



### **Introduction**

**“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” – Acts 1:1-2.**

It is fitting we turn to the book of Acts as a church family at this time, for a number of reasons.

*Firstly*, it is the companion volume to Luke, a completion of the story Luke wishes to tell of Jesus, and how the world heard about him. As we have spent much time in Luke this year, Acts is a natural progression. It is one story in two volumes. As John Stott writes, the most accurate title for the book of Acts should be “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles.” Luke-Acts is one story, the story of the church of Jesus Christ.

*Secondly*, we are about to begin a new chapter of the life and ministry of Poynton Parish, with the arrival of the Rev Matthew Swires-Hennessy as our new incumbent. On the cusp of this exciting new venture, it is I think helpful for us to consider what *won't* be changing, as well as what will. Going back to the early church will help us see our priorities as a church, which will make Matthew's beginning with us a lot smoother as he will want to pick up the baton of faithful ministry of word and sacrament where Rob McLaren left off.

*Thirdly*, because of our strange times. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century west, church looks vastly different to the church of the first century. Or at least it used to. The prohibition of public gatherings (though done for very different reasons), smaller gatherings in houses, fearful, cut off and uncertainty were marks of the early church that we are experiencing in various ways at the moment. Thus, Acts becomes a helpful reality check for us as we negotiate these strange times.

Our prayer for this term is that we take heart from what makes a church, and that we work hard together encouraging one another to not just *go* to church (especially as we cannot do that physically), but to *be* church. That is the next step for us, and so let's pray for ourselves to *be* church as we move forward in faith.

## **Context**

Acts begins where Luke ends: Jesus has resolutely set out for Jerusalem, died on the cross, risen again, and will return to the Father. The job he gives to the apostles is to take that same gospel of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and to take it out: beginning in Jerusalem, and out to the ends of the earth. Luke-Acts heads into, then out of Jerusalem with the good news of Jesus Christ the King, Redeemer, Lord and Saviour, who we can be certain of. By the help of God the Spirit, who descends on the believers in a once for all moment, the apostles boldly proclaim the gospel, at great personal cost. This is the beginning of the church; not in a glamorous show of power and strength, but emerging from a locked room, out into the streets, speaking to people that Jesus is alive, and that forgiveness is found in him, and him alone.

### **Series outline**

1. Acts 1:1-26: To the ends of the Earth
2. Acts 2:1-13: By the work of the Spirit
3. Acts 2:14-41: We preach Christ
4. Acts 2:42-47: Gathering as a Church
5. Acts 3:1-26: Proclaiming boldly
6. Acts 4:1-37: Despite Opposition
7. Acts 5:1-42: Committed to the truth
8. Acts 6:1-15: Counting the Cost
9. Acts 7:1-8:1: With our Lives

### **Notes on teaching Acts**

There is some debate concerning whether Acts is purely *descriptive* i.e. just telling us what the early church was like and that is all, or whether Acts is purely *prescriptive*, i.e. we should expect all the miraculous signs and wonders displayed by the early church. Like most things, the answer is a bit of both. It is worth bearing this in mind as we look at these passages together.

It is also tempting when reading the book to see it as *the birth of the church*. That's not strictly true. Church is the fulfilment of God's promises to his covenant community, and so continues his promises made throughout the OT. Try and see Acts as the church's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday: i.e. the day it comes of age and 'grows up' by the work of the Spirit.

# Home Group Study 1: Acts 1:1-26: To the ends of the Earth

**Intro:** Speaking about Jesus is for the professionals only. DISCUSS

**Recap:** Re-read the opening verses of Luke 1, and the closing verses of Luke 24. Why is Luke writing? What story are we continuing?

Listen: Read v1-11

1. What did Jesus do with the apostles after he rose from the dead in v3-5?
2. Why did he do this? What is he preparing them to do?
3. What marks out the apostles? What 'qualifies' them for this ministry of proclamation?
4. Who will be their helper? (v8) How would that be a comfort to them as Jesus departs?
5. What is the 'area' of their ministry? How far will the gospel go?
6. Why did Jesus ascend to the Father?

Listen: Read v12-26

7. What has happened to Judas?
8. Why does he need replacing? What is the reason for 12?
9. How does that help us see the church as part of God's continuous plan of salvation?
10. What is the qualification of an apostle?
11. Why do you think the first thing that happens in the church in Acts is a meeting?  
Shouldn't something more exciting have happened? What does that tell us about the reality of mission?

Making it real

1. How does it comfort you that, though physically absent, Jesus is with us by his Spirit in our role of witnessing about Jesus?
2. How is the whole story of God's people continue on in Acts 1?
3. What is the role of the church according to Acts 1?
4. How do you think Poynton Parish is doing in this role? Where are ways we can be intentionally looking outwards?

## Prayer ideas

- Pray for continual reassurance of the truth of Jesus Christ
- Give thanks that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father on our behalf
- Give thanks for the faithful witness of apostolic teaching, pray we would never deviate from this.

## Home Group Study 2: Acts 2:1-13: By the work of the Spirit

**Intro:** Why do you think the Spirit is the most neglected member of the Trinity in most churches today?

**Recap:** What is the mission of the church?

Listen: [Read v1-13](#)

1. How would you film this event?
2. What is the significance of the gifts the Spirit gives?
3. Divide up and read the following passages and see how Acts is the fulfilment of them:-
  - a. Genesis 11:1-9
  - b. Numbers 11:1-3
  - c. John 15:26
4. How is God helping his church 'come of age'?
5. What are the apostles able to do, by the help of the Spirit?
6. What is the role of the Spirit in these verses? How is that role often lost in contemporary discussion about what it means to be 'Spirit-filled' etc?

Making it real

1. How does Acts 2 help the church fulfil its role of proclaiming Jesus as Lord?
2. How can we think about the Spirit in the light of these verses?
3. How does this passage give us confidence in our Christian life and our witnessing for Jesus?
4. Are we right to expect a second Pentecost experience in our Christian lives? Why might this passage help us see the once for all nature of this event?

### Prayer ideas

- Give thanks that the Spirit lives in us, shining the spotlight on Jesus, and equipping us to speak for him
- Pray for boldness to speak of Jesus, even when we can't physically see people at the moment.

## Home Group Study 3: Acts 2:14-41: We preach Christ

**Intro:** If you could boil down the Christian message to one essential component, what would it be and why?

**Recap:** What has God done to equip the church to be witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth?

Listen: Read v14-21

1. Look up Joel 2:28-32 to see Peter's quote in its context
  - a. What 'day' is this day of Pentecost, according to Peter?
  - b. How does this help us see Acts as carrying on the story rather than starting a new one?
  - c. What is the role of the Spirit in these verses? Is this the same or different to last week's study?
  - d. What is the scope of the Spirit in these verses?
  - e. What does the coming of the Spirit mean for the time left before Jesus returns?

Listen: Read v22-41

2. How does Peter testify to
  - a. Jesus' *nature* (v22)
  - b. Jesus' *ministry* (v22)
  - c. Jesus' *death* (v23)
  - d. Jesus' *resurrection* (v24)
3. How did David testify to Jesus' resurrection in Psalm 16 that Peter quotes?
4. How does Peter help us see the Trinitarian shape to God's work in salvation? (v32-33)
5. Who is responsible for Jesus' death?
6. What is the right response to Jesus?
7. Who is the promise for? How does that help us see how God deals with families?
8. How do the people respond?

Making it real

1. Where/when are we living, according to Peter? How does that motivate us for witness?
2. What is the core content/hinge of the Christian message? How does that inform our witness?
3. Who is the Spirit for? How does that give us confidence in witness?
4. What happens if we do not speak of repentance, but only forgiveness, and vice versa?
5. Have you ever felt 'cut to the heart' at our sin, and what it cost Jesus?

### Prayer ideas

- Give thanks that Jesus is risen
- Give thanks we have the Spirit at work in us
- Give thanks that our evangelism doesn't need to be flashy, just faithful
- Pray for boldness to share Jesus with our loved ones, and hold out hope in these strange times.

## Home Group Study 4: Acts 2:42-47: Gathering as a Church

**Intro:** Church is... How would you finish that sentence?

**Recap:** What is the mission of the church according to Acts so far?

Listen: Read v42-47

1. There are many marks of this church, look through them and discuss what they mean/look like:-
  - a. *Devoted to the apostles' teaching*
  - b. *Devoted to fellowship*
  - c. *Devoted to breaking bread*
  - d. *Devoted to prayer*
  - e. *Sacrificial in their possessions*
  - f. *Meeting together*
  - g. *Glad and sincere hearts*
  - h. *People becoming believers*
2. How would you write a parish profile based on this passage?

Making it real

1. "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church" – how does Acts 2 help us understand what that means?
2. Read Isaiah 60:1-5 – how are the nations attracted to the glory of God? What does that mean for our church gatherings?
3. Would we find all/any of these marks present at Poynton Parish church? What are we doing well? What do you think we could do better at? How can you help with that?
4. Are we called to be an exact replica of this church? Or does it give us guiding principles? Are any of these marks negotiable/non-negotiable?

### Prayer ideas

- Give thanks for God's church universal: the body of Christ across the world.
- Give thanks for our church family
- Pray we'd be a church marked by a devotion to God's word, to one another, and to the spreading of God's word by his Spirit.
- Pray for wisdom and discernment for us as a church as we begin a new chapter with the arrival of our new vicar Matthew.

## Home Group Study 5: Acts 3:1-26: Proclaiming boldly

### Intro:

**Recap:** If you could make a film trailer for the first two chapters of Acts, how would you do it? What would you make sure were highlighted, and why?

Listen: [Read v1-26](#)

1. How is the ministry of Jesus continuing by the Spirit in these verses?
2. What are the true riches displayed here?
3. Is this about Peter's giftings? What does that say about who gets the glory in the church?
4. Look through Peter's sermon. What are the similarities from what he said Pentecost? Are there any differences?
5. Why shouldn't the people be surprised at this healing?
6. What is the response to Jesus?
7. How is he the fulfilment of the words of the prophets in the OT?

### Making it real

1. Should we expect miracles like this today? DISCUSS
2. How can we follow Peter's example in
  - a. The content of our speech?
  - b. The credit for our work?
3. How could you, in the good events and bad events we see, turn the conversations around to Jesus Christ, as Peter does here?

### Prayer ideas

- Pray for continual reassurance of the truth of Jesus Christ
- Pray for boldness to speak of Jesus
- Pray that God gets the glory in all we say and do
- Give thanks for the ways God is still at work today, pray for opportunities



## Home Group Study 6: Acts 4:1-37: Despite Opposition

**Intro:** How do you feel about conflict? Does the idea of people reacting negatively to the gospel scare you?

**Recap:** What ‘incident’ has just happened that prompts what happens in today’s passage?

[Listen: Read v1-22](#)

1. What is the single reason that the Priests and Sadducees are “greatly disturbed”? What might that tell us about the content of our message?
2. What are the religious leaders trying to do?
3. What is Peter’s response? Is it just him? How is this Peter so different from the Peter we saw denying Jesus?
4. V12 would not go down well in our schools, offices or anywhere outside church. Why is it good news we need to speak about?
5. What shocks the leaders in v13?
6. How does Peter and John’s response to the edict of the religious leaders strike you? How does that help us with the balance of listening to our rulers, yet not in a way that compromises our faith?

[Listen: Read v23-37](#)

7. What do the believers pray? Why is that striking?
8. Look up Psalm 4 – how is that at work in these events?
9. Has God’s word been hindered by this opposition?
10. Does this opposition change the believers’ attitudes towards one another?

[Making it real](#)

1. What does this incident tell us about?
  - a. The inevitability of opposition?
  - b. The ineffectiveness of opposition?
2. How can we model Peter and John’s response?
3. What will it look like to be bold and rely on the Lord in opposition to the gospel of exclusive reliance on the resurrected Lord Jesus?

### Prayer ideas

- Pray for continual reassurance of the truth of Jesus Christ
- Pray for those who are opposed for speaking about Jesus
- Pray for preparation for boldness when the day comes we are opposed for speaking about Jesus

## Home Group Study 7: Acts 5:1-42: Committed to the truth

**Intro:** Lying in order to keep someone from being upset is fine. DISCUSS

**Recap:** What big themes have you spotted in the book of Acts so far?

[Listen: Read v1-11](#)

1. What is the issue behind these startling events?
2. Look up John 14:15-20. What is the defining characteristic of the Spirit? How might that help us understand what happens in this chapter?
3. Look up Joshua 7. Can you see parallels between Ananaius and Achan?
4. Why do you think Ananaius and Sapphira lie? What would be their gain?

[Listen: Read v12-16](#)

5. Does the hypocrisy of its members hinder the work of the church? How is that a comfort to us?

[Listen: Read v17-42](#)

6. These events seem to be a bit of a re-run of chapters 3 and 4. How do the apostles response to their persecution strike you? (See particularly v41)
7. Does persecution hinder the work of the church? How is that a comfort to you?

[Making it real](#)

1. How are we assured from chapter 5 that nothing hinders the word of God?
2. How are we challenged in how we use our words?
3. Look at v41 again. Would you respond like this if you were persecuted for following Jesus?

### Prayer ideas

- Pray for continual reassurance of the truth of Jesus Christ
- Give thanks nothing hinders his word
- Pray that we would be truthful as a church and as individuals?
- Pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters across the world

## Home Group Study 8: Acts 6:1-15: Counting the Cost

**Intro:** If you could have any role in church, what would it be and why?

**Recap:** Imagine you were writing an article for *Readers Digest* summing up this new church movement. What would you say and why?

Listen: Read v1-7

1. Why is this incident recorded? What does it tell us of the nature of church organisation of the apostles/elders (*presbuteros*) and the seven men/deacons (*diakonos*)
2. What does v7 tell us about the decision the church took at this time?

Listen: Read v8-15

3. Does being a deacon mean Stephen can't tell people about Jesus? What does that say to those of us who think evangelism is a job for church staff only?
4. Who opposes him? Why?
5. What do they resort to to get him arrested? How does this remind us of what happened to Jesus himself?
6. How does Stephen respond?

Making it real

1. Why is it good for those called to the ministry of the word to be freed up from certain responsibilities?
2. How would v1-7 look in practice in our church?
3. Do v1-7 invoke in you a desire to serve in a particular way?
4. We are once again confronted with the inevitable opposition to speaking about Jesus. How does that make us feel? How might that inform our prayers?

### Prayer ideas

- Pray for continual reassurance of the truth of Jesus Christ
- Pray for persecuted believers
- Pray for those in our church called to lead and preach, particularly for Matthew as he begins his ministry of word and prayer among us as our vicar
- Pray for more of us to step up and serve in the many ways needed

## Home Group Study 9: Acts 7:1-8:1: With our Lives

**Intro:** How do we respond to people who strongly hate the things we strongly love?

**Recap:** Where did we leave off last week? What is Stephen accused of?

Listen: Read v1-38

1. Before we look at the content of the speech, what do you make of Stephen's conduct and style? Would we ever be brave enough to go on the attack like he does?
2. Who is really on trial in this chapter?
3. Look through Stephen's speech together
  - a. What is the point Stephen makes in these verses?
  - b. Are the Pharisees right that God has only been about Jerusalem and the Mosaic law?

Listen: Read v39-53

4. Who has been the real rebel blasphemer against God, Jesus, or the Jews?
5. How are the Pharisees accusing Stephen just like their ancestors?

Listen: Read v54-8:1

6. How does Stephen emulate his saviour?
7. Who approves of his execution?

Making it real

1. Is Stephen preaching just to shame/stir up a crowd?
2. Should all of our evangelism be fluffy and nice?
3. Are we prepared for people to hate us because we show them how bad they are?
4. Would you die for God's honour?

### Prayer ideas

- Give thanks for the witness of faithful believers who have died for God's honour
- Pray for discernment as we speak, some of us (like the curate!) do not like conflict at all so may be tempted to not call out certain things, whereas some of us do not have that issue, and may need God's help to be nicer in our evangelism!
- Give thanks for Acts 1-7, pray it impacts us continually as a church