

The Power and Purpose of Christ's Church

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[0 : 00] Now that we turn to God's Word this morning, Paul's beginning a series on Acts, so we begin this morning in chapter 1. That's page 909 in the Church Visitor's Bible. We're going to read chapter 1, verses 1 to 11, beginning verse 1, chapter 1.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, You heard from me, for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

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.

And when he had said these things, they were looking on. He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

[1 : 46] This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Amen. May God bless to us this his word.

Well, good morning, and welcome to the Tron from me. And do turn back in those Bibles to Acts chapter 1. So Acts chapter 1, and looking at verses 1 to 11 there.

I don't know about you, but I find that my fundamental convictions are challenged on almost a daily basis. Through what I read on the news, what I see posted on Facebook, and the fundamental worldviews that are assumed on the TV that I watch.

All the time, my convictions about God, about the Bible, about Jesus, about the gospel, even the very concept of truth.

They are always being challenged and undermined. They're under attack, or so it seems to me at least. I'm sure you're the same. And so what better book to turn to than the book of Acts?

[3 : 05] Acts is a book that down through the years has given Christians clarity and certainty about the content of the gospel message. Clarity and certainty about the priorities of the gospel church.

Clarity and certainty about the unhindered progress of that gospel to the end of the earth. It's a book that calibrates our expectations for how things will work out for the gospel church.

It reassures us that Jesus is at work now through his church. And it reassures us about the reality of what that looks like. And it's a bit different from what you and I might tend to think.

As we read through the account of Acts, the experience of the church then, that calibrates our expectations for the gospel ministry now.

It's therefore so important that we get the message of Acts into our bloodstreams, so that we know what we're about as a church and as individual Christians.

[4 : 13] Here's a snippet of a conversation I had not long ago. I've just been speaking about the message of the gospel and the task of Christians in speaking that gospel, of telling others.

And this guy came and said to me, that's all very well, what you've been saying, but isn't there more to it than that? Isn't there something else? Isn't the key thing for Jesus, for his followers, just loving others, about showing mercy in practical ways?

Isn't that really what's it about? That's the main thing, isn't it? How might you respond to that sort of thinking? Getting Acts clear in our minds will help us to answer that sort of thing.

Or perhaps you find yourself looking over the fence at the lush grass of another church. A church that seems to have much more of a buzz about it, much more exciting.

They do healings. There's prosperity preached from the pulpit. There's promise of happiness. That looks very powerful and quite different from what we do.

[5 : 25] Have we got it right? Should I perhaps try out that other more exciting looking church? Getting Acts clear in our minds will help us think clearly about those impressive looking ministries and churches.

Or maybe you just question the content of what we major on. Perhaps you doubt the gospel message that we hold out. You wonder, have we got our priorities right?

Perhaps you're new to church life. Perhaps you've been coming along here for a few weeks or a few months. And you wonder, why do you do what you do as a church? Why do you focus on what you focus on?

Well, getting Acts clear in our minds will help us think clearly about all those issues, about what we do as a church and why. Now, this first section we're looking at this morning is all about Jesus' ascension into heaven and the giving of his spirit to the church and the certain purpose and power that gives to the church then and now.

It's about Christ continuing work in this world and what that looks like. But notice first how Luke begins his account.

[6 : 42] Look at verse 1. In the first book, O Theophilus, I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. This book of Acts, this is the second part of Luke's work.

The first part was his gospel. The first book in which Luke details all that Jesus began to do and to teach. And the implication is that this second volume, this book called Acts, is about what Jesus continues to do and to teach.

And Luke is writing so that we would have clarity about what this continuing work of Jesus really looks like. And he writes in such a way not just to give clarity but also certainty.

Remember Luke's great purpose, which he states clearly at the very start of his gospel. Part 1. A purpose that holds for the second part as well. The book of Acts.

We're going to flip pages for just a moment. If you turn back to the start of Luke's gospel, let me read the first few verses which serve as an introduction not just to his gospel account but also his second volume, the book of Acts.

[7 : 58] Can someone shout out a page if you've got it? 855. So Luke chapter 1, 855. Let me read the first few verses there. This is how Luke introduces his gospel.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, having delivered them to us.

It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things that you have been taught.

He writes that you may have certainty. So taking the gospel and Acts as Luke's single work, we can say, to quote one preacher, that he is writing so that we will have certainty about what Jesus has done and is doing, and also that we will have certainty about the way in which Jesus is working now through his church.

So what clarity and certainty is Luke bringing his readers then and now? Well, he brings clarity and certainty about the historical facts and the implications of Jesus' resurrection and his ascension.

[9 : 23] He brings clarity and certainty about the content of the gospel message that we're to proclaim, and clarity and certainty about the significance of the sending of his spirit and the subsequent mission of the church.

William Taylor, speaking about the book of Acts, says that Luke defines, defends, and declares the gospel through his two-volume work.

He defines it, but he also defends it and also declares it. That's a helpful summary, I think. Defining, defending, and then declaring. And this really is key stuff because it shapes the daily realities of Christ's church today.

It shapes what we should be focusing on, prioritizing now in the life of the church. It shapes and directs the very message that we proclaim. So then, we're looking at two key things this morning. First, in verses 1 to 5, we see the power of Christ's church. And then second, in verses 6 to 9, we see the purpose of Christ's church.

[10:35] So looking firstly, verses 1 to 5, the power of Christ's church. These verses show us the reality of the ascended Christ continuing his work and his reign over his church through his spirit, which he gives to his followers.

It's all about what Jesus is continuing to do. He is the hero of this book. It's all about what Jesus is continuing to do through his spirit.

Notice in these verses that Jesus is not just risen, which is astonishing, which is the absolutely central foundation to the Christian faith.

It guarantees our hope for a future resurrection. But Jesus is not just risen, but also he is ascended. And these two momentous events pervade the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts.

And in particular, it is his ascension that is often overlooked. I'm not sure about you, but I had the ascension of Jesus tacked on the end of my mental map of Jesus' life.

[11:44] I knew it happened, but I was not quite sure why it was important. Why is it significant? But Luke makes a big deal of it here. Just listen to the end of his gospel account.

I'll read a few verses from the end of that. He says, Then he, Jesus, opened their minds, that is, the disciples, he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, blessing God. That's the end of Luke's gospel account.

[12:58] And the key thing there at the end was that he rose back, he went back to heaven. And then here again, at the start of Acts, his second volume, Jesus' ascension is the pivotal point.

Look at verse 2. Until the day when he was taken up, and after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit.

And look on to verse 9. He was lifted up. And again, verse 11, this Jesus who was taken up. Jesus is risen, and he has ascended.

He's been taken up. And Luke is at pains here, not just to provide plenty of evidence about his resurrection, but also his ascension.

He mentioned it several times. It is the risen Lord Jesus who ascends to heaven and who now sits at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is right now, in his resurrected body, sat in the heavenly throne room.

[14:02] And from there, he directs the mission of his church, which is the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. That's what he says there at the end of Luke.

And here again, at the start of Acts, that is the task he gives to his church. But how does Jesus direct that work from heaven?

How is Jesus still working? Well, his ascension here is linked with the pouring out of his Spirit. Only once Jesus has ascended will the Spirit come.

That is what he promises at the end of the Gospel. He says, Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed from power on high. And then here again in Acts, Luke records again that same promise.

Verse 4. Now that's a promise that was long anticipated by God's people.

[15:07] The prophets, Joel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, all looked forward to a time when God would pour out his Spirit in fullness upon his people. And so this pouring out of the Spirit that Jesus promised, which you read about later in Acts, is the great fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

Promises fulfilled which mark the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Promises fulfilled which mean that God is with his people in ways not seen before.

Jesus is, through his Spirit, with his church, directing everything. That is a great source of encouragement for Christians today, isn't it?

Christ is, through his Spirit, with us. He has given his Spirit to his church. So it's not simply the case that Jesus spent three intense years with his apostles and just left them to get on with it. He didn't just wind them up and let them go. No. Through his Spirit, Jesus would continue to be with his apostles. He was still directing, still leading, still equipping.

[16:21] And so his church has real power. It has the power of the Spirit. That's the great reassuring thing, isn't it, for his church. Christ is with his people even today.

But it's a pouring out of the Spirit for a specific purpose. And that's what we see in verses 6 to 11. We see the purpose of Christ's church. Jesus sent his Spirit in order that his apostles would be his witnesses.

The giving of the Spirit is linked with proclamation. Look again at verse 8. He says, 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.

The giving of Christ's Spirit leads inevitably to witness, and witness that will go to the end of the earth.

And what was the content of that witness? What were they to say? Well, they were witnesses to the life, the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and the eventual return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17:40] It is a witness to the explanation of those words and works, how they are the fulfillment of all that the Scriptures pointed forward to. And it is the call to the obedience of faith, to the submission to Jesus as Lord, demonstrated in repentance and faith.

That was the content of their witness. That was the task they were being called to. That is the purpose of Christ's church today. Two things in particular to say about the purpose of the church, about its task of proclamation.

Firstly, it's proclamation with power. It's proclamation with power. Notice what Jesus says there at the start of verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

And it is a power that is very tightly related indeed to the task of being Christ's witnesses. The task of proclamation requires power.

Now, power is required because of the very nature of what is being proclaimed. They proclaimed Christ crucified, God himself come down to earth, crucified on a tree, who died, who rose again, who now reigns in heaven over the entire cosmos.

[19:04] That is a deeply controversial message. It is a message that provokes huge opposition. Just read on in the book of Acts.

Again and again, that message is met with fierce opposition. Again and again. And so Jesus equips his disciples with great power.

Because power is needed for that task. We see evidence after evidence of that power at work in the work of proclamation through this book. Just flick over the page of chapter 4, just to see one example.

Chapter 4, verse 31. And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. The filling of the Holy Spirit leads to speaking of the word with boldness.

[20:11] Look on to verse 33. And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Again, power is linked with proclamation.

And that is the key thing. Power, the Holy Spirit at work through his people, enables proclamation. That is the sign of the Spirit at work.

True filling of the Spirit leads to bold proclamation of the gospel, to witness to Jesus. So if you're looking for a Spirit-filled church, a church of Spirit power, then you look for a church that is bold in proclaiming the gospel.

Look for a church that is laser-focused on that task, on witnessing to that truth. That is the sign of a Spirit-filled church.

Now that's not to say that every member of a church like that must be preaching or leading Bible studies.

[21:13] Not at all. There are many ways in which you can serve in the life of the church to enable that work to carry on. Things need to be in place to enable the proclamation of the word to go forward.

We need a building with a roof over our heads that's not going to collapse. That doesn't happen by accident. We need a building that's clean and suitable to use. We need tea and coffee to be made to enjoy fellowship after us.

That doesn't happen by accident. All these things are valuable and contribute to the work of the church. But if the witness to the truth is not central, if that is not the heartbeat of a church, then it's not really a Spirit-filled church at all.

The teaching of the word, the witnessing to the truth, must be the absolute heartbeat, the central thing in all areas of the life of a church. Because that's the priority that Jesus sets here in Acts chapter 1.

It's the priority Jesus sets for his followers and he promises to be with his followers in that task. He promises to equip them with the Spirit for that task. So we can trust that God will be at work as his word goes out.

[22 : 28] He promises to be with us in that task. So that means that we see the vital importance as we pray together corporately for the mission of the church.

That's why as we gather on a Wednesday night to pray, the priority is this very thing. It is the mission of the church, the proclamation to the ends of the earth.

That is why we start on a Wednesday evening thinking about our gospel partners around the world and not praying about our felt needs or our personal needs.

It's not to say we don't pray for that, no. But our priority, the thing we focus on, must be this. It must be the furtherance of the gospel. That's our mission. That's our priorities, we pray.

It means that our confidence is in God working through the regular ministry Sunday by Sunday here. What we're doing here this morning, that is how God works through this preaching of his word as we gather together.

[23 : 33] That is powerful. It may not look it as we look around, but God promises to be with his people in that task. So we don't need special events necessarily.

Some of those might be helpful, but that's not where the power lies. The power lies in the regular Sunday by Sunday ministry. We must have confidence that God is our work through what's going on here.

It means that our focus in our children's work is on the same thing. It's on preaching and proclaiming the gospel. It's teaching the word and doing so without apology. That's why we do what we do as a church.

That's why in Sunday school and Tron Youth Activate, that's why we do what we do. There's a James Phillip quote that I like about this and I didn't look it up, but I vaguely remember it.

And he says that the problem with youth work in churches is not too much Bible. The problem is that church has for too long pandered to the youth. It's watered down the gospel.

[24 : 35] It's watered down Bible teaching. The problem is that we haven't set the bar too high that we've set it too low. The bar's so low that it's barely worth consideration for our youth.

That's a challenge, isn't it? But it's also an affirmation of what we do as a church. It's an affirmation of the task that we go about in our youth work with our children.

We teach the Bible without apology because it's where the power lies. It is the task that Jesus called us to. It's the task that he promises to be with us and with great power.

We could go on looking at different areas of church life, but the heartbeat, the central priority is Acts chapter 1 verse 8. The witnessing to the truth.

That is our task. It's what Jesus set as the church's priority, it's purpose. And he promises to be with us in that task. Proclamation with power.

[25 : 38] But it's also proclamation with perspective. We see here with great clarity what Jesus' timescale, his agenda is and what it isn't.

Jesus gives us the right perspective on his kingdom about when we can really expect it to come. So are we to expect God's restored kingdom now?

No, is the answer. The task of the church is not to build the restored kingdom now, but it is the task of the church to proclaim the kingdom now. Look again at the apostles' question in verse 6 and Jesus' response.

The apostles asked Jesus, Lord, will you at this time restore your kingdom to Israel? Now, that's a fair question, isn't it? Some people like to beat them over the head for asking that question.

How can they be so silly? But it's a good question. They've seen all that Jesus has done. They remember the promises of the Old Testament. They were expecting a real king over a real kingdom in a real world.

[26 : 50] and they wondered if that was going to happen now. But Jesus doesn't blow them out of the water. Look at what he says. He basically says, not yet.

He gives them the right perspective. It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. It's not for you to know that. With Jesus' ascension, the restoration is only beginning.

It's not yet completed. And it will only be completed when he returns. Look at verse 11. The angels speak to the apostles they look on and they say, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Verse 11 hasn't happened yet. We're still living in the verse eight days.

he hasn't yet returned in the same way that he ascended. So, says Jesus, you're not to worry yourself about the complete and final restoration of the kingdom now.

[27 : 58] That's not for you. That's not for now. It is coming, but that's not your concern now. What is your concern now is that task of proclaiming God's kingdom.

That's what he immediately goes on to say, isn't it? Verse eight, but you will receive power and you will be my witnesses. The agenda now is not restoration but proclamation.

They're to announce the kingdom and as we've seen Jesus promises his power through his spirit for that task. That was the task of the apostles and their witness was going to the end of the world.

Nothing would stop that. That's the agenda of the book of Acts. Again and again you see through the book the gospel going forward. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth.

The gospel without hindrance. The gospel to the end of the earth until he comes. That is the age of the apostles and it's also the age that we live in. The church today still faces that same task.

[29 : 03] We're not about restoration but we are about proclamation. We're not about restoration because that will only happen can only happen in its true and full sense when Christ returns.

Only then will we see a new heaven and a new earth. Only then will you and I have resurrection bodies. Only then will every tear be dried.

Only then will we be free from sickness and death. Our task now is proclamation. It's witnessing to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ testifying to the fact of his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension and his coming return.

It's testifying to those events with explanation. Pressing home the response. Pressing people to respond in repentance and faith. That's our task. That's what we're about.

So we proclaim with a right perspective. And that means that we don't promise too much now. We don't promise the sort of things that will only be true when Christ returns.

[30 : 15] So we don't promise healing now. We don't promise freedom from sickness now. We don't promise health and wealth now. Now you may well think that there isn't much danger of me falling for the prosperity gospel.

It's so blatantly not right. But it holds great power. It's what our itching ears long to hear. It's what our clutching unsatisfied hearts leap for.

And in a sense those desires are right. Who doesn't want freedom from pain? Who doesn't want freedom from sickness? But the thing is Jesus doesn't promise those things now.

Yes, one day we will be with him in a restored world. A new Eden. A new creation. Our hearts long for that. And it's right to long for that. But it's not yet. It's not for now.

So we don't promise too much now as we witness to Jesus. But we also don't promise too little for the future. I think by being careful not to promise too much now we can downplay, we can undersell the future that is coming.

[31 : 32] There is a great and wonderful future for those who trust in Jesus. It is a real future. And it's guaranteed because of his resurrection. resurrection. It will be fully consummated when he returns.

One day it's going to happen. We're not to promise less than what the Bible does. Just listen to these words from the end of Revelation.

These glorious words of the glorious future that awaits every Christian. then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adored for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

[32 : 38] Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. Isn't that a glorious future?

We should proclaim that but with the right perspective. Not yet but one day. So we can press on now with proclamation.

We can do it with confidence because we know what Christ has promised. And he's promised his spirit empowered witnessing to the end of the earth.

And that is a task as the book of Acts shows us that is unstoppable. It's unhindered. At the very end of the book we see Paul proclaiming the truth about the kingdom teaching about the Lord Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance.

And Jesus says right here at the side of Acts that the proclamation of his kingdom would go to the end of the world. And there at the end of the book we see that happening. The word is making steady unhindered progress.

[33 : 47] There is a certainty about chapter 1 verse 8. It is going to happen. And isn't that hugely reassuring to you and I? Nothing is going to stop this mission because it's Christ's mission.

Now we look out on a western world that is hostile to that gospel don't we? but the apostles they also looked out on a world that was likewise hostile to that same gospel.

But that same gospel advanced and is advancing and will continue to advance. Yes there was opposition. Yes there was suffering. But the gospel went out and out and out.

And as you and I are engaged in that same task with that same gospel we know that nothing is going to stop it. Nothing. And that's what we're about as a church.

Straightforward witnessing to the truth. And as we do that we know that the gospel will advance because Jesus says it is going to the end of the earth. Nothing can stop it.

[34 : 55] We know that God will answer his prayers for true gospel progress because Jesus promised it. he's promised that the gospel will go to the end of the earth.

It is an inevitable progress. It's a progress without hindrance. So will you play your part in that task? It is going on.

His mission will not fail but will you be part of it? It is the purpose of the true church. Will you make it your passion your priority your life's goal?

It is what we strive as a church to do. It is our goal our passion and by God's grace we are seeing gospel advance new locations new opportunities people being sent out new opportunities all the time let's press on all the more because we know that God is with us in power as we go about that task.

these short verses at the start of Acts are hugely significant. We don't need to wonder about our task as Christians as a church.

[36 : 07] We don't need to work out the content of our message. We don't need to worry about the outcome. These verses settle all those issues and they assure us that Christ is with us by his spirit in great power.

He's with you he's with us as a church as we go about that task. Gospel progress without hindrance that is Christ's mission and he calls us to be part of it.

So will you be and take great confidence as we do. Let me pray. Amen. 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.

Father, these are great promises promises and promises that bring us great clarity, great certainty and great confidence. You've given us a task and you're enabling us to do that task.

So help us to keep fixed on it in every aspect of our lives with the people that we rub shoulders with, our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues, as we seek to witness to the historical fact of Jesus' life.

[37 : 45] and the implications of that. Give us great confidence that you are with us enabling us to do that task. Not only as individuals but as a church, as a church family.

Help us. Keep us laser focused on that one task. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.