

A Series of Sermons on ACTS

by

Kenneth Gray & Jack McHugh

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Sunday Evening 27th January 2013 - Kenneth Gray, Acts 1: 12-26; 'Prayer and preparation'.



This passage covers the transitional period between Christ's Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit in Chapter 2 which will transform the world for ever. The Eleven are waiting and praying. We are told the church in these early days comprises 120 people. We do not know whether this number refers to the 'full on' followers of Jesus, those already fully committed or whether these 120 are the only ones able to get to Jerusalem. What is clear, though, is that the early church was very small and insignificant numerically in face of the might of the Roman empire and the numerous, entrenched religious bodies against whose teachings and practices it would find itself in opposition. Not a very propitious start!

There does seem to be a perceived 'optimum' size for some churches. For some, when numbers start to exceed their optimum, squabbles can arise, some people decide to leave and numbers eventually even out again to the optimal level. Kenneth observed that a somewhat similar situation seems to pertain at Freeland. We tend to feel that if the church is well-filled on Sundays things are going well enough. But if numbers seem to be falling then we must take action of some kind to restore them. This concept of an 'optimal size' is a constraint on our evangelism and, as an approach, indicates an unhealthy complacency.

What if the 120 we read about in Acts were to have said "We're OK; 120 is a good number; we're saved, so let's enjoy our salvation together in our tightly-knit group."?

What this passage teaches us is that it is because of those 120 that we ourselves have been offered salvation. Last Sunday we considered how the sowing and reaping of our predecessors in Freeland has benefitted us.

Reflecting on the work of the Church of Scotland in previous decades, Kenneth commented that 25 years ago the Church operated the biggest mission in Israel. Due to financial constraints this is no longer the case. In the recent past some 400 missionaries from Scotland were deployed in the international mission field through the Church's Missionary Council – today the number is 30. This scale of decline in activity is true of missionary work generally.

We have lost sight of the need to fulfil our responsibilities for sowing and reaping. We have carried the farming analogy too far. Farming is a cyclical activity. There are seasons for sowing and seasons for harvesting so we fall into the trap of thinking that it's OK to enjoy the sowing of others whilst we wait for some notional 'right time' to reap. We tend to involve ourselves in 'seasonal evangelism' - taking the Good News of Jesus Christ out into the world only in periodic, pre-determined campaigns. The truth is that evangelism is always 'in season'!

Another problem is that most of us in the church are so much better at 'practical' Christianity than we are at 'spiritual' evangelism. We find it difficult to talk about our faith. We fear we will be called upon to answer difficult questions for which we don't know all the answers.

If the 120 had shared that reticence they would never have got started.

The paradox is that, like so many TV pundits, we are all swift to share our views on every topic under the sun – from football to politics, from the national health system to the economy – whether or not we possess any knowledge or expertise in those subjects. But when it comes to the Gospel message – the most important information people do need to hear about from us - we clam up because we don't know all the

answers! So, Kenneth concluded, when it comes to evangelism, we need to be more confident in the power of the Holy Spirit to equip and lead us.

Another very important lesson from this passage is found in verse 14 “They all met together continually for prayer..” A strong prayer habit was the foundation of the early church. It is easy to fall into bad habits in relation to prayer. We can find ourselves ‘praying by rote’ almost mechanically mouthing familiar phrases and petitions without really thinking about what we are saying. Kenneth noted that in Freeland we have most closely emulated the early apostles when we have held our Day of Prayer events. It is so easy to become distracted when we pray. We need to strive to improve the balance between our everyday living and working and our prayer lives. The early church’s people prayed together and drew together in God’s presence and in their reliance on Him. Prayer is at the heart and centre of all they do.

So it is that they ‘get an idea’ i.e. God speaks to them about replacing Judas. Let us all spend more time in prayer – individually and collectively and allow God to speak to us.

The choosing of a new apostle was a significant task. If the Eleven had not been so in tune with one another and united under God there might have been resistance to this statement by Peter. Jesus himself had selected the original 12 – did they have the right to elect a substitute? The two candidates identified have the required credentials; they have both been with Jesus throughout his ministry, through the crucifixion, resurrection and the ascension. They do not know which man to choose so they pray about it and put the decision in God’s hands. They cast lots and the lot falls on Matthias.

If we in the modern church had had to pick a new apostle we would have set up a committee! Is it not time we in the Church of Scotland placed less reliance on a business-like approach and allowed the Holy Spirit to lead? The reformation in Scotland tried to return to the early Church’s way of doing things but we seem to have stopped short of being truly Spirit-led. Let us turn from being bureaucracy-chained to having a simple dependence on God.

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Sunday Evening Joint Communion Service 3rd February 2013 - Kenneth Gray, Acts2:1-13 ‘Tongues of Fire’



In this familiar passage the Holy Spirit’s empowering of the apostles enables them to speak to the multinational crowd and be understood in each hearer’s own language. Some sceptics who rejected the Word being uttered derided the apostles and accused them of being drunk.

This reminded Kenneth of a situation many years ago when a fellow minister had enlisted his help dealing with a bridegroom who had turned up very drunk for his own wedding. The minister had been doubtful whether the young man could be considered sufficiently compos mentis to take his marriage vows. Happily, consumption of several cups of black coffee had restored the groom to a more sober state and the wedding had gone ahead.

Some had considered the apostles to be ‘drunk’ because they were in the grip of the intoxicating power of the Holy Spirit. Emboldened by this power they had left the upper room where they had been praying and awaiting the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise. Now they possessed the courage, the joy and the words to set about spreading the Good News.

When we exit the church after a service on any Sunday do the people of Bridge of Weir wonder if we too are intoxicated - so full of joy at the Gospel message that we cannot hide how we feel?

Noise

In this passage the coming of the Spirit is accompanied by firstly by noise. "...a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting."

In Freeland we are perhaps more relaxed than some churches about how we organise ourselves and how we conduct worship services. Before our service begins the church is usually quite noisy. Children run about and people chatter to one another. Kenneth views this noise as a sign of life; people are pleased to see one another. When human beings are pleased they show it, so we should not be reticent about showing our happiness when we worship. When we hear God's Word being preached we should be stirred and unsettled - prompted to respond.

Sadly, nowadays we in the Church tend to dislike being unsettled; we resist change and seek the familiar and comfortable. We do not want the church to change; we expect to be challenged - but not too much, please! The Holy Spirit however stirs up people, excites them, sets them on fire with zeal for evangelism. The Church needs to give the Holy Spirit free rein if we really wish revival to come in Scotland.

Tongues of fire

In this passage the coming of the Spirit is accompanied secondly by tongues of fire. Here we are given a beautiful picture of power coming down, cleansing and burning away the impurities of sin. The Holy Spirit does not just come and live within us: He changes us and makes us better. The more the Spirit fills us the more the 'bad old us' departs. We need the Spirit to burn away all the old dross that is hampering the Church and reveal the purity of God in our midst.

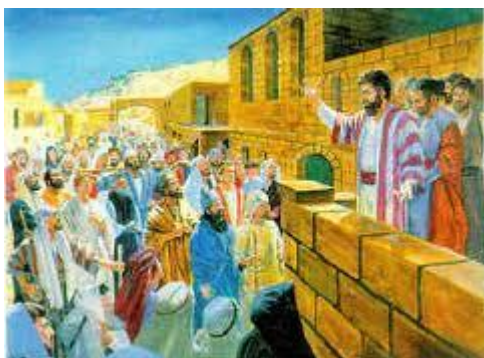
Power to speak

The apostles are now equipped with the words to speak and the courage to speak them. Kenneth recalled the words of evangelist Tony Campolo who described the experience of preaching to a congregation of Afro-Caribbean Christians. His message was accompanied by frequent shouts of 'praise the Lord' and 'halleluiah!' when his message was inspired but 'help him, Jesus!' when he was perhaps missing the mark. Their excitement for the Word burst forth from them as it did for the first apostles. In the early church the apostles spoke with power and authority. They did not have degrees in theology; they had not been through ordination ceremonies. But they knew the Saviour and they spoke in the name of Jesus, with the authority of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. They preached the Gospel gloriously in everybody's language. They spoke compellingly of the wonder, the glory, the majesty of God. No preacher can preach adequately unless he is filled by the Holy Spirit.

This service of Communion tonight reminds us of the love and the sacrifice of Jesus. We see some of that glory when we break bread together. In so doing we are proclaiming the depth of God's love and the scale of God's grace. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit enables us to share these very insights with others as we go about in the world.

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Sunday Evening 10th February 2013 - Kenneth Gray, Acts 2: 14-41 'The pattern for every sermon'.



Reading through this, the first post-Resurrection sermon of the embryo Christian Church, Kenneth reflected that Peter's words bear all the characteristics of a perfect sermon. As someone who has preached some 2500 sermons during his 25 years in the ministry, Kenneth observed firstly that, unlike ministers today, Peter had had the support of the

Eleven other apostles when he stood to address the crowd. Preaching is a heavy burden as well as a privilege. When ministers look out from the pulpit they will be conscious of some of the congregation being with them whilst others are against; some will seem bored, others acquiescent. Some people may even be upset or angered by the preacher's words. Even ministers themselves going to hear a preacher at a conference, say, will have certain expectations and it is not uncommon for ministers to comment positively or negatively about their fellow preacher's sermon. Preaching is a lonely job and for Peter to have his fellow apostles beside him must have been an encouragement.

It is said that evangelist Billy Graham always felt he preached better if George Beverly Shea were present to sing the praise because of their long-standing association and mutual support. In sporting events, like rugby matches for instance, players often comment that the cheers of the crowd motivate them to perform to their best. But preaching is not like rugby. Those attending a church service are there to form part of the worship; they come seeking a welcome and an affirmation of their faith.

Explain the Word

Kenneth observed, secondly that Peter 'raised his voice' and said 'let me explain'. In the midst of the furore caused by the apostles' message and their ability to speak in everyone's language Peter had to grab the crowd's attention. He then goes on to do what 90% of preaching is all about - explaining what the Word is saying. Preaching is not about entertainment or witty stories; it's not about displaying gifts of oratory. If a preacher does not set about explaining God's Word then he's not doing his job.

Historical biblical context

Peter refers to the hundreds of years of prophecies that the Jews have all held on to and the fulfilment of which they have all longed for and prayed about. He tells them that these prophecies have now come to pass in their present generation. Peter has not sat for hours in his study preparing this sermon. He speaks from the heart drawing on Scriptures from Joel he has known all his life and memorised. These touch a deep chord with the crowd. In a similar way words from the Psalms, say, can resonate with us today. Though composed thousands of years ago they seem as if they were written expressly to comfort or inspire us in situations we are currently experiencing.

Speak about Jesus

In verse 22 Peter gets to the 'meat' of his sermon - every good sermon must speak about the work of Jesus. It is amazing how little some of us know about Jesus. Every preacher must avoid assuming that everyone in the pews - whether visitors or even long-standing members - has heard about Jesus and knows what He has done for the world. It is only through Jesus' work on the cross that we are made right with God.

This truthful summary of Jesus' life and works cuts the crowd to the quick. If we had been those apostles might we not have put off preaching such a hard-edged, no-holds-barred message on this Pentecost day? After all, many of these very people were those who had called for Jesus' crucifixion! Might we not have commissioned a small committee to consider the matter? Might we not have discovered ways of preaching in a shallow fashion without causing offence to anyone? Peter speaks the Truth boldly and baldly empowered by the Blood of Christ.

Witness to the Risen Christ

There is an astounding arrogance among those nowadays, both inside and outside the Church, who argue and debate about the facts of the Resurrection. They try to contradict those who were actually there. A good preacher, like Peter, goes to Scripture to explain Scripture.

Preach to elicit a response

Peter did not address the crowd to display his skills in oratory. He is not trying to be 'nice' or popular- the message is too important. He wants people to change and be saved. Those same folk who were milling around at 9am full of consternation to hear the apostles speaking had not set out that morning intending to be changed. Yet by the end of that day 3 thousand of them had their lives transformed. They became new, first-hand witnesses to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. This is a compelling

basic place - God's Word. This is so basic a truth that we often ignore it.

Kenneth recalled that staff of the AA or RAC are frequently staggered by how little many motorists know about the basic components of a car and the basics of car maintenance. They **do** know how to programme the radio; they can operate their satnav; they can set-up their car phone apps easily but they do not know where to put in the oil and water!

It's the same in the Christian faith. There are people who can wax lyrical about obscure and esoteric aspects of theology but they do not know the basics of their faith. If we get the basics right everything else is built upon these.

We owe so much to the faithfulness of those early apostles. They would all be dead within 30 or 40 years of this passage. Within 50 years there would be no-one alive who had been a contemporary of Jesus. Without the teachings of the apostles the Christian message and the foundations of the Church would have been lost. Preachers have a huge responsibility to provide sound teaching yet so many nowadays offer sermons that are unbiblical, ungodly, unfaithful and ill thought out.

We do use the term 'fellowship' a lot in the Church and most churches have a 'fellowship committee' or similar. Yet so many churches actually offer very little in the way of fellowship on Sunday mornings when church members' involvement with one another is minimal. However, a sense of welcome and fellowship are things that new people do look for when coming into a church. Do we not need to change our attitude to one another not just the structure of the Church?

Communion too was a bigger, more frequent practice in the early church that derived from a recognised culture of hospitality. It was not the periodic 'event' that it has become in the modern church. There seems to have been a real sense of God's imminence and presence that people came together to celebrate over food. It is clear that part of the success of the Alpha Course is the opportunity it affords to get to know participants over a meal. Modern families have lost the art of eating together, of the unity of the meal. Our lives are so busy and disjointed from one another that we have to work ever harder to maintain relationships.

As modern Christians this has also led to us losing the practice of collective prayerfulness. None of us, if we are honest, have prayer lives that bear scrutiny. We all pray too little individually and corporately. For those in the early church, many of whom were Jews, praying was as natural as breathing. We do not have to teach children to ask or to love. As children of the Heavenly Father we should find it easy to ask him things and to love him but somehow we find it difficult.

The early church impressed people. It changed society. Not everyone was impressed but many were. Some passed by and rejected the message but no-one failed to recognise that these early Christians were very different. *'Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles'* In Corinthians Paul tells us that the church in Jerusalem ran out of money - they gave of their possessions to anyone in need - so Paul helped gather resources from other areas to support them. The church in Jerusalem didn't means test people, they simply saw a need and met it.

This still happens in the church today but often it's done quietly, behind the scenes. At a recent Presbytery meeting the Welfare Reform Act was being discussed. Whilst many present regarded many of its provisions as an imposition on the church others, like Kenneth, regarded it as an opportunity to offer help in the name of Jesus Christ.

Another characteristic of the early church was its accessibility. We are told the Christians came together daily. No doubt not every person attended every day but clearly people could come under the influence of the Christian community every day. Today we lock our church doors to protect our buildings from theft and vandalism. We, basically, tell people to *'come back when we are open'*. Sadly, so many of our institutions and services take a similar approach e.g. the NHS and Social Services. The world has become a 9 to 5 bureaucracy and the Church is following suit. The early church was not like that. We must continue to

examine what the early church used to be like and compare it with how we operate currently and find ways of bridging the gap that has developed.

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Sunday Evening 24th February 2013 - Kenneth Gray, Acts 3: 1-10 'The church meets society.'



In our previous studies in Acts we have learned that the members of the early church met daily. It is likely that Peter and John will have seen this crippled beggar frequently as they went in and out of the synagogue. Indeed people with disabilities begging in the streets were a common sight. People in this situation did not hide away, rather their livelihood derived from the charity of others.

The opportunity arises

What is remarkable is why Peter and John should have singled out this man for healing. If the apostles had possessed money and given it to the beggar then the miracle would not have happened. Peter and John would have entered the temple, no doubt feeling good about having discharged their charitable duties, and thought no more about it. Sometimes we do not allow God to do what he can do in situations because we lack the insight to realise the limitless scope of his power.

The beggar had asked for money- that's how he made a living. In the UK today there are people who have been reduced to begging to get by. Many find themselves in the grip of money lenders. The world doesn't really change. This passage from Acts is as relevant today as it was in Peter's day because people's hearts and needs do not change.

In verse 4 the man 'gave them his attention' no doubt delighted that they had stopped to address him. He imagines they will now give him money. The man's expectations were limited; he would have been content with 'crumbs from the master's table'.

How like the rest of us! We look down instead of up. We strive in our Christian walk merely to be better than others; we do not aspire to be like Jesus. When we open our Bibles do we expect God to enlighten and change us or are we content to give cursory attention to reading familiar passages?

The beggar's heart no doubt sank to hear the apostles had no money to give. We do not know whether he knew who the apostles were or if he had heard about Jesus and the miracles he had performed. We do not know if he had heard of the new hope, the new life that had been discovered by the people of The Way.

Peter responds and follows through

Peter and John did not set out from home that day determined to identify someone to heal, someone to whom they would offer new life in Jesus. Peter simply sees a man's desperate longing, a need - not just for money but for Jesus - and he responds.

The human condition is to be needy. So often people think they need a bigger house, a better job, a fancier car when actually what's missing from their lives is Jesus.

In verse 7 we read that Peter reaches out and takes the beggar by the hand. He followed up the words with action. Sometimes we speak the right words but we don't follow through - we speak the words but we do not really believe. When someone is converted we need to 'take them by the hand'. We can be quite good at connecting with and supporting people who have been converted 'in the right way' maybe through an Alpha course or via some recognised, well-structured evangelistic campaign. But even then our support

dwindles away after our first flush of interest. We tend to be sprinters rather than marathon runners when it comes to evangelism.

Transformation expressed in joy

When the beggar gets up and discovers he has indeed been healed his joy is immediate and exuberant. He leaps and shouts and praises God. In the kirk we are big on restraint, even repression - we're not so big on joyful exuberance! The world does not like that about the Church. We talk about transformation and renewal but we play everything down.

The impact is felt by society

All the people see what has happened and are full of amazement. Evangelistic events often finish with an appeal, an invitation to come forward and accept Jesus into your life. There is usually a pause until the first few individuals make their way to the front and then the trickle builds to a steady stream until many respond and a crowd assembles at the front. Sometimes this kind of response is criticised for being no more than an emotional reaction that is shallow and unsustainable. But even when one person is truly drawn to God other people are affected by it.

When the beggar is healed perhaps some feel guilty for not having been of more help to him in the past. Others are clearly full of wonder and awe to see this miraculous transformation. The church grows when people witness the transformation in the lives of those who come to faith.

In the West so few are being converted inside the church and church members so seldom seem to look for conversions. Churches start to grow when Christians start to invite their friends along and are not embarrassed to discuss their faith and not ashamed that their church may not be perfect.

Over the coming weeks our studies will discover the start of problems for the early church. There is no persecution when the people of the Way are quiet and quiescent but things change when God's power is visibly at work within his church.

How sad that the modern church in the West shows so little evidence of God's power at work that society disregards it and finds it inconsequential.

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Sunday Evening 10th March 2013 - Jack McHugh, Acts 3:11-26 "There is only one saving Gospel!"



Jack mentioned that one of his favourite TV programmes is *Question Time* but it never fails to amaze him watching the lengths politicians go to avoiding answering the difficult questions.

In this passage Peter delivers the second sermon of his ministry and, like most good sermons, he poses some very searching questions of the onlookers and also provides the answers. The healing of the lame beggar which we considered last week was the dramatic introduction to this passage and, as we discover in Chapter 4, another 2 thousand believers were added to their

numbers as a result of this message from Peter. We cannot get involved with the Word without being affected. To bring spiritual benefit to people in our day we must return to the apostolic power of the Word.

Peter puts the focus on Jesus.

Peter addresses the crowds who are full of amazement and curiosity at the miraculous healing they have just witnessed. He immediately seizes the opportunity to focus the crowd's attention on Jesus and away from John and himself. Unlike most human beings Peter does not accept any credit for the miracle but

proclaims the power to be flowing from the name and grace of Jesus.

This is a useful reminder that we should treat the instruments of God - ministers and preachers of his Word - with respect, esteem and love them and take care of them, but we must not be tempted to idolise them. Jesus alone deserves all the honour.

People sometimes say that modern preachers are not gifted and that's why souls are not being saved at the rate achieved through Peter's preaching. The truth is that every preacher called by God is equipped by God with the gifts needed for this task.

Peter exposes their sin

With the urgency of a messenger desperate to impart a life-saving message Peter goes straight ahead listing the sins and crimes of which the crowd are guilty. With the courage born of the Spirit's empowerment he accuses them of having murdered the Son of God, 'the author of life', but then reveals that God has raised Jesus from the dead. He explains that it is by faith in the name of that same Jesus that the beggar has been healed. He tells them that entry into heaven can only be given, through God's grace and the righteousness of Jesus, to those who admit their sinfulness and repent.

Peter offers the crowd a new hope

After wounding the crowd by cataloguing their own guilt, Peter goes on to extend to them the offer of an incomparable hope. Having castigated their ignorance and that of their leaders he explains that the death of Jesus had been the accomplishment of God's purposes as foretold through the prophets. He urges them to repent and turn to God so that their sins be wiped out. He offers them a fresh opportunity to be 'heirs of the prophets and of the covenant' a heritage they were discarding by their rejection of the Christ.

Peter, like Paul after him, emphasises the pre-eminence of Jesus. Jack observed that every good sermon should always get back to Jesus regardless of whatever else it has covered. In our day with its rising tide of human philosophies we all need to know what we believe. The modern trend is for man to seek and offer man-made solutions to life's challenges and questions when only God offers the truth and the answers man is seeking.

As we are reminded in John 14:6 Truth is not contained in dogma but in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ did not say 'I will **teach** you the way, the truth, the life' - he said 'I **am** the way, the Truth and the Life'.

What if God were to ask you to do something sacrificial such as give up a well paid career and comfortable home to work among the poor and the oppressed in a far off land? If you responded to that call the world would describe you as having 'lost everything.' As Christians we know that to serve God is to gain everything.

In the intervening centuries since Peter preached this sermon nothing has really changed - the sin is the same, but so too is the Saviour. The hope offered to those early crowds is offered also to us. People today need to turn back from sin and give their lives to Jesus. We need to tell people about Jesus and share with them this hope.

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