

Introduction:

Open your bibles to Acts chapter 1. Today, we are going to consider Luke's overarching narrative structure in Acts 1-12 as part of our "Culture of Grace" series. This sermon series focuses on building our church culture around habits and practices God calls us to pursue that help His grace flow into our lives. Yet, there are also culture building responses to God's grace to consider, one of which is engaging together in gospel witness. This aspect of our church culture is vital to the mission of our church and my hope this morning is to have the overarching structure of Acts 1-12 call us to be a strengthened and scattered people before we move forward Luke's narrative. We will cover a lot of ground, so let's dive right in. I see three main movements that Luke guides us through in these twelve chapters. First,

The Church is Established in the Gospel through the Spirit

The first eight verses of chapter 1 set the focus and structure of Acts. Look there with me, "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. He presented himself alive to them 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.'" Note three things. First, verses 1-3 points back to Luke's account of Jesus' life and ministry up to the moment of His ascension and highlight two things for his purposes. He speaks of what Jesus began to do and teach and shows His post resurrection proclamation was centered on the kingdom of God. This tells us the book of Acts reveals what Jesus continued to do and teach through the apostles in relation to the kingdom of God. Second, verses 4-5 point forward to the coming promise of the Holy Spirit to emphasize what we see involves the Spirit of God moving through the people of God. Third, in verses 6-8, Jesus' exhortation to wait for the Spirit's power to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" outlines the structure of Acts around the apostolic witness reaching these areas and builds anticipation for chapter 2. Move to Acts 2:1-4, "When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." Note how the promised power of the Spirit involved Spirit uttered proclamation. Proclamation of, as verses 5-12 show, God's mighty works miraculously in the native tongues of those present. When questioned about what this meant, Peter boldly declares the gospel in verses 14-36. He shows this fulfilled God's prophetic promises and Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified, has been raised and exalted to the right hand of the Father, pouring out what they were seeing and hearing through the Holy Spirit. The life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus is Yahweh's promised salvation. Look, now, at Acts 2:37-41, "when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.' And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

As thousands are pierced with the truth of the gospel, they repent and trust in Jesus for forgiveness, receive the Spirit, and are baptized. These thousands form the church, God's new covenant community, and verses 42-47 end this first movement by recounting their devotion to the Word of Christ taught by the apostles and the fellowship, which involved sharing meals and the Lord's supper, praying together, and sacrificing for one another. God's first step in redemption was to establish the church in the truths of the gospel and its application for their lives through the Spirit's power. Consider, next, the second movement of Luke's overarching narrative structure,

The Church is Set Apart & Strengthened

Acts 3-4 relay Peter's second major gospel proclamation and the first opposition to it. After showing Jesus' power to heal, redeem, and restore continued through the apostles, Peter and John are brought on trial before the Sanhedrin. When questioned, they boldly proclaim the gospel to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, are charged to say no more, and released. Notice what happens after they report what happened to the gathered church in Acts 4:24-31, "when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"— for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' 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 gathered church praised God for His sovereign grace and asked to be strengthened. And the Lord powerfully responds by filling them all with the Spirit to speak His word with boldness. We begin to see the church set apart and strengthened. Acts 4:32-5:11, then relays true and false responses to the Spirit, and God purifying the church through the judgement of Ananias and Sapphira for falsifying the Spirit's work. Look at the result of this in Acts 5:12-16, "Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed." Note two things. First, people would not join the church until they were added to the Lord. God's people we set apart in a way that kept the world watching. Second, God's saving work took place outside the gathered church as people were added to the Lord away from Solomon's Portico. The rest of Acts 5 continues that emphasis as the apostles are tried and released again only to continue sharing the gospel boldly in their spheres of influence. Acts 6:1-7, then, close this movement with a final strengthening of the church before Luke transitions the narrative. The strengthening involved establishing leaders to manage widow care so the apostles could remain devoted to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Two aspects of this story speak to our emphasis. First, the widow care wasn't for outreach but to strengthen the church as the widows were part of the church. Second, the separation of leadership allowed physical nourishment to be provided while spiritual nourishment was prioritized. Now, pay attention to Acts 6:7, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem." This verse serves as both a conclusion to this story and everything since chapter three, as well as a transition in Luke's narrative before the gospel moves beyond Jerusalem. Family, consider what this is communicating.

In Acts 3-6, the church was empowered by the Spirit, set apart from the world, and strengthened through prioritizing the Word, prayer, and radical care. And through this, faith permeated Jerusalem and the church

multiplied greatly. The spiritual strengthening and purification of the church lead to numerical growth, not strategic growth plans. This launches into the third movement of Luke's narrative structure,

The Church is Scattered for Mission

The rest of chapters six and seven focus on one of the men put in charge of the widow care, named Steven, proclaiming the gospel outside of the church. Think about this. One of the administrative leaders is participating in gospel witness. Steven is martyred for this and God sovereignly uses his death to advance the gospel beyond Jerusalem. Look at Acts 8:1-5, "Saul approved of [Steven's] execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." Verses 4-5, "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ." Those scattered preached the word and Philip, another man put over widow care, became Christ's witness to Samaria. In chapter eight, Philip not only brings salvation to Samaritans, but he also spreads the gospel to Ethiopia through the salvation of the Ethiopian Queen's Eunuch. The church was scattered for mission. Chapter 9, then, holds the salvation of Saul of Tarsus, or the apostle Paul, who had approved of Steven's death and caused the scattering of the church. As he was breathing threats and murder against the church, Christ met him with mercy and sovereign grace on his trip to Damascus. Saul's conversion screams of the power and call of the gospel. Look at Acts 9:18-22. After Ananias of Damascus declared the gospel and restored his sight, we are told, "[Saul] rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus." He was redeemed and joined to the church. Then we read in verse 20, "immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'" And in verse 22, "Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ." Saul's pursuit of the scattered church ended with him proclaiming the majesty of Jesus and redeeming plan of God in Damascus beyond Jerusalem. When we come to the end of chapter 9, two things happen that speak to these narrative movements. Look at verses 30-31, "And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." Saul is scattered to Tarsus and the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was being built up. And once again, through its strengthening, it multiplied. Family, note how the gospel spread to Judea and Samaria as Jesus promised through the church being scattered. And there's more scattering for mission that follows this. Let me summarize it for the sake of time. In Acts 9:32-10:48, Peter visits the scattered church and spreads the gospel in Lyda, Joppa and Caesarea. Through dual visions, God brings Peter to share the truths of the life, death, resurrection, exaltation, and saving grace of Jesus to a Gentile centurion name Cornelius and his whole household in Caesarea. To the astonishment of Peter and those who were with Him, God's salvation and promised Spirit were given to the Gentiles as well, so they were baptized and joined with the church. Note how all this took place. Peter ended up in Joppa because other believers had spread the gospel there. While in Joppa, He was called to go further to Caesarea and meeting in a Gentile Centurion's home. God scattered the church for mission and the gospel was beginning to spread to the ends of the earth. When we come to Acts 11-12, which launch us into the second half of Acts, we see these two movements repeating, showing us how,

The Church is Continually Strengthened & Scattered

In chapter 11, Peter is met with opposition by the church in Jerusalem for extending fellowship to the Gentiles. After sharing what God did to prove Gentiles are recipients of the covenant promises, notice what happens in Acts 11:18, "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

The church was strengthened in its understand of the gospel and Acts 11:19-12:25 continues the pattern of being strengthened and scattered. Look at Acts 11:19-21, "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the

word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” Luke returns to the church being scattered and we learn they went as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch preaching the gospel. Their witness was mostly to the Jews until some proclaimed the gospel to the Hellenists, or Greeks, and many turn to the Lord. Following this, the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to Antioch, who gets Saul on the way, and they strengthen the church’s faith for a whole year. Again, we see the church strengthened as they gathered and scattered for mission. This pattern continues in our passage from last week. Still with me? To close chapter eleven, Barnabas and Saul are sent to Jerusalem with relief for the church after Antioch hears the prophecy of a coming famine. Note how they move to strengthen the church, trusting the Spirit was speaking through Agabus. They didn’t wait for the famine to send relief. Family, I wonder if we miss opportunities for obedience like this because of our skepticism of the prophetic, but that’s a message for another time. Chapter twelve, then, shares what took place in Jerusalem, and Pastor Adam’s observation of how this shaped Paul for mission was so helpful. Let me highlight a few things from this story. First, after James is killed and Peter is in prison, notice the church’s response in verse 5, “earnest prayer for [Peter] was made to God by the church.” Once again, the gathered church is prioritizing being strengthened through prayer. Second, after being rescued by the angel, Peter goes to the church, who was praying in Mary’s house, and notice what he does in verse 17, “he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Tell these things to James and to the brothers.’ Then he departed and went to another place.” He strengthens their faith and tells them to strengthen other believers before moving on to another place. Finally, look at verses 24-25, “the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.” Once again, the strengthening of believers leads to the increase of God’s Word and multiplication. And Barnabas, Saul and John-Mark were scattered for mission as chapter thirteen opens with their commissioning. The consistent pattern we see for the church is gathering to be strengthened through prayer, the Word, and radical care for each other, and being scattered to take the gospel to the world.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, I want to bring this all to a close by answering one question,

What Does this Mean for Us as a Church?

This pattern defines the priorities of the church. Family, we are called to be on mission, spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth. However, there is a distinction between the function of the church as an organization and the people of the church. The church as an organization exists to strengthen gathered believers through the Word, prayer, and radical care for each other. The people of the church are called to go and share the gospel in the world. We gather to deepen and strengthen faith, and then we scatter to take the gospel to our sphere’s of influence. Come to church to be strengthened in your faith by going deeper in your understanding of God’s Word and your care for each other. Then, let these things give you boldness to go and reach your community. Engage in gospel conversations at work, the gym, or a regular lunch or coffee shop. Share the gospel with your neighbors, other parents at our kid’s activities, and friends at school. Spread the gospel while connecting with organizations that serve the community. See God’s pattern for the church’s life and mission to be a strengthened and scattered people and lean into trusting it. As we prepare to partake of communion, let this act strengthen your faith in the gospel. Reflect on the depths of God’s grace through Christ body and blood given for you. Bury the truths represented by the bread and cup deep into your hearts. And let those truths launch you out of these doors for mission this week. As you reflect and respond, you are welcome to come and kneel before the Lord, sit and reflect, or stand and sing. If you need prayer or long to know Christ today, come see me or one of the members of our prayer team worshipping on the front row during this time. Let’s pray as we respond to God’s Word together.