book of Luke. It takes off where Luke ended. Acts details the Power of the Holy Spirit and the Witness of the Apostles as they engulfed the world in the spreading flame of the gospel. It is a powerful drama meant to encourage every one of us to take advantage of the Spirit’s power in our witness.

The Title of the book is “The Acts of the Apostles.” and indeed they are the focus of the book. The Apostles as a group are mentioned 24 times in the book of acts. While Luke did not record all that Andrew and Bartholomew and the others did, they do play a dominant role in this book. Behind the scenes, the Apostles were very busy doing God’s work.

How the Story is Told

There are two ways to outline this book. The first is

Geographically

In Acts 1:8 Jesus left the disciples with this promise, **“you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

That is an outline of the book and it is also the very simple plan that Jesus left for his Disciples to follow about how to change the world. You start at home – Jerusalem. You move out into the wider community Judea. You even reach the untouchables and the outcasts. That’s Samaria. And then you head out to reach the utter most parts of the earth.

But this more than just outline the book, every Christian ought to **memorize Acts 1:8**, for it contains our marching orders. It tells us what our mission on earth is. Our mission is to focus on our relationship with God so that we are constantly living by the power of the Holy Spirit. When that happens our power will be expressed in our witness wherever we go. We are witnesses. Some of us are powerful witnesses, and others are poor witnesses. Some of us portray a vital Christianity, and others of us are living lives that are a sad reflection on our Savior. What kind of witness are you?

We must always remember that **foreign missions is completely dependent on the effectiveness of missions at home**. If we don’t reach the people in our own back yard, there’s no way we will be able to sustain missionaries going to tim-buc-too. We need to have a vital, growing, giving church if we are ever to reach the world. That’s why we need to have you become missionaries to our children’s ministry. Missionaries to you neighbors. Missionaries to the jails and prisons and rescue missions. This is still our mission. This is still our strategy. And our goal is always to reach the world! That’s what our little church aims at. We have an incredible goal! We want to reach the world! Won’t you join us.

1-7 Jerusalem – city evangelism

8-12 Judea / Samaria – Home missions

13-28 Utter most parts of the earth – foreign missions

Biographically

The other outline of the book of acts is biographical. It is basically the story of two Apostles.

1-12 The Apostle Peter (Jewish Evangelism)

13-28 The Apostle Paul (Gentile Evangelism)

Even the Apostles recognized that **not everyone had the same gifting and calling**. One Apostle, Peter was called to reach the Jews. His ministry was aimed at a specific ethnic group: God’s chosen earthly people. He wanted to win them to Jesus their Messiah, so that they could also be God’s heavenly chosen people. Paul was called to follow a different track. His audience was broad. He ended up reaching Gentiles. He was incredibly effective at winning the pagan world to Christ.

Acts also shows how the church grew, and how the gospel went from Jewish in nature, to the Gentiles and became a universal message, that whoever calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved.

And the book does not disappoint. Once the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles his coming was more powerful than a nuclear explosion. The life transforming power of the Holy Spirit invaded our planet and radically changed the world's landscape!

How the Church Grew

I want to share five explosions in the book of acts, each more dynamic than the last that show how this little rag tag group of fishermen and outcasts transformed the world. These five verses show how the church grew exponentially.

2:47 – Added daily (3000 added that day)

Acts 2:47 is the first explosion. The church began with a bang. The Holy Spirit filled the Apostles. Peter preached a stunning message, and according to Acts 2:41 about 3000 of them made a decision to follow Christ in Baptism. Great things were happening to that newborn church and 2:47 says, “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Wouldn't be incredible if we saw people coming to Christ every day! That's our goal here at Pine Grove! But there's more.

5:14 – Added multitudes (Acts 4 – 5000 were added)

In Acts 4 the Apostles kept preaching, and in 4:4 we read, “many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” The church is growing. But the numbers don't do justice to what is going on, because in the next chapter we read 5:14, “And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”

Not just one multitude, but multitudes! How many is that? I don't know. It doesn't say. One version says there were crowds of them. Another used the words large and increasing numbers, still another says that throngs were added. One person after another! This is exponential growth. But wait, there's more. This little rocking church is just getting started winning the world!

6:7 – disciples multiplied

“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.” Disciples are almost better than converts. Why? Because our goal is not just to win people to Jesus. It is to build them up in Jesus, so we can send them out for Jesus. Our goal is to train as many disciples for Jesus as we possibly comes before He returns! That's the way to see the ministry explode! You must become a disciple! You must not just be a pew warmer. You have got to take this Jesus thing seriously! And that's when the church exploded!

9:31 – church multiplied

“Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And... the churches were multiplied.” If we are to reach the world for Christ one of our ambitious goals must be to plant other churches. If we can get other churches to be rocking churches, and to do what we do! The world will be reached for Jesus! Incredible. But there is still one more step.

19:20 – grew mightily and prevailed

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed

This is an evangelism explosion. When you receive the word, believe the word and practice the Word, it grows mighty in your life, and mighty in the lives of others around you! This is the spreading flame. This is where our little church is heading! This is what the book of acts is all about.

Jesus was preparing the disciples for an explosion! The flame was about to spread so rapidly that it could not be extinguished. Soon it would prevail and have victory! It started with a simple but profound command, “But you will receive power to be my witnesses.” Having heard that powerful command, Doctor Luke picked up on it and demonstrated how it was carried out over the next 35 years. In this verse, verse 8 we find the outline and the key to the entire book.

From beginning to end, the book of Acts is like an out of control blaze. The more the enemies of the faith attempted to smother it, the faster it spread. And it has. The centuries pass, and the flame still burns brightly, spreading to the world. From one continent to the other, from the populations centers to rural country sides it still sweeps the land.

By the year 250 – Christianity, which began with tiny groups, scattered in cities across the empire, have become numerous, they have become a significant segment of the population. There is some evidence that in many towns in North Africa, they may actually have been a majority already.

In the year 251, right at the time of the persecution of Decius, we have a register of the church at Rome, which says that they had 46 presbyters and over 1,500 widows [and needy persons] on the roster of the church at Rome. If you have 46 Elders and 1500 widows, you have a mega church. I would assume that the church of Rome, just 200 years after Christ to be over 10,000 strong.

It is no wonder that by the year 325 they have become the official religion. In fact, by the end of the 4th century In 380 AD Theodosius the Great made all other religions illegal. That is stunning.

And how stands Christianity today? Is the flame still spreading? It can, and it is. That movement can happen again where you live, but it must begin with a radical transformation of your heart! You must be willing to let Jesus do surgery and change whatever is necessary! Never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit and one single person!

In the highlands of the interior of the East Malaysian state of Sarawak on the heavily-forested island of Borneo, there is a small village called Barrio. It is only accessible by small planes capable of landing on the tiny mountain-ringed runway, or by a long journey by canoes up Jungle Rivers and trekking on foot. And yet, every person in that village confesses the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

In southern Zaire, where political turmoil and a corrupt government has many people on the brink of starvation, there are small groups of Christians who gather in rural mud-brick churches, sometimes without even a roof, and there each Sunday, they sing the praises of a king whose name is Jesus.

Through the long years of repression in the Soviet Union and in China where for so many years public worship was forbidden, we now discover that the church was not only alive but growing, and is now stronger than it ever was in those lands. Many people in those lands refused to confess Mao Tse-Tung or Stalin as king, preferring to confess Jesus instead, sometimes at great personal cost.

Today over 2 billion claim the Christian name

Somehow, that historical development — the universal reign of One who died as a subversive criminal at the town dump of Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago — must be explained. This book alone will stand the test of time. This church will grow like a spreading flame. This Jesus alone will be triumphant. I will build my Church, and it will prevail, even over the very gates of hell.

From beginning to end, the book of Acts is like an out of control blaze. The more the enemies of the faith attempted to smother it, the faster it spread. But did you know that Luke left off one thing from the book of acts? I believe that Luke purposely never wrote an ending for the book. When you read it, you feel like it should go on and on and on. The centuries pass, and the flame still burns brightly, spreading to the world. From one continent to the other, from the population centers to rural countrysides it still sweeps the land. And we are now a part of the spreading flame. You can do this. Together we can. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13