

Date: March 12, 2023

Scripture: Acts 1:1-8

Series: *God's Grand Story*

Title: *"Foundations of the Church"*

Acts 1:1-8

**1 - The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach,**

**2 - until the day when He was taken up to Heaven, after He had given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.**

**3 - To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of things regarding the kingdom of God.**

**4 - Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, *"Which," He said, "you heard of from Me;***

**5 - *for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."***

**6 - So, when they had come together, they began asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"**

**7 - But He said to them, *"It is not for you to know periods of time or appointed times which the Father has set by His own authority;***

**8 - *but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth."***

Have you ever gotten an AMBER alert on your phone---alerting you to the fact that a child is missing? It sounds like this: [https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video;\\_ylt=AwrFRvt6WwZkVjIAgYJXNyoA;\\_ylu=Y29sbwNiZjEecG9zAzEEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3BpdnM-?p=amber+alert+sound&fr2=piv-web&type=E210US105G0&fr=mcafee#id=1&vid=07675db2f72d0e5a0831b8cf90913f9e&action=view](https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video;_ylt=AwrFRvt6WwZkVjIAgYJXNyoA;_ylu=Y29sbwNiZjEecG9zAzEEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3BpdnM-?p=amber+alert+sound&fr2=piv-web&type=E210US105G0&fr=mcafee#id=1&vid=07675db2f72d0e5a0831b8cf90913f9e&action=view)

I don't know about you but when my phone makes that terrifying sound and I read the terrifying news my heart breaks for the child---and his or her parents. I think, *"Somewhere in our area there are parents who are pacing the floor worrying about their little boy or girl. They feel terrified---helpless---and have asked for help in finding their child."*

I mention this because our Heavenly Father is like those parents in that HIS children are lost. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, thanks to the fall, we have all ***"gone astray."*** God's grand story tells us that our Heavenly Father responded to the fall by initiating a massive, three-phase AMBER alert system of His own---a search and rescue strategy to "find" His lost children and bring them home.

The first phase was ISRAEL. God wanted a nation through whom He could show His character and a nation to call His lost children back to Himself and He chose the people of Israel for this task. The second phase was Jesus Christ, God's only Son. Jesus, Who came to ***"seek and save the lost"***--- (Luke 19:10) and declared, ***"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes [home] to the Father except through Me."*** (John 14:6)

This morning as we continue our study of God's Grand Story, we are focusing on the third phase in God's "amber alert" rescue strategy: THE CHURCH. Before He ascended to Heaven Jesus gave the church the job of sharing the good news that God had sent Him to pay the sin debt for all mankind---making THE WAY for people to be forgiven and come home to God. The church was equipped for this task on that first Pentecost Sunday when God bestowed on those first believers the powerful gift of His indwelling Holy Spirit---a gift every single believer since receives the moment he or she decides to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. Jesus foretold this, the beginning of Phase Three in verse 8 of our text when He said, ***"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth."***

On that amazing day, God's Spirit united believers into a powerful tool---THE CHURCH---that He used to turn the world upside down or more accurately RIGHT SIDE UP---by bringing His lost children home---and that brings us to the question I want us to deal with this morning, namely:

*“What does it look like when a local church is the kind of church God had in mind?” Or, to put it another way, “What qualities are found in churches that are effective tools in God’s ‘phase three’ strategy?”* Of course, the best place to look for an answer to this question is the book of Acts because it describes the very FIRST church—the original deal! In the first few chapters of Acts Luke tells us about this amazing congregation.

Now, the first church wasn’t a perfect church—there is no such thing—but it seems to me that they got the main things right. It was an amazing congregation that God used in a powerful way!

So, borrowing an idea from Kyle Idleman, pastor at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, I want us to take this description of the first church in the book of Acts—and then compare and contrast it with some images that capture how many people think of the church today. This will help us see how far we have gotten from the original—in our understanding of the church—OUR church—as God intends it to be—and perhaps help us to see what we each need to do as individual believers to get our thinking more in line with our THIRD PHASE assignment from God.

**(1) First, these days many think of the church as a sort of MOVIE THEATER.**

Now, a movie theater is where you go—usually on the weekend to spend a couple hours to be entertained and perhaps even a little inspired—depending on the movie of course. We also go there to be distracted from the trials and tribulations of life. These days we pay a lot of money for this form of entertainment—even more for popcorn and other snacks! Many theaters will bring your food—not just popcorn—but a full meal—right to your seat. When we saw *The Jesus Revolution* last week, I noticed a “call for service” button on my arm rest. It seems that—in an attempt to compete with live-streamed films that you can watch at home—theaters are upping the ante—making going to a theater as enjoyable as possible.

In any case after the film is over and we’ve wiped our mouths with a napkin—we leave our recliner seats and dirty plates behind—and as we head for the car the first thing we do is go into movie critic mode. We discuss things like: *“Was it a good movie? Did it go too long? Did the plot drag? How were the special effects? Would we give it a thumbs up or a thumbs down?”*

And—this is how many people tend to approach or judge the church. As Kierkegaard put it, *“We tend to think of church as a kind of theater: we sit in the audience, attentively watching the actor onstage who draws every eye to himself. If sufficiently entertained, we show our gratitude with applause and cheers.”* Now, Kierkegaard said this a long time ago but unfortunately many believers around the world still enter sanctuaries like ours here at Redland and think of themselves as the audience.

In their mind they come to be entertained and hopefully a little inspired. They hope the pastor will tell some good jokes to make them laugh a bit and share some moving stories to make them cry a bit. They hope the music will be of a professional caliber and will be performed according to their tastes. In some churches—certainly not Redland—when they leave, they give the service a thumbs down because for one or more reasons the service wasn’t satisfying. Many leave reviews on the Internet.

Well, this is not the way the New Testament describes a “phase three church.” No—in the church as Acts describes it, you and me—we are not the audience. We are not here to be entertained. Don’t get me wrong. There is an audience—but you’re not it. I’m not it. No—the audience is GOD HIMSELF. So—with this corrected mindset, we should leave a church service not asking ourselves, *“What did I get out of it?”* but rather, *“What did God get out of it? Was God pleased?”* Philip Yancey writes, *“Church exists primarily not to provide entertainment or to build self-esteem or to facilitate friendships but to worship God. If it fails in that it fails.”* Walter Wink put it like this, *“To worship is to remember Who owns the house.”*

Listen GOD is the audience and the thing that pleases HIM most is not funny or moving sermons or huge choirs or rockin’ praise teams. The thing that pleases God is changed hearts—the broken and contrite hearts of individuals who realize how they need to change—and then, perhaps because of worship, commit themselves to that change.

The members of the first church understood this because those Christians didn't gather for an hour of fun. Instead, as it says in Acts 2:42, they gathered to, ***"DEVOTE themselves to the apostles' teaching."*** And this word, ***"devote"*** is an important word. It means they COMMITTED themselves to the teaching they heard. They strove to live in accordance with the Scripture. I mean, the things they learned in church became a way of life for them. The Apostle's teaching—the BIBLE—was what guided and directed them day in and day out. It was their compass.

That's the way it is in *"phase-three"* churches today. Their members come together to study the Bible not to be entertained but so they can know better how to live in ways that please God. They DEVOTE themselves to it in every way.

- They spend their money—they make financial decisions—based on the Bible's teaching.
- They parent their children according to its guidance.
- They let it be the guide when it comes to their work ethic.
- It guides their understanding of marriage and sexual expression. In fact, God's Word guides ALL their relationships.

We see this attitude in the response of the early church to the very first sermon ever preached in a "church." After Peter delivered it the book of Acts tells us this: ***"When the people heard the sermon they were cut to the heart and said, 'What do we do?' 'What do we do?'"*** (Acts 2:37)

So, when a church like ours gathers to worship our response should be to humble ourselves as those first Christians did and pray, *"God, what do I need to do---what do I need to change in my life?"* When we walk out of church we don't say, *"How pleasing was worship today?"* but rather, *"God, what do I need to do differently in order to make You more pleased with the way I live?"*

Too many churches get this wrong. As A.W. Tozer said, *"Our churches these days are filled with a soft breed of Christian that must be fed a constant diet of harmless fun to keep them interested."*

Listen—to be more like the EARLY CHURCH—we need to strive to be less like our CULTURE—a culture that breeds self-centered entertainment junkies. This cultural influence is why many of us come to church and like to be challenged but we don't want to change.

- We like to be fed but we don't want to spend any time in the kitchen helping feed or teach or serve others.
- We want the church to be united but only as long as everyone is united around me and what I think is best.
- This is why many believers want PERFORMANCE instead of worship.
- It's why we want the Holy Spirit to come—but with the understanding that the service can't last more than an hour.

Well, the first church wasn't like that—and today's churches must steer clear of this attitude as well if they are to fulfill their "phase-three" responsibilities in God's grand story.

A second flawed way some people think of the church is this.

## **(2) They think of it as a STORE.**

I don't know about you guys but on average Sue and I spend a couple hours every week walking up and down aisles of various stores, a grocery store or a department store or a thrift shop.

And as we walk, we shop. We look for what we want at the prices that we want to pay. If we don't find it in one store, we'll go to another.

Well, unfortunately, this mentality has become a part of many Christians in our consumer-based culture---to the point where many believers spend a lot of time CHURCH shopping. They visit numerous churches in order to find something that has what they want. They even have a mental shopping list that includes things like: *"good-preaching, great music, a children's ministry that their kids like and a youth ministry their teens like"* and so on.

And—to a degree I understand why they think this way. For example, I know how important it is to find a church that helps you with the all-important task of parenting. And—when I attend a church, I want to hear a sermon that feeds me spiritually—equips me to do the good work God has called me to do—to prepare me to join God in His rescue mission.

But, this “shopper’s” mindset is not found in the church in Jerusalem—and I say this because it seems to me that in that church what we find is a group of people who were committed TO FELLOWSHIP. In other words, not only were they devoted to the APOSTLES’ TEACHING—they were devoted to ONE ANOTHER as well. Idleman puts it this way, *“The Christians in the first church didn’t act like customers in a store but rather like members of a family.”*

Listen to Acts 2:44, ***“All the believers were together and had everything in common.”*** Now, don’t misunderstand that ***“everything in common”*** phrase. These early believers liked different things. They had different opinions like all families do. But like a family they shared the same *“spiritual genes”* in that they all had Jesus in their heart so they were brothers and sisters—spiritually speaking and they interacted that way.

A few years ago I came across a TRUE story about two guys named Randy and Gary who delivered furniture for the Dow Furniture store in Waloboro, Maine. Their customers would often say to Gary and Randy, *“You guys look a lot alike.”* And, as you can see in this picture they do. That’s Gary on the left—Randy on the right. Well, Gary and Randy just dismissed these comments as coincidence because everyone knows furniture delivery men tend to look alike. I mean, to do their job they have to be a certain size. They have to have muscles in the right places, etc. So, Randy and Gary didn’t give these comments a second thought. But then a law changed in the State of Maine that allowed Randy, who was adopted, to find out what was on his birth certificate. So, he did some research and found out that his biological parents had already passed away. But he also discovered that he had a brother who was one year younger than him. He also learned that his biological brother was born on June 10, 1974.

And he didn’t think too much more about that, but then one day the two of them were out making deliveries—and once again a customer said, *“You guys seem to look a lot alike. There’s a definite family resemblance.”* And as they drove back to the store, Randy thought, *“Well, why not?”* So, he nonchalantly asked Gary, *“When’s your birthday?”* Gary said, *“My birthday is June 10, 1974.”* Immediately Rand knew the truth. They WERE brothers. They have the same mom and dad. There’s a great quote in the article. It said, *“There’s nothing like family, especially when you didn’t know you had one.”*

Now, I don’t know about you, but I have had the same experience Randy and Gary did. I’ve met people all over the world and the better I’ve gotten to know them the more they have felt like family—and you probably know where I’m going with all this. I’m saying that we have brothers and sisters in other believers because we both have the same Heavenly Father and we have the same elder brother, Jesus, living in our hearts. Maybe you have a co-worker and you wondered why you got along so well—and then one day you learned why—He was a Christ-follower too.

I remember years ago, we had taken a team to Saltillo, Mexico to put a roof on a church. Toward the end of the week, even though I had spiritual brothers like Bob Michael and CC Day with me—I was getting a little homesick and at dinner that night, our hosts came in carrying guitars of various sizes—singing hymns and praise songs in Spanish—the same ones we sing in English. Even though these people didn’t speak English—in that moment I recognized them as my brother and sisters in the Lord—and my homesickness eased.

This is the relationship we are called to have in the church. We are called to be brothers and sisters—to have a family mentality where we put each other’s needs above our own and sacrifice for one another and serve one another. This is one reason church membership is so important. A local church like ours is a family that you publicly commit to be a part of.

Now, we have a great family here at Redland but like all families we are not perfect. We have our own *“cousin Eddies”* if you know what I mean. Do you remember what Rick Warren calls these *“challenging cousins?”* Right: *“EGR’s”* which is an acronym for *“extra-grace required”* and we have some of them here. You know who you are. Well, you might not but

we know who you are. And don't feel bad because the chief EGR at Redland preaches from behind this pulpit every Sunday.

I'm saying we're not perfect, but we are a family. We're committed to each other. We love each other in spite of our weaknesses, and we strive to meet each other's needs. And, if you haven't joined our family, I want you to know we're still going to love you like family even if you don't—but you won't get the fullest benefit from Church as God intended church to be until you walk the aisle during an invitation hymn and commit to join. I'm saying the church is not a place we come to GET but a place we come to GIVE—a place we come to SERVE—and we show that commitment to serve with a public decision. As Idleman puts it, *"We are not customers shopping for what we want; we are brothers and sisters sharing life together."* I love Paul Tournier's statement on this issue. He said: *"There are two things you cannot do alone. One is be married and the other is be a Christian."* Everyone NEEDS a church family!

This brings us to another misconception that some embrace when they think of the local church.

### **(3) They look at it as a RESTAURANT.**

Now, what do you do when you go into a "sit-down" restaurant like Cracker Barrel or Founding Farmers? You go in there expecting to be served and waited on. You want the tables to be clean and you want the food to be prepared according to your tastes. You want it to be brought to you just like when you go to the movies. Well, that's how many people think of church. They think of church as a restaurant or sorts where they come and sit down to be served. We see this in people who explain why they leave a church by saying, *"We wanted to be in a place where we could be fed more. That church didn't meet my needs."*

And—I understand that statement to a degree, but the fact is one of the best ways to be fed spiritually—one of the best ways to GROW as a Christian—is to serve others. Idleman puts it like this. He says, *"Spiritual growth and spiritual maturity happens much more quickly in the kitchen than it does at the table."* We grow—we get our needs met best—by working alongside other family members in a local church focused on serving others. I have been a part of the local church all my life and I would say the more members you have working in some way the healthier your church is—because a church is a place of selfless service. We see this in the church in Jerusalem. In verse 45 it says, ***"(They were) selling their possessions and goods (and) they gave to anyone as he had need."***

Paul Curtis is the pastor of Crossroads Christian Church in Brooklyn, New York. He talked about how his church responded the storm that hit NYC and the north a while back and said, *"Tragedies don't just have to rock our world, but tragedies can give the church the opportunity to rock someone else's world with extraordinary kindness and the love of Jesus."*

And that's right. I mean, we have opportunities to show the love of Jesus, but it can't happen if we're all focusing on being fed. You can't show the love of Jesus if you're just focused on self.

When I go to visit in the hospital, I always wear a tie. Kevin and Bill do the same. Peggy may not wear a tie but she goes with her best outfit on. We dress this way for a couple reasons. First, it shows the patient we care enough to look our best when we come to see them but it also makes us look more professional. Nurses and docs see that we're not just normal visitors and they let us in to see the patients more readily if we're dressed up a bit.

But—this kind of garb can also cause problems. More than once I've been confused as hospital staff. People have asked me questions and I've had to say, *"Oh—I don't work here. I'm just a pastor visiting."* I share this because I think this kind of thing should happen here at Redland all the time. I'm not saying you should all wear ties—but I'm saying people who visit here should think everyone in our church works here. They shouldn't be able to tell who's a pastor and who's not—because the truth is we all DO work here. We all SERVE here in one way or another. That's part of what makes our church so healthy. We are a priesthood of believers. We all are in the ministry. We all serve in this church family. We're not customers—we're employees! And that's the way it needs to be in every "phase three" church.

I am ALWAYS praying God would lead more people to join our church because we need more laborers. The more employees we have—the more we can do to fulfill our phase three mission!

A fourth misconception of a local church is this.

**(4) Some think of it as a GAS STATION.**

They think of it as a place where they pull up every Sunday for a quick fill-up and then they go back to living their daily lives. In other words, they think of church as a one-day-a-week kind of thing. Well look at what Acts 2 tells us about the first church. In verse 46 it says, ***“EVERY DAY they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”***

Now—I have to say, I love these two words, “*glad*” and “*sincere*” because that’s not the words I hear most used to describe Christians these days. Usually, we hear Christians described with words like “*judgmental*” and “*hypocritical*.” So, let’s each just stop long enough at this point in the sermon to make a private commitment to God to try and live in such a way that people on the outside see our joy and our authenticity!

And to be clear I’m not saying that a church is healthy if its members go to the church campus every day. That’s not what this text in Acts is getting at. No—it’s saying we are the church not just one day a week here at 6922 Muncaster Mill Road—but every day of the week wherever we are: at work, at school, on the job. Redland Baptist Church is not a place—it’s a people—who serve God every day of every week all over the place! Our church is more about what happens outside these walls than what happens in them. It’s more a Monday-Saturday thing than it is a Sunday thing. This is what Paul was getting at in Romans 12:1 when he said, ***“I urge you therefore brethren—fellow church family members—to present your daily lives as living and holy sacrifices acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”***

Here’s one more misconception.

**(5) Some people think of the church as a FITNESS CENTER.**

Now, you might think, “*Well, Mark, that’s not a bad illustration of a church because a gym is where people go to get into shape.*” But that’s not really true. Research shows that most people who actually GO to gyms are already in shape, and they go because they want to stay that way.

In fact, most people who have gym memberships never show up at the gym. I guess it just makes them feel better about their health to know they are paying that monthly fee.

Well, a lot of people don’t want to go to church because they think the church is for people who are already in good shape and just go each week to stay that way. They think the church is for people who have healthy marriages; they think it’s for people who are perfect parents---for people who don’t suffer from addictions. In short, they think the church is for healthy people—people who have their act together and so people who aren’t healthy—people with problems—tend to steer clear of most churches. But this is wrong. As the old saying goes, *“A church is not a museum for saints. It’s a hospital for sinners.”* The truth is all of us are “out of shape” — all of us need to grow to be more like Jesus. We are all equally dependent on the grace of God. I think the first church understood this. They knew THEY were imperfect sinners so they WELCOMED imperfect sinners and this is why as verse 47 says, ***“The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*** The population of Jerusalem was drawn to the grace of that first church. They knew it was a place you didn’t have to be perfect to attend.

My favorite scene in the movie I mentioned last week, *The Jesus Revolution* is when all the hippies start attending the church where Chuck Smith pastors. In that scene all the “members” --- mostly older, very conservative believers sit on the left and the right side is full of these hippie seekers. It’s a “no tie” zone---just bell-bottom jeans and beaded necklaces and bare feet. Some of these kids obviously have troubles---they’ve struggled with drug abuse; many are homeless.

After the service some of the members ask to meet Pastor Chuck in his office. They complain about the dress of those hippies---and their smell. One says, *“Their bare feet are staining our brand-new shag carpet!”* The next Sunday when everyone shows up for church there is a long line to get in. The men who complained look to see what is keeping them from entering---and they see their pastor sitting in a chair in the doorway with a big bowl of warm soapy water---and he’s washing and drying the feet of every hippie Jesus Freak who enters. Once everyone is inside, he says something like this: *“As long as I am pastor, this church will welcome anyone through its doors. I am THRILLED that all these young people are coming yearning to learn more about Jesus. Anyone who disagrees with me can leave.”* Many of the complaining members do---they get up and walk out. But the elderly man who complained about their new shag carpet, got up, walked to the other side---sat down between two hippies putting his arms around both and said: *“Lead on pastor!”*

Listen. The church is for people who are NOT in shape—people who know they desperately need the grace of God. The fact is you can’t be a phase-three church—unless your members are grace-driven like Chuck Smith and that old guy who no longer worried about the carpet.

So, to review, the church is not a movie theatre. We are not here to entertain you and we are not the audience. The church is not a shopping center where all of us come in and we shop for what we want and we make sure we’re getting what we like. The church is not a restaurant where we come in to be served and waited on. The church is not a gas station where we swing by once a week to get filled up and then we just head back to life as usual. The church isn’t a fitness center. It’s not a gym only for people who are in good shape.

No, I think the best illustration for a healthy phase three church is this. It’s a BODY—more specifically, it’s the body of Christ. We are the flesh God is using now to do His will. We are his hands and feet. We are His voice. With His indwelling Holy Spirit, He is our Head—and a healthy body obeys its head!

Yancy writes,

*“What is God like? Where does God live? How can the world get to know God? God’s presence no longer dwells in a tabernacle in the Sinai, or in a temple in Jerusalem. God has chosen instead to dwell in ordinary, even ornery people like you and me. God now reveals Himself in the world not through a pillar of smoke and fire, not even through the physical body of His Son in Galilee, but through the mongrel collection that compromises my local church and every other such gathering in God’s name.”*

LET US PRAY