

Acts 1:1-11 “Looking Back in Order to Move Ahead”**

Main Idea: As we celebrate 130 years as a local church, it's the perfect time to *look back* in order to *move ahead*. Let's look back to the beginning of the church, not merely this church but to *the* church in Acts 1. As we prepare to move ahead into the next chapter of our church's story, it's vital that we live with three essential perspectives presented in Acts 1:1-11.

I. The book of Acts calls us to *look back* (1-5).

A. We must remember what Jesus did (1-3).

1. He chose apostles (1-2).
2. He suffered and died (3a).
3. He gave proof He was alive (3b).

B. We must remember what Jesus said (4-5).

1. He told them what to do (4).
2. He told them what would happen (5).

II. The book of Acts calls us to *look out* (6-8).

A. Jesus' followers were concerned about Israel (6).

B. Jesus is concerned about the world (7-8).

1. He gave us a promise.
2. He gave us a purpose.
3. He gave us a plan.
 - Start in Jerusalem .
 - Go next to Judea and Samaria .
 - Keep going to the ends of the earth.

III. The book of Acts calls us to *look ahead* (9-11).

A. Fact #1: Jesus returned to heaven (9).

B. Fact #2: Jesus will return to earth (10-11).

1. This is no time for standing around.
2. This is a perfect time for reaching out.

Response: As we prepare to move ahead as a church...

1. Let us affirm what Jesus did.
2. Let us participate in what Jesus is doing.
3. Let us be ready for what Jesus will do.

On April 9, 1878, a group of approximately thirty people met for the purpose of organizing a new Baptist church in Wheelersburg, Ohio. After giving a devotional from the Scriptures, W. L. Malone was called to chair the meeting.^[1]

That took place on a Tuesday. Five days later, on Sunday, April 14, the newly organized local church met for a 2:00 afternoon worship service. As stated in the record of the church minutes, “Rev. I. N. Clark preached from Luke 14:17, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ On motion the trustees were instructed to take the necessary steps to build a church Edifice.”

Two months later, on June 29, the church appointed a building committee and authorized that committee (as the minutes record) to “complete any arrangements now under consideration towards the building of a church house in Wheelersburg... It was also decided that Levi Smith superintend the carpenters’ work and painting, that Robert Ellioth superintend the stone work, that Harris Dodge superintend the removing of the old building and clearing off the lot preparatory to building, and that John C. Malone superintend the subscriptions and the collection of moneys.”

Although the record does not specify, apparently the first church facility was built and completed during the summer and fall of 1878 at a cost of \$1828.01. As far as utility costs go, you may be interested in knowing that on the following March 1, 1879, the minutes state, “There was enough money collected to buy 4 ½ gallons of oil; Bro. Smith donated a 5 gallon can and agreed to see that the can was filled.”

This month we are celebrating 130 years of God’s goodness to Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It’s important to remember the past, not so we can live in it, but so we can learn from it. Indeed, it’s the perfect time to *look back* in order to *move ahead*. So we’re going to take two Sundays and look back to the beginning of the church, not merely the beginning of *this* church but of *the* church, for while there are many local *churches* there is ultimately only *one* church.

How did the church begin? We find the answer in the book of Acts. This week we’ll look at Acts 1, next week, the Lord willing, at Acts 28. These two texts serve as bookends for the most significant book on the church you’ll ever read.

Why preach two messages on the church? A valid question. It’s not for sentimental reasons, for sure. Let me give three reasons on why we need them. One, many today are scrapping the church. “Who needs it? I’ve got Jesus. I’ve got my Bible. I’ve got my radio and podcast preachers. I don’t need the church.” Two, others are *reinventing* the church. Today we have proponents of the *emergent* church. What’s that? John Piper offers this helpful commentary:

“*Emergent* seems to be a reaction—among younger believers primarily, 20- and 30-somethings—to several things. In my judgment it’s not a very healthy reaction, though I can understand why it might happen.

On one hand it seems to be a reaction against the large, plastic, mega-church phenomenon where relationships are not paramount. The emphasis on bigness, success, slick marketing, and super-duper high-powered worship services all feels very plastic, commercial, and not real, poetic, gutsy and down-to-earth. So there is a reaction against that.

On the other hand it’s a reaction to formalized doctrinal statements. The emergent church tends to find creative ways of coming together, like sitting on sofas, using candles for lighting, painting the walls—strange and different things like that—because it’s fresh and new and it gives release to different peoples’ expressions, and so on. And if you try to push them on what they believe they don’t like to tell you.

If you Google the emergent church you’ll find some emergent websites. You’ll notice that they don’t like statements of faith. They don’t like them because they say that they alienate people. They push people apart instead of relationally nurturing people to come together.

So that’s the flavor. It’s not defined. There is no list on “this is what it means to be emergent.” It’s just kind of a general reactionary movement.”^[2]

So while some are scrapping the church, others are reinventing it. And that brings us to the most important reason we're taking two weeks to look at the book ends of Acts. God wants us to know and then live in light of *His assessment* of the church. We have no right to redefine (and certainly no right to scrap) what God has already defined. And since it is *His* church, what He says matters.

As we prepare to move ahead into the next chapter of our story as a local church, it's vital that we come to grips with three essential perspectives presented in Acts 1:1-11.

I. The book of Acts calls us to *look back* (1-5).

Our faith is not subjective. It's rooted in history. That means a vital key to moving ahead is first of all to *look back*. We need to remember some things, namely two items that Luke highlights in the first five verses. First of all, we need to look back and...

A. Remember what Jesus did (1-3). "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. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God."

According to verse 1, Luke originally wrote the book of Acts for a friend by the name of Theophilus. Acts was actually volume two, the first volume being the gospel of Luke. Luke penned both volumes to give his friend certainty about the two most important subjects in the world: Christ and the Church.

In the gospel, Luke introduced his friend to *Christ* with a biography of His life. In Acts, he introduced him to the *Church*.

The fact is, we must appreciate both *Christ* and the *Church*. If you don't come to grips with Christ, you cannot experience eternal life. But if you don't come to grips with the importance of the *Church*, you will never experience joy as God intended. You will look in vain to find in the book of Acts what is common today, people who profess Christ and yet have no meaningful relationship with Christ's church. It was unthinkable in the first century to be a Christian and *not* be firmly linked to a local church—as it should be today.

Luke begins by looking back and rehearsing the highlights of volume one. The subject matter pertained to "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach." Notice the word "began." In reality, He's not done. Jesus' teaching and doing continues. Where? In His Body, the church. And what's happening in the church now rests upon the foundation of what Jesus did before He left the earth.

Luke invites us to remember what Jesus did, namely three activities, all of which were developed in his gospel.

1. He chose apostles (1-2). One of the first things Jesus did when He began His public ministry was to select twelve men to be with Him. He invited them to follow Him for three years.

And so they did. They saw His miracles, heard His teaching, and witnessed His divine power. He called them "apostles" (Luke 6:13), and delegated His authority to them before He left the earth (Matt 28:20).

Here Luke says that Jesus gave them instructions "through the Holy Spirit," indicating that the same Spirit who would be instrumental in the work of the church in Acts had already been instrumental in the work Christ performed in their lives.

In a very real sense, what happened in the church as recorded in Acts is merely an extension of the ministry Christ began while on earth. Christ delegated His authority to the apostles. He also gave instructions to the apostles that eventually were recorded in what we call the New Testament.

That's why we must hold the Scriptures in high esteem. We have no right to make the church what *we want it to be*. Christ already made it clear what He wants the church to be and do—in *His Word*.

2. *He suffered and died (3a)*. Here Luke summarizes the redemptive work of Christ by simply stating, “After His suffering [the KJV uses the term “passion”].” In his gospel, Luke devoted nearly five chapters to the Passion Week of our Lord (19:28-23:56), but here he merely says he suffered.

And truly, our Lord suffered. He was rejected and unjustly arrested. The soldiers beat Him, and the crowd mocked Him. Ultimately, they nailed Him to the Tree where He gave His life as a ransom payment.

We must look back, beloved. He suffered and died for us. *Wounded for me, wounded for me, there on the Cross He was wounded for me. Gone my transgressions and now I am free, all because Jesus was wounded for me.*

Luke wants us to remember what He did. He chose apostles and then suffered and died. But He's no longer dead!

3. *He gave proof He was alive (3b)*. What kind of proof? Verse 3, “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men [i.e. the apostles] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God .”

Notice the term *many*. The resurrection event didn't happen in a closet. The risen Christ appeared to many individuals over a forty day period, once to a group of over five hundred people at the same time (1 Cor 15:6). He focused on the apostles and gave them *many proofs* of His resurrection, such as eating with them (Luke 24:42-43).

Furthermore, He taught them. About what subject? Interestingly, Luke says He spoke about “the kingdom of God .”

The *kingdom of God* is an important theme in Acts. Philip preached “the good news of the kingdom of God ” in Acts 8:12. Paul told new believers in Acts 14:22, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God .” Later at Ephesus Paul spent three months arguing in the synagogue with unsaved Jews “about the kingdom of God (19:8).”

And Luke ends the book highlighting this theme, too. In chapter 28, while under house arrest in Rome , Paul received visitors. According to verse 23, “From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the *kingdom of God* and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” The last verse of the book, in fact, says this of Paul's activities in prison, “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the *kingdom of God* and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (28:31).”

Answer this. When was the last time you mentioned the *kingdom of God* when you witnessed to an unbeliever? Most gospel presentations don't. That's unfortunate. The apostles talked about the kingdom. Why? They learned it from their Master. Luke says that during Jesus' final forty days with His apostles He spoke about the *kingdom of God* .

Actually, you can sum up the story of the Bible by talking about the *kingdom of God* . In the beginning, God the King created the universe. Since He is King, He deserves obedience from His subjects.

Is that what He received? No. In Genesis 3, the King's subjects committed an act of cosmic treason. Adam and Eve deliberately defied the King's orders and ate the forbidden fruit. Their rebellion cut off creation from the King.

But the King loves His creation. And so in the Garden, God began the work to reclaim what is rightfully His. The story of the Bible, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22, is the account of God's work to reclaim His kingdom.

God sent His Son, King Jesus, to rescue and restore a people for His glory. His rescue mission was costly, so costly that the King gave His own life for His subjects. It was through His death and resurrection that the King removed the curse of sin. Now when a sinner repents and believes in Him, the King reconciles the sinner to God and places him in a new community, the community of the redeemed, the *Church*.

Beloved, we must come to grips with the message of the *kingdom of God*. There are two ways—and only two ways—to live. First, you can be your own king and seek to rule your own life. That’s how we all enter the world. And if you persist in living this first way, you will experience the consequences of God’s eternal judgment.

On the other hand, there’s another way to live. You can submit to the rule of King Jesus, the One who loved you and died in your place. And if you do, you will be reconciled to God and begin to enjoy the benefits of His eternal kingdom!

Listen. This is the message the Lord entrusted to His Church. We need to *look back* and remember what Jesus our King did. Have you come to grips with His accomplishment, my friend?

There’s more. In addition to remembering what Jesus did, Luke invites us to...

B. Remember what Jesus said (4-5). “On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

Remember, Jesus interacted with the apostles several times after His resurrection. But Luke mentions “one occasion.” He wants us to remember a particular conversation Jesus had with the apostles. It took place over a meal. And in that conversation Jesus told His followers two things.

1. *He told them what to do (4).* Verse 4 says He gave them a “command.” Let there be no misunderstanding. The King has the right to give commands to His subjects. He *is* the King, and what He says goes.

What was His command to the apostles? Verse 4—He told them to do two things, first, “Don’t leave Jerusalem.” Remember, these men were from up north in Galilee, but they weren’t to leave Jerusalem. What were they to do? The second command, *wait*. They were to wait for a special gift.

What kind of gift? Jesus identified it as the gift His Father promised. It was also the gift He had told them about earlier.

The command was clear. Don’t leave, but wait. But why?

2. *He told them what would happen (5).* “John baptized you with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

The verb is passive. You *will be baptized*. The apostles would not initiate this activity. God Himself would. And He did in Acts 2 where we read about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a historical event that Jesus predicted and then fulfilled. As John the Baptist baptized converts with water, so the Church was baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Here’s the first essential perspective. We need to *look back* and remember what Jesus did and said, and respond appropriately. We must believe in Him and then become an active part of the community His Spirit inaugurated at Pentecost. We must *look back*.

But don’t stop there.

II. The book of Acts calls us to *look out* (6-8).

The Lord never intended for His church to be a religious country club. No way. We’re not to hoard the good news that’s changed our lives. We’re supposed to *look out*. In fact, the church is in trouble when it fails to *look out*, and it’s that problem that Jesus addressed head-on in His final conversation with His followers. Here’s what happened...

A. Jesus' followers were concerned about Israel (6). Verse 6—"So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"

Remember the subject Jesus had been addressing with the apostles? Verse 3—*the kingdom*. And when they heard Jesus tell them that the Holy Spirit was coming in a few days, they could hardly contain themselves. They knew the Old Testament. They knew the connection between the coming of the Spirit and the kingdom (Joel 2:28ff.).

This was the great hope for Israel throughout the Old Testament. "The kingdom is coming!" the prophets announced. "God established His covenant with King David and promises that one of his descendants will sit on his throne forever!"

It was only natural, then, for the disciples to ask this question. "Lord, is it time? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" You need to realize their perspective, too. Until they met Jesus, their idea of the Messiah was a soldier like Judas Maccabeus (Judas the Hammer). They believed God was going to send a King riding on a white horse, with sword flashing in the sun, to get rid of the pagan Roman Empire, and establish David's throne forever in Israel.

They'd been with Jesus for three years, all the while wondering when He would pull out the sword. "Are you going to do it *now*, Lord?" they asked.

They were concerned about *Israel*. In contrast...

B. Jesus is concerned about the world (7-8). Verse 7—"He said to them, 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.'" Jesus didn't deny His intent to restore the kingdom to Israel. He did not tell them it wouldn't happen, but did challenge them on the matter of *timing*.

"That's up to the Father," He told them. "It's not your business to know when I'm going to set up My kingdom. You're thinking about *Israel*. I've got something in mind for the *world*. And here it is..."

Verse 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." Here's the theme verse of the book, and in it Jesus gives us three essentials.

1. *He gave us a promise.* "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you," Jesus told them.

Notice that word *power*. James Boice offers this perspective, "The Greek word *dynamis* entered the English language when the Swedish chemist and engineer Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833-96) made the discovery that became his fortune. He discovered a power stronger than anything the world had known up to that time. He asked a friend of his who was a Greek scholar what the word for 'explosive power' was in Greek. His friend answered, '*Dynamis*.' Nobel said, 'Well, I am going to call my discovery by that name.' So he called his explosive power 'dynamite.'" [\[3\]](#)

That is the word here. Jesus promised to give His followers *dynamis*, the life-changing, dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. But what's this power for? It's not for self-fulfillment, but is related to the second essential.

2. *He gave us a purpose.* "You will be my witnesses," Jesus said. That's what the power is for, to enable us to be something, to be *witnesses*. Notice the order. You will receive power, and *then* you will be my witnesses.

A witness doesn't say, "I think so." He says, "I know so." He speaks the truth with conviction, even if it costs him. It's not surprising that the Greek word for *witness* and the word for *martyr* (*martus*) are one and the same. As Barclay observed, "A witness had to be ready to become a martyr." [\[4\]](#)

And what's supposed to be the subject of our witness? "You will be *my* witnesses," Jesus emphasized.

Let that sink in. If you are a Christian, here's your purpose for existence. We who know Christ have a mission. We're not here to live for ourselves. We are here on *kingdom* business. The King told us to tell the world about Him.

Do you view evangelism that way? It's our mission to tell people the truth about the *King*. Just think of it. He didn't say, "Go, tell people to get their act cleaned up." No, He said, "Go, tell them about *Me*."

The truth is, no one is too far gone *or* too good for Jesus. That's our purpose, to tell people what the King did, and call them to respond to Him.

Answer this. Do you believe the gospel is good news? It seems to me one of the reasons many of us hide our light under the bushel is because we really don't believe the gospel ourselves. I mean *really* believe it, that it's good news!

Crowds used to flock to hear the well known preacher, George Whitefield, who often preached early in the morning before people went to work. On one such occasion, an assembly gathered in Edinburgh around 5 o'clock in the morning to hear his preaching. On the way to the church a man met David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic. Surprised at seeing him on his way to hear Whitefield, the man said, "I thought you did not believe in the gospel." Hume replied, "I do not, but *he does*." [\[5\]](#)

Before leaving the world Jesus gave His followers a promise—"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." As well as a purpose—"And you will be my witnesses." Thirdly...

3. *He gave us a plan*. Where did He say to be witnesses? He was very specific in His instructions to the apostles. His plan entailed three phases. He told them...

- Start in Jerusalem . What was significant about Jerusalem ? This is profound. Jerusalem is where they *were*!

There once was a demon possessed man who lived in the tombs. People tried to chain him, but he broke the chains. Then Jesus came to him, set him free from demonic control, and gave him new life. The man begged Jesus for the privilege to go with him. Jesus declined. Do you remember what Jesus told him? "Return home and tell how much God has done for you (Luke 8:39)."

Jesus' plan is quite simple. *Go home! Start at home!* Some new Christians get in trouble right here. They think they need to rush right away to India or Africa to fulfill the Great Commission. But Jesus told the first disciples to start in Jerusalem .

He didn't say to *stop* there, however. Phase #2...

- Go next to Judea and Samaria . *Judea*—that's the district where Jerusalem was located. And *Samaria* — that was the next district to the north. And by the way, in Samaria the people and the culture were different.

Right here is where some older Christians get in trouble. They make the mistake of believing that the gospel need not be taken beyond their own circle of friends. "I can serve God right here where I live." But Jesus told the First Church to *start* in Jerusalem , not finish there.[\[6\]](#)

In fact, the First Church apparently got into a rut. Then God used persecution against His church to help His church move beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8:1).

The plan couldn't be clearer. Empowered by the Spirit, you are to be My witnesses. Start in Jerusalem . Go next to Judea and Samaria . Then phase #3...

- Keep going to the ends of the earth. Think of how that sounded to men who had never been more than 75 miles from home! These were ordinary men from Galilee . Family men. Blue collar types. Yet Jesus looked them in the eye and said, "Here's the plan. *You* are going to the ends of the earth."

"But I don't want to go! I like my bed, my friends, my town. I've just remodeled my house the way I like it. And besides, I like seeing my relatives when the holidays roll around. Let somebody else go."

Is that what they said? No. They went. How do we know? The book of Acts tells the story. Acts 1-7 shows the witness of the church “in Jerusalem ,” chapters 8-11 their witness “in Judea and Samaria ,” and chapters 12-28 verifies that Christ’s followers took the message of Christ to the “ends of the earth.”

And why did they go? Because the *King* told them to go.

When we become a Christian, a fundamental change occurs. The most important thing is no longer what I want. It’s what the King wants. Is that true of your life?

Have you told your neighbors about Christ? How about your classmates? How about the fellow that works next to you? We’re not called to be prosecutors and judges, but *witnesses*. The disciples were concerned about Israel , but our Savior is concerned about *the world!*

If you’re feeling stale in life, maybe it’s because you need a perspective adjustment. First of all, *look back*. Submit to Christ and become an active part of His church. Then *look out*. See the world, and tell the world what you know about Christ. There’s a third essential perspective...

III. The book of Acts calls us to *look ahead* (9-11).

The episode concludes with two undeniable facts.

A. Fact #1: Jesus returned to heaven (9). “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” And just that suddenly, He was gone. Where is Jesus today? He is in heaven. That’s a fact. Many witnesses saw Him go. This, too, is a fact...

B. Fact #2: Jesus will return to earth (10-11). “They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee ,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”

I’m intrigued by the impact Jesus’ departure had on His followers. There they stood, paralyzed as it were, looking up into the sky.

Until ... the angels’ message jolted them into reality. “Why are you standing here, looking up?” they asked. First of all, He’s coming back! And second of all, you’ve got a job to do! Between this day and the day He returns, tell the world about Him!

Let the facts sink in.. Jesus returned to heaven. And Jesus will return to earth. That being the case...

1. *This is no time for standing around.* Rather...

2. *This is a perfect time for reaching out.* There’s work to be done. The Savior gave us a job to do.

I don’t think we realize how seriously the first generation of the church took Jesus’ final words. Within thirty years they spread the message of Christ from Jerusalem all the way to the capital city of Rome and beyond!

How did they do it? They were ordinary people like us, but unlike many of us they truly lived with these three perspectives. They *looked back*, they *looked out*, and they *looked ahead*.

Response: As we prepare to move ahead as a church...

Let's do the following...

1. *Let us affirm what Jesus did.* Jesus died and rose again to save sinners. Have you received Him as your Lord and Savior?

2. *Let us participate in what Jesus is doing.* Jesus is gone, yes, but He's doing something on earth right now. As Boice rightly points out, "'Acts' is a short name for 'The Acts of the Apostles.' It might more properly be called 'The Acts of Jesus Christ' or, to be even more accurate, 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Jesus Christ through God's People.'" [7] Are you a part of what Jesus is doing right now? Are you a devoted, joyful, contributing member of a Bible-believing, Christ-centered church? In order to take seriously what Jesus is doing, you must be.

I'm grateful that in 1878, Brother Smith donated a five gallon oil can and made sure it stayed full. I'm grateful that today this church has many "Brother Smiths" who are giving what they have to this church because they love Christ. May their tribe increase!

3. *Let us be ready for what Jesus will do.* He will come again. It may be today.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Information taken from the *Minutes of the Regular Baptist Church of Wheelersburg*

[2] John Piper, "What is the emerging church?" March 12, 2008, www.desiringgod.org

[3] James M. Boice, *Acts*, p. 25.

[4] Barclay, *Acts*, p. 13.

[5] As told by Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 17.

[6] William LaSor, *Church Alive*, p. 36.

[7] James M. Boice, p. 15.