

SPEAK UP

It has long been said that the Pentecostal church of today has its roots in the book of Acts in the New Testament. The idea that drives this is that the book of Acts begins with the Day of Pentecost. The book then continues by declaring the works of the Holy Spirit as it pictures Him working in and moving through the church.

However, as true as that is, I want to submit to you that we might be a book of Acts church in yet another way. While the book begins with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it quickly moves into a period of persecution. It is the persecution that actually compels the church to obey the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to take the Gospel into all the world.

This morning, I want to draw some parallels between the church in the book of Acts and the church today in America. I want to begin by giving you an outline of this the fifth book of the New Testament.

The outline is drawn from the Lord's prophesy in Acts 1:8, "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" The books shows:

1. The apostles as witnesses "in Jerusalem" (1:1-8:3)
2. The believers as witnesses "In all Judea and Samaria" (8:4-12:24)
3. Paul as a witness "to the ends of the earth" (12:25-28:31)

As you can see, the whole book focuses on that one verse.

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL MINUTES WE ARE GOING TO STUDY HOW THE LORD GOT THE CHURCH TO OBEY THAT VERSE. OUR ATTENTION WILL BE DRAWN TO ACTS CHAPTERS 6-8.

1. THE ASSAULT BEGINS

Chapter 6 takes place after the Lord had been gone for perhaps as long as 1-2 years. Notice Acts 6:7, **“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples IN JERUSALEM increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”** Where? In Jerusalem. The church had already developed a home; a safe and sacred place. The too, problems had begun to surface within the assembly. Seven men – I would call them deacons – are appointed to deal with a conflict (I find it interesting that the first thing the church does when faced with a problem is to appoint a committee. The more things change, the more they stay the same.) Significantly, all seven men had Greek names. Remember, the church was primarily Jewish up to this point. The reference to these Grecian Christians prepares the way for the wider spread of the gospel outside of Jerusalem later on.

Up to this point the church had experienced some opposition from those on the outside, but it was limited. A few of the disciples had been thrown in jail and had been beat up. But the majority of the believers were getting along OK. Then, too, the fellowship was slowly but surely becoming accepted in the mainstream. Again, **“large number of priests”** crossed over and had joined the church. To be sure, the church was growing.

VERSE 8, THOUGH, BEGINS WITH THESE WORDS, “NOW STEPHEN, A MAN FULL OF GOD'S GRACE AND POWER....”

Stephen happened to be one of the seven deacons that had been appointed earlier. While his primary job in the church was taking care of the widows, he also moved with great power and anointing from God. He was a Mother Teresa on spiritual steroids.

Anyway, the brother eventually got under the skin of some very powerful Jews from within the Jewish Synagogue. They basically bribed some people to lie about him, and as a result, the man was arrested. After the deacon made a long and passionate appeal based on his faith, Acts 7:57-58 (*New Century Version*) says, **“They shouted loudly and covered their ears and all ran at Stephen. They took him out of the city and began to throw stones at him to kill him. And those who told lies against Stephen left their coats with a young man named Saul.”**

The opposition against the church, at this point, got to be fierce. I want us to notice now Chapter 8:1-3, **“And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”**

Remember, up to this point, the persecution against the church was rather timid – at least in comparison to what the church was about to face. I want to return to a word that I just read from verse 3 – **“destroy”**. **“Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”**

The word destroy is only used one time – here – in the New Testament. It is a

powerful word picture. When the listeners heard the word they would immediately think of a herd of wild boars ravaging a vineyard or some wild animal devouring a carcass.

Saul's zeal was so great against Christians that it was as if he were wildly raging against them. In fits of violence he would drag off both men and women, beat them, and have them thrown into prison.

2. THE CHURCH IS SHATTERED

Important point. Where was the church at this time? Jerusalem. Where had Jesus told it to be? Again Acts 1:8, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

The church had largely ignored the dictates of the Lord. They had grown comfortable in Jerusalem and it was quite apparent that they had no intentions of ever leaving there. I repeat, it was growing, had great leadership, signs and wonders were taking place, and it was gaining in respectability. What more could a church want?

Then came the death of Stephen. Everything changed.

Some of you may remember that my favorite movie of all time is “Fiddler on the Roof.” I have no idea how many times I have seen it on either stage or screen. I love it. One of the most memorable scenes in the movie is it's conclusion as the Jews are forced to leave their little village --Anatevka -- due to severe persecution by the Czarist Russian government. Some of the people leave for Poland. Others for America. Others were headed who knows where?

That scene fits well with this story in Acts. The saints are forced to leave and to head out in every direction. Notice now Acts 8:4, **“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”** The word “scatter” here in verse four means to sow, to distribute, to scatter abroad. God actually used the death of Stephen to sow the church as a farmer would sow seed.

Acts 11:19-21 confirms, **“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”**

So again, (OHT)

- First it left Jerusalem – it's comfort zone.
- Then it branched out to Judea and Samaria,
- Then on to Africa,
- Asia Minor,
- Europe,
- And finally Paul comes on the scene, later on in the book, and takes the Gospel to Rome.

Acts 17:6 says in part, **“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here'...”**

Colossians 1:23 (*New Living Translation*) adds in part, **“The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed by God to proclaim it.”**

The church was comfortable hanging loose in Jerusalem. You see, in Acts 6 and Acts 7 the church had no conception of a world mission; but when we read chapter 8 in the light of what was soon to happen, we see the believers unconsciously but irresistibly being moved towards it's destiny.

Back to the persecution. I like to put it this way, the church was shattered that it might be scattered. If it hadn't been for the tragic death of Stephen, the church might still be stuck away in the heart of Israel and we the Gentiles might still be lost in our sins!

I WANT US TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS CHURCH ON THE MOVE:

1. THE BIBLE IS CAREFUL TO POINT OUT THAT THE APOSTLES STAYED IN JERUSALEM.

Acts 8:1 again, **“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all EXCEPT THE APOSTLES were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”** For some reason, Peter, John, and the other disciples stayed behind while the rest of the church flew the coop.

There was no mention of these scattered believers having ever received:

- a license to preach,
- or being ordained by the apostles in Jerusalem.

They simply went.

The words in Acts 11:19: (*King James Version*) **“preaching the Word”** does not mean here a formal sermon such as we know today - such as you're now hearing - but rather it means that they **“gossiped the gospel,”** or talked the good news. The original language means “to announce good news.”

Listen to Acts 8:4 from *The Message* translation, **“Forced to leave home base, the Christians all became missionaries. Wherever they were scattered, they preached the Message about Jesus.”**

Now think with me for a moment. Do you possibly think that these “missionaries” were full-time paid clergypersons? Of course not. They were traveling merchants, businessmen, teachers, farmers, herdsman, craftsmen of various sorts – who were also mouthpieces for Jesus Christ.

I think that we sometimes envision the growth of the book of Acts church as being a result of Peter, James, and John going out and conducting giant crusades much like Billy Graham does yet today. That is simply not the case. The early church grew largely while the apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

2. EVERYONE WAS INVOLVED.

Look at your hands, please. Without meaning to be overly dramatic, in a real sense, you are looking at the hands of Jesus. Now don't get me wrong. I do not wish to imply that either one of us is Christ. The point is though, He really doesn't have any hands here on Earth except for the hands that we provide.

- He touches through our hands.
- He heals through our hands.
- He blesses through our hands.
- He gives through our hands.
- He comforts through our hands.

Get the point? Our hands serve as extensions of His hands.

Now...

- Think of all of the healings in the Bible;

- all of the resurrections from the dead;
- all of the other miracles as well.

How many of them just happened without the aid and assistance of some human being; some saint of God? How many? They were rare, very very rare!

God has always had a Noah, a Joseph, a Moses, a David, a Daniel, a Mary, a Samaritan woman, that He could work through. By the way, none of the people that I just mentioned were full time clergypersons. Everyone was known as a leader, a shipbuilder, a king and so forth. Even the Apostle Paul was bi-vocational. He built tents to help support his ministry.

Back in the mid-nineties a church in Houston experienced an amazing phenomenon. *Charisma Magazine* told about it. "Like a bolt of lightning from the sky, God's power zapped the pulpit at the Christian Tabernacle in Houston last fall, splitting the speaker's podium in two pieces before a stunned congregation and igniting a series of revival meetings that are still going on.

The bizarre pulpit-splitting incident, which occurred during an early morning service on Oct. 20 last year--has resulted in hundreds of professions of faith in Christ as well as several reported healings.

In that instant, a loud clap of noise hit the sanctuary. Pastor Richard Heard was thrown backwards and landed 8 or 9 feet away and flat on his back. He lay uninjured, but overcome by a sense of the Holy Spirit's presence.

The podium--made of a half-inch thick, plastic material--did not fare as well. It was split into two pieces that were flung toward the congregation in different directions, landing 6 or 7 feet apart. The base and top were unscathed, but the middle was severed.

Later, the pulpit manufacturer was informed of the incident. The firm denied there was any way the material could ever split as it did--along a

diagonal jagged line. If the podium had been subjected to extremely high pressure--more than 50,000 pounds per square inch, for example--it would have shattered into tiny splinters like glass, the manufacturers said. But they insisted the material would never split by natural means the way it did that Sunday morning at Christian Tabernacle.

When the pastor was asked about the significance of the event, he said that he believed that God was communicating His desire to see the ministry restored back to the people. The pulpit had been used to separate the laity from the work of the ministry. The Lord wants there to be no division of workers and non-workers. Everyone has a service to perform in the Kingdom of God.

In the December 8, 1997, issue of *Christianity Today*, Billy Graham said: "A Christian who fails to express Christ's love for humanity through compassionate service is not living a life of full discipleship. In like manner, a Christian who fails to express Christ's love for humanity through clear verbal witness is also not living a life of full discipleship. For too long we have assumed that evangelism was the province of only a few professionals or a task that the pastor alone could do. Such a view is not faithful to the New Testament, not is it realistic if the challenges of the coming decades are to be met. The task is simply too overwhelming."

The scattered saints of the book of Acts all went; all got involved in the work.

3. THEY DIDN'T HAVE A BUILDING.

Don't get me wrong. I love this complex. God does some neat and awesome things in a church building. But He seems to save His best stuff for places other than some religious edifice.

Listen to this important passage from John 4:19-22. Jesus is speaking here to the Woman at the Well. **“‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus declared, ‘Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’”**

Both the Jews and the Samaritans had an edifice complex. They saw worship as being tied to a special place; a temple or a mountain. Not so, said Jesus.

In like fashion, much of the church’s interest and activity today is tied to a building (a church building) and to a day (Sunday). The impression that is left is that God can only work in a particular building and on a particular day. That just isn’t the case though!

John Wesley had a rule that he lived by. He said:

“Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can,
in all the places you can,
at all the times you can,
to all the people you can, and
as long as you can.”

My wife and I spent 3 and a half years working in Houston Teen Challenge prior to our taking our first pastorate. For nearly half of that time, I was the Director of Evangelism, Jail and Coffee House Ministries for Teen Challenge. A while back I ran across a portion of one of my old annual reports from that period of time. I wrote, “Last year over 250 souls found Jesus Christ as Savior due to Saturday night witnessing. This doesn’t include a number of people healed, delivered from

dope, and freed from alcohol.”

The work was almost completely lay-driven. I can't remember any full-time preachers that came down to our place on a regular bases. But then, the work wasn't for them. It was for believers regardless!

In addition to this, we worked out of an old produce market instead of some beautiful church building. We had some beat up tables instead of pews, bare colored lights instead of fancy chandeliers, and more drunkards and dopers than saints. My wife taught a soul-winning course in a old broken-down walk in freezer.

Then too, please understand that the work as closed on Sundays. The hippies were somewhere sleeping in on Sunday mornings. The drunks were getting over a hang over. The dopers were coming off of some trip. Nothing happened in downtown Houston on Sunday!

In spite of all of these seeming obstacles, God was in our midst and souls were saved, healed and set free by the power of Almighty God!

Do you want to know where New Life Assembly of God is on Friday nights?

The immediate answer is, why it is where it is throughout the week – over on the corner of Wright Road and Highway 14. No, friends, that is not where the church is. That is merely where the church building is located. The church that makes up New Life Assembly is:

- Out on the line at General Motors,
- Setting at home with the kids,
- Out having fun with a group of friends,
- Eating at a restaurant,
- Involved in a Bible study or perhaps a prayer group,
- In the hospital,
- Or driving on the interstate on vacation.

You see, you are the church.

Then, let me add this note, New Life Assembly of God is also out on the streets.

- We are on the corner of Mount Zion and Milton Ave.
- On the sidewalk beside K-Mart and in front of Arbys on Milton.
- New Life is outside a convenience store at Five Points,
- And across from Screamin' MeeMees on Jackson St.

That is the church and that is where the church is!

4. THE BOOK OF ACTS CHURCH TODAY

I need your help. I believe that the Pentecostal church of today is either in Acts 6 (localized and comfortable), or it is in Acts 8 (scattered and persecuted).

Which is it, in your opinion?

Personally, I can see that the church has truly had an experience with Almighty God. Things are happening.

- Then too, we have beautiful church buildings,
- We have learned the necessary principles of leadership and administration, and...
- we have gained a certain degree of respectability within our communities.

As a result of this new ease, the church has grown comfortable. Fat.

Nonetheless, once again the Lord is calling the church out. Once again the cry is to take the Gospel from the home base to our Judea and Samaria, as well as to the very ends of the earth. But who wants to leave the safe and the comfortable in order to encounter risk and discomfort? Let me assure you, the line is not too long.

Without meaning to be melodramatic, I do sense that perhaps we could also be moving into Acts 8 and a period of persecution that the church in America has

never seen before.

Let me give you just a few reasons for my concern.

- Back in the nineties the then governor of Mississippi sparked a national furor when he said in a speech that America was a "Christian nation." *USA Today*, in covering the story, noted that a number of people were calling on the governor to apologize. Senator Warren Rudman, Republican from New Hampshire, said, "Maybe he didn't mean anything by it, but it's deeply offensive to many Americans, frankly, including me,"
- June 19, 2000, the Supreme Court of the United States decided 6-3 that student-led prayer at public high school football games violated the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.
- June 27, 2002, a United States federal appeals court declared the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional because it contains the words "under God".
- Here in our home state of Wisconsin, Federal District Court Judge John Shabaz ordered the city of Marshfield, Wisconsin, to erect a four-foot iron fence around a statue of Jesus Christ near a city rest area. The city had displayed the marble statue since it had been donated by the local Knights of Columbus in 1959. Opponents to the statue argued that the city should erect a 10-foot masonry wall around the 15-foot high statue and post a sign stating that the statue was located on private land. Judge Shabaz ordered the sign but called for an iron fence only four feet high.
- **(OHT)** A federal appeals court unanimously ruled July 1 that a Ten Commandments monument in the Alabama Judicial Building violates the

First Amendment. Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, who installed the 5,280-pound granite monument in 2001, criticized the decision. He said, “When federal courts... proceed to deny the right to acknowledge God merely because three attorneys are offended, we must defend our rights and preserve our Constitution. For federal courts to adopt the agenda of the ACLU and remove the knowledge of God and morality from our lives and our law is wrong.”

While the courts were doing all of this, the Supreme Court ruled this past June 26 that the sodomy laws in the state of Texas were unconstitutional. Their ruling, in effect, stated that private behavior is of no public concern and that morality and decency are unimportant.

Our present state of affairs reminds me of the poem “Topsy Turvy Land” by H. E. Wilkinson

The people walk upon their heads,
The sea is made of sand,
The children go to school by night,
In Topsy Turvy Land.

The front-door step is at the back,
You're walking when you stand,
You wear your hat upon your feet,
In Topsy Turvy Land.

And buses on the sea you'll meet,
While pleasure boats are planned
To travel up and down the streets
Of Topsy Turvy Land.

You pay for what you never get,
I think it must be grand,
For when you go you're coming back,
In Topsy Turvy Land.

As in Topsy Turvy Land, our country is getting it all backwards.

My concern is that this conflict between:

- morality and immorality,
- righteousness and godlessness,
- truth and error,

may escalate until we are ushered into a new age of persecution!

Already:

- our values are scoffed at,
- our preachers are mocked,
- and our Christ is portrayed on screen in blasphemous compromise!

Simply put, the church serves as the world's conscience. Evil and wicked people want that conscience stilled!

Someone once observed that while we PROSECUTE AS CRIMINALS those who fall below societies standards, we, at the same time, PERSECUTE those who rise above them! They did with Jesus and He said that the servant is no greater than His Master.

The Apostle Peter likewise stated in I Peter 4:12-14, 16: **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”**

5. THIS MORNING I WANT TO CALL YOU TO ACTION. I BELIEVE THAT WE STILL HAVE TIME TO TURN THE TIDE – IF WE ACT NOW.

I want to challenge every one of you here today to seriously pray about what God would have you do with your future. Think about this, instead of setting money and career as your goal, why not try to change our culture for the better your goal? Make that your goal. As did those early Christians, be a missionary where you work, as you work, as you go to school, as you live out your life.

Then too...

- Maybe you should think about a career in public service. Consider going into politics.
- Study law. Law is a very noble profession. It is also one of the most influential professions in America today. We need more godly men and women in law.
- Consider going into the arts – music, stage and screen, art. The church use to own the world of art. We have given it away and those who took it have degraded it. The great music and art of the ages has been and is religious art and music.
- Consider science. Can you imagine what would happen if a great number of Spirit-filled Pentecostal young people applied themselves to the daunting issues of life? I could see where God would give Words of Knowledge and Words of Wisdom that could revolutionize medicine, astronomy, physics, and the like.
- Go into media. We need Christian newsmen and newswomen. Write a column. Work to become an anchor on a evening news broadcast. You can make a difference.

I believe that it is time that we rise the banner of righteousness once again in the public arena.

Two weeks ago I briefly addressed some of my concerns that I have talked to you about this morning. As I did so I puts out a quote written by a Martin Niemuller in

Germany during World War 2. It just so happened that Pastor Mark, without knowing anything that was on my heart, had brought to read to the staff the very same quote. The lines are inscribed on a plaque outside one of the concentration camps in Germany. "In Germany, they first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist; then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me and by that time no one was left to speak up." Niemuller was a German pastor as well as a victim of such a Nazi concentration camp.

I believe that the Lord is sending us warnings. The church had better set up, wake up, and speak up. If we don't we might end up living out Acts 8. I can see it happening. If we don't get out and get involved in reaching a world for Christ, if we don't take this Gospel to our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the Earth, I can assure you, God will allow the heat to be turned up and the heat in turn will force us out!