

KEY Good to see you all this morning; as Dave (?) said: moving back into Acts.

KEY We've not made a point of it, but a KEY mark of a genuinely Spirit-filled community is its emphasis on ... TEACHING, as the foundation. That shouldn't surprise: Acts opens by picking up on what Jesus began to do and ... TO TEACH.

It's the most common single word describing what the apostles do when they speak.

And in the very first panel, and as a direct outcome of the Spirit, teaching words occur more than TWICE as frequently as ALL the other words for public proclamation.

And NOT just to believers... TEACHING is important to outsiders as well.

Why does teaching matter? Because in the NT, in this time of the Spirit, the most common form of Spiritual Warfare against God's people IS... false teaching. Want to do spiritual warfare? TEACH the truth.

Just as a "spiritless" Christianity is no Christianity at all, a community that doesn't prioritize teaching might also wonder how Christian it actually is.

That's why we've spent so much time working through Luke's gospel—the longest book in the NT—and it's about Jesus. How can I say I'm a believer if I don't really know the ONE in whom I'm believing?

And that's where Acts comes in, the SECOND longest book in the NT: how can we be part of God's new community if we don't know WHO we are?

Indeed, it's why the entire NT is ultimately about teaching.

Well, given LW's recent emphasis on hearing the Spirit, this morning we'll follow his lead.

KEY Our teaching this morning has three main concerns.

We've away for four months, my job is to review (so you know it really IS me) of what Acts is about, and where we've covered so far. (There's no point having all this go in one ear and out the other. Being a Spirit-filled believer is ACTUALLY about learning; so yes, do feel free to take notes.)

Then we'll set out a road map for what's ahead this semester: mostly in the third panel of Acts.

Finally, I'd like step back and ask: why even bother? Why would Holy Spirit give us Acts in the first place?

KEY So what have we covered? Given the relatively tiny numbers of believers in the few but close-knit communities at the time, Luke must have been very well known, having already written the gospel that bears his name—how many “Lukes” could there be, this early in proceedings who had the skill and standing write either?

Like Peter, John, Barnabas, and Paul, he only needs the ONE family name because everyone knows who he is.

He’s almost certainly a Greek and a member of the Antioch church—the first primarily Gentile church in history, and the very church on which the second half of OUR panel 3 focusses.

He’s a close and trusted companion of Paul (Col 4:1; Philemon 24; 2 Tim 4:11), travelling with him during parts of his second and third missionary journeys, on his return to Jerusalem, and subsequent journey to Rome (panels 5-6). He’s also with Paul in his final imprisonment (later in 2 Tim). He knows what he’s talking about.

Speaking of panels, Acts as you’ll remember is structured around six of them.

KEY After a carefully selected account of the early church in Jerusalem (small red circle), the WORD begins to move out, in an ever expanding “ellipse.”

KEY first in 6:8, there are some small steps to Judea and Northward to Samaria, and

KEY then in panel THREE, 9:32 a huge jump, WAY further North —500 kms — and well into Gentile territory, taking root especially in Antioch.

KEY From there, in 12:25, panel FOUR follows the gospel on the first full-blown Gentile mission NORTH WEST to central “Asia” (what we call modern Turkey),

KEY then in 16:6 across into Europe,

KEY and finally, in 19:21 and mostly focused on Paul’s trials, to Rome, finishing up in 28:30.

KEY So what’s Acts on about? Well, as we all now know, Acts is NOT an early church history (far too much is missing and several things repeated).

It’s NOT a daily devotional (just Jesus and me in our quiet time). NOR a handbook on HOW TO regain a lost golden age of a pristine church (good heavens no; it wasn’t that golden!) NOR on how to receive the Spirit; OR even what a Spirit-filled life looks like (better to start with Galatians or Ephesians—though truth to tell, pretty much the concern of the entire NT).

KEY Like all Greco-Roman historiographies of his time, Luke INSTEAD has a LOT to tell us particular facts of the near past. In particular, about HOW we believers got to be WHO we

are. He's certainly INSPIRING, and both a dramatic AND thoughtful writer.

He's ALSO about defending the gospel. The final and longest section is essentially a SINGLE interlocking legal defence of Paul's mission and message before Jews and the Empire.

As to the ancient historiographer's interest in moral guidance; Acts has long been a happy hunting ground for all kinds of exhortation, some bits helpful; others, perhaps the majority, less so.

Discerning between what was unique to them in their particular time and calling, and what speaks to all believers for all time, is a well-recognized problem.

Even in its own day, 1st cent. Jerusalem (panel 1) was historically and culturally unique. The gospel very quickly outgrows it, and most of the key figures leave. No wonder Paul's churches don't seek slavishly to follow its example, AND neither should we.

Similarly, for Peter and Paul. Their apostolic callings are unique and their key tasks can never be repeated. There's only one first coming of the Spirit at Pentecost for Jews and, with Cornelius (our panel) for Gentiles. Barny and Paul's first mission to the Gentiles in Asia and Europe can only happen once.

Yes, they sometimes sound like Christian Harrison Fords. But that's likely because these are PIVOTAL moments—there are huge gaps about which we hear nothing. AND when Paul writes to Timothy, his goal for most believers is a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and dignity.

Even so, there are some universal moral points. One, especially clear in the climactic sixth panel, but often not noted, is the importance of an unimpeachable character. This, apparently more than tongue-speaking and signs and wonders, should be an indisputable mark of what it means to belong to this new Spirit-filled community.

THAT's something we ALL can, and should, imitate. Even in the midst of conflict.

We'll recall that conflict—a common motif in ancient historiographies—is also thorough-going in Acts. It's easy to forget that in Israel's Scriptures, going all the way back to the Exodus, signs and wonders are primarily given in the context of ... conflict.

Everywhere the gospel goes it challenges and deconstructs entire worldviews, both Jewish and pagan—in Jerusalem, Samaria, Caesarea, Psidian Antioch, Lystra, Philippi, Athens, Ephesus,

and on.

But again DO remember, especially in our contentious age, THIS has nothing to do with our digital offence, and dehumanizing keyboard outrage.

Read the material. Their focus is utterly on Jesus; NOT their opinions about politics, conspiracies, or whatever.

So, dear brothers and sisters, be very careful, lest we sully HIS glorious gospel with tawdry, “holier than thou” Instagram virtue-signaling.

KEY And this brings us to Acts’ central concern: (anyone remember?) our new identity.

In SIX movements, describing the growth of this small Jewish sect in outlying and odd Jerusalem, to a majority Gentile phenomenon in cities reaching all the way to Imperial Rome, Luke shows HOW we came to BE WHO we ARE: God’s one new humanity gathered around Jesus, purified by trusting him, and now filled with his life-giving Holy Spirit.

As with other ancient historiographies, one key way of carrying this forward is through particular individuals and especially their clarifying speeches.

This is not to denigrate signs and wonders. They certainly get our attention, BUT more often than not result in confusion.

It’s the speeches that get much more space. Seriously thought-through and thought-provoking, they explain the significance of the history unfolding around them. And that’s not merely Luke’s personal preference. It clearly matters to the Holy Spirit who inspired the original speakers and Luke himself in putting Acts together.

The two key figures here are Peter in the first half, and Paul in the second.

KEY I know it’s almost de rigueur to take gentle, almost patronizing, pot-shots at Peter. But do remember, Jesus himself chose him, HE is the first among the twelve, and this unique apostolic authority makes him, from the very beginning of Acts, the spokesman for the earliest believers. As we’ve seen, he addresses the gathered Jewish crowds at Pentecost, outside the Temple, and responds to the hostile Jewish authorities. His Scriptural knowledge and his rationale here would leave most of us—not least on the ministry team—floundering in his wake.

In our upcoming panel 3—to the Gentiles and Antioch—Peter’s also the one the LORD chooses to validate the utterly gob-smacking transformation—and it really is—occasioned by the SPIRIT coming on Cornelius.

Also prepares us for the transition to Paul.

His contributions are either well-known and barely recognized.

On the one hand, his long Jewish training and cross-cultural experience made him an ideal choice to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and hence obviously the Damascus.

Less well appreciated are his radical redefinitions of what gave people standing in the ancient world. From elite society, his natural born Roman citizenship automatically elevated him into that internationalized circle from whence came all effective authority. Acts (19) reports that several from the highest council in Asia were his friends.

Yet time and again, Paul endures indignities and physical abuse from which a man of his standing could easily have protected himself. Indeed his dreadful catalogues of personal disaster unleashed on his critics constitute a deliberate embarrassment to those who cared about status and self-cultivation. Drawn from the world of servitude, Paul's use of "fellow laborers, coworkers, servant and ministers," of his wealthy patrons was not at all the language to which they were accustomed.

His writing and speaking repudiated the affectations of the classically trained, their retreat into their ivory towers of abstract systemizing, and addiction to a studied indifference toward others, lest they disturb one's enlightened equilibrium. Caring nothing for their attempts at carefully curated attractiveness, no writer in antiquity exposed himself so ruthlessly to direct human contact nor reveals himself in such transparent candor. Utterly captivated by the LORD Jesus' self-abasement, following Christ did mean identifying with him in his sufferings.

A radical anti-humanist, Paul's starting point AND his final goal were always the incarnate historical Jesus.

KEY At the heart of Acts is that the good news about Jesus—HE'S ALWAYS THE guy—is for all peoples, in all social strata, and of both sexes. At Acts' very heart lies a profound personal encounter with and utter commitment TO him.

This is probably one of the hardest lessons for us to absorb. Male nor female; slave nor free.

These things no longer define us.

Our identity is found solely in Jesus. But we'll come back to this.

Now we might rightly wonder, how in an Empire of some 25-30 million, could a tiny marginal group of 10,000 or so believers accomplish this? And against such frequent opposition, and in the face of getting a bit too comfortable, of various hiccups, some outright venal

individuals, and coming to terms with their OWN new identity?

Acts makes it clear: behind all of this is GOD. We'll see that especially in the ONE TRULY massive redefinition that takes place in our Panel 3, this semester.

That too is a great reminder: this is GOD's PROJECT.. and regardless of all kinds of setbacks, HE WILL get it done, through the GIFT of HIS empowering SPIRIT.

They were just starting out. Two thousand years later we can only look on in wonder that one in three people on the planet (over two BILLION) in some way give their allegiance to Jesus, who is arguably the most significant figure in changing the shape human history and culture.

KEY So with that in view, what awaits?

The huge shock of panel 2 was Stephen's Scripturally irrefutable demonstration that so much of God's work all took place BEFORE Israel had a "holy" land, city, or especially a temple. The implication : he's clearly not confined to them, so why so confine him now? This was so inflammatory it unleashed a terrible persecution BUT notice, against " outsider," Greek-speaking Jewish believers.

Ironically, it only served to underline Stephen's point, as the gospel to the lost sheep of Israel in Samaria and even to an Ethiopian proselyte.

In retrospect Panel 3 and Corenilius simply follow the logic: neither is he confined to one ethnic group. Now there's no question, as we've seen that God's working through Israel, his appointed leaders, his covenants, Scriptures, and promises have a unique and inalienable authority. That still stands.

And for sure, in Israel's history God has welcomed Gentiles who believed and accepted the yoke of Torah.

But what no one ever expected was that even that boundary marker would be replaced.

Welcome to panel 3; 9:32—12:24.

In our last Acts session, way back in May, our Luke took us into the opening section, which he entitled "Peter on the Road." It's one of the first signs we get that Peter is already moving beyond Jerusalem.

But what's interesting is the shift in emphasis. Up to this point, as we've just seen, Peter's primary role in Jerusalem was to give speeches. In this section there's exactly .. NONE.

THAT ought immediately to pique our interest. Not only that, we get instead not one but two back-to-back accounts of remarkable mighty deeds. We've not seen any of that since his and John's singular healing of the lame man way back in chapter 3. So what's going on?

Well, think about it. What did we just say about signs and wonders? They are regularly God's way of pointing to his intervention in conflicted situations.

And what comes next? The truly gob-smacking account of Cornelius, traditionally described as his conversion. Hmm... nice try but no cigar. Why would any Jew be upset by a Gentile converting?

The hugely contention issue is instead the COMING of the SPIRIT on an UNCLEAN (meaning unsnipped) Gentile. You want to talk about conflict? We're talking about a boundary that's older than Torah. It's one as old as God's choice of Abraham as the father of God's unique people.

Crossing that picket line REALLY is going to set the fox among the chickens. No wonder it gets told twice.

Can you see the link?

It's precisely this previously unmatched PAIR of mighty deeds—not one but TWO; something we've not seen before in Acts—that preemptively testify, not to Peter's wise words—there's no speeches—BUT to the fact GOD is with him.

These two historical accounts thus AFFIRM in the strongest way to date the front rank Apostolic WITH connection with the utterly shocking and seismic events of the immediately following events around Cornelius (10:1—11:18). Events that are so astonishing they get told twice: first in terms of Peter's and his companions' experience and THEN before some critics in Jerusalem. In other words, sit up and pay attention.

Now I should note, Cornelius is a devout God-fearer—a Gentile who was already deeply attracted to Israel's Yahweh—WHO gave alms generously TO the people, and prayed constantly TO God.

I suspect there are two points here. One, this isn't just dropped on him out of the blue in the middle of a drunken idolatrous binge. He's already fears the LORD. What's about happen is then firmly in the LORD's court. Second, he's not yet submitted to the yoke of Torah. It can't

be Torah observance that prepared the way.

Also notice it all happens—in keeping with Stephen’s incendiary speech—outside Jerusalem and its Temple. It starts first in Caesarea, the seat of Roman power in Judea, and then in Joppa in the house of an unclean tanner. Both are entirely GOD’s own initiative : he sends his angel; he takes Peter “outside” of himself and speaks not once but THREE times about WHO gets to define purity; and, HE, NOW in the midst of a Peter speech, sends his Spirit.

What makes this even more striking for me is that this didn’t happen during the LORD Jesus’ own ministry. It comes after his departure.

The astonishing point? There is no LONGER any ethnic distinction. It’s SOLELY repentance by trusting Jesus, that purifies the heart and leads to both Jew and Gentile receiving the gift of God’s life-giving Spirit.

KEY BUT it’s not just Cornelius. Immediately after him, we have the shorter account of the founding of the church at Antioch. Remember Antioch was the first predominantly Gentile community of believers. IN this respect the forerunner of the vast majority of gatherings of believers.

If the Cornelius event was entirely God’s doing, Antioch is the first intentional evangelizing of Gentiles by believers. And it’s not insider Jerusalem folks, BUT those expelled “outsider” Greek-speaking Hellenistic believing Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene who do it.

Subsequently, Barnabas (himself from Cyprus) who is sent by Jerusalem to check things out. He gives the nod of approval—Jerusalem might be playing catch-up again BUT their authority is not simply ignored.

Then Barny fetches Saul from Tarsus and for a year they together teach many people. It’s here that we are first called Christians. MORE on that when we get there.

ONLY then do we get in 12:1-19 another amazing account of God’s being with Peter: his deliverance from prison.

Well now we know. It’s God’s way of demonstrating that ALL of this, not just Cornelius, and Peter’s defence thereof, but the consequent founding of Antioch and its intentional witness to Gentiles, with Jerusalem’s affirmation... ALL OF THIS, is HIS (God’s) doing.

Why such an emphasis?

Others will have the privilege of unpacking this, BUT our problem is we are so accustomed to this new thing, that we can barely register HOW staggering an event it was.

It really DID turn everything around, and it was God himself who orchestrated it... and to boot (thank you Stephen), outside both the holy city and the temple.

Torah and Jewish bloodline are no longer definitive. The only thing that matters: is the purification that comes from trusting the LORD Jesus. Yep, purity DOES still matter. But now, it's based SOLELY on repentant trust in Jesus.

So, some truly amazing and world-changing events to come. It's gripping stuff and great writing.

KEY Well, that brings us to the final question. Why Acts? And why bother? How many folks really care about history, when there's so much to deal with today? What place the past in the ever pressing immediacy of present?

The NT letters are fine—we get to learn about how to live as God's people in a range of different settings across a range of different social settings and issues.

The Gospels: well of course we surely need to know the one we claim to follow. After all, all kinds of people have a wonderful experience in being healed by Jesus. But that happens without repentance, and is surely NOT the same thing as being a disciple.

Revelation, even though often wondrously misread—and I'll leave it at that—has its own points to make.

But Acts? We've seen what it's not, and what it IS, makes "application" *far* trickier than some of us might have thought.

So WHY did the Holy Spirit give us ALL this stuff?

I think it's His antidote to ... spiritual Alzheimer's.

I realize that's a bracing analogy. I've experienced Alzheimer's ravages on at least two of my former, dearly loved colleagues. I don't know how else to describe it, but it's unspeakably sad to watch someone you know and love, slowly drown, gradually losing their identity in a sea of forgetfulness. Some of us face it even today.

In a world drowning in splintering change, blithering chatter, ephemeral distractions, and the crushing, kaleidoscopic "high beam" glare of THE NEXT BIG THING; ACTS is God reminder of who we really are.

If it's true that we are each the history of our relationships, then for us, the only relationship that FINALLY matters, come what may, is the one true God's compassionate love for his creation. It's that history, covered in Scripture that alone provides a sure and certain anchor, leading to eternal life.

Yes, lots of things happen to us; Scripture is well aware of that. But God offers us a choice as to which history, through his indwelling Spirit, we will allow to define us.

We know from the Gospels WHO Jesus is, what he began to DO and to teach.

Acts is about HOW that beginning brought us to WHO we now are.

It is sometimes said, if you want to know what's inside a full 40 gallon drum, kick it. It's when someone "kicks us" that who we truly are spills out.

That's how Acts is intended to speak to us today. Not primarily by giving us individual guidance on what to do with my current passing problems, but by grounding our very foundational identity in this extraordinary moment of what GOD did in this history.

This is why Acts has enough substance and detail for us to put down roots, but not so much as to overwhelm.

God intended for this HISTORY to be repeatedly read, marked, and inwardly digested so that it becomes WHO we are. So that when we are "kicked," it will be ACTS that comes out, neither Jew nor Greek but his THIRD way.