

Followers of the Way

Restoration and healing - the Church arises

Philip Quenby, 18 June 2023

Acts 3:1-26

The Roman Empire of the 1st century AD offers plenty of comparisons with our present-day world: in the efficiency of its communications; availability of an international language (Latin in the western Empire, Greek in the east); impressive technical achievements co-existing alongside a brutal culture; widespread sexual immorality and paganism; anti-God philosophical systems and the open worship of demons; persecution of true believers; demands for allegiance to the state regardless of freedom of conscience; and (in the context then of Israel, now of segments of the Church, particularly in the West) a corrupt and largely apostate religious establishment.

The situation of the early Church was not unlike our own, too. Jesus had been resurrected, promising to come again, and believers had to grapple with how to live out the Gospel while eagerly expecting and desiring His return, which they thought could happen at any moment. Two thousand years later, we have even more reason to expect at any point the Second Coming of our Lord.

We do not normally consider Acts to be a prophetic book, yet it foreshadows much of what needs to be done by the people of God in our day, and provides examples of how the Church should discharge its mission in each time and place. There is a forerunner principle in the Bible – King David and John the Baptist were both forerunners of Christ, for example – and the giants of the faith Acts describes are our forerunners. They show how we should be walking at this point in redemption history, and what is needed for the Body of Christ to fulfil its Kingdom mandate in these end times. Today we will explore one aspect to this prophetic dimension of Acts, but before we get into that, let us set the scene and remind ourselves of some background.

The starting-point for everything Acts describes was the ascension of Jesus to heaven (Acts 1:9) forty days after His crucifixion, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Shavuot (Pentecost) ten days later (Acts 2:1-4). These events empowered the disciples to be Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) – together providing the springboard from which the Church was birthed.

God's sovereign activity was foundational in bringing the Church into being, and without it, none of what followed would have been possible. However, the LORD chooses to use us as His "fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 6:1) or co-labourers.

Consequently, a response was required from the apostles as leaders of this fledgling Christian community, and their lead had to be followed faithfully by the other believers.

This response involved taking the steps of faith needed to fulfil the kingdom mandate of all who belong to the Lord Jesus. That mandate is not just to preach and teach the kingdom of God, but to manifest it. It has the same purpose as the one for which Jesus originally sent out His disciples, namely “to drive out all demons and to cure diseases ... to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.” (Luke 9:1, see also Matthew 10:8). It involves fulfilment of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) – to make disciples (not converts, mind you, but disciples), baptise in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teach believers to obey the Lord’s commands. All these Kingdom mandate things can be summarised in the word Jesus used in Acts 1:8, when He spoke of the disciples being His “witnesses” (Acts 1:8). To witness is to indicate, show, prove, and to bear testimony to. It involves both speaking and acting, a physical demonstration as well as (even, instead of) words. As people who have the kingdom of God within us (Luke 17:21), and from whom God demands fruitfulness, we are called to witness, and thereby to manifest as well as talk about this kingdom – not being passive observers of what is happening around us, but active agents who (by God’s grace) can “[turn] the world upside down.” (Acts 17:6, KJV).

And so it was that “Then Peter stood up with the Eleven” (Acts 2:14) – a physical expression of stepping into their new role as apostles, as leaders of the Church, and as preachers and teachers of the Kingdom. Though only one of them (Peter) spoke to the crowd on this occasion, they stood together as a body, which meant putting their heads above the parapet and making themselves targets of the regime. What Peter said answered the perennial questions of humanity in the face of things eternal and miraculous – “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12) and “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37) – and did so with uncompromising directness. Though Peter was still grappling with all the implications of everything he had seen and heard since Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, all the essentials of his developed understanding of who Jesus was and why he came were present in this speech: he affirmed that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried (Acts 2:23); that He rose again (Acts 2:24, 2:31); that He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 2:33); and that He is the Messiah (Acts 2:36). He did not pull any punches about his fellow citizens’ complicity in Christ’s death, saying, “you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death” (Acts 2:23) and He was the one “whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Hearing this, the crowd “were cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). A similar honesty and straightforwardness are required in how we deal with matters of sin, salvation, and the identity of the one we serve.

Peter responded to the second question “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37) with a call, a promise, and a warning. The **call** was to “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ [that is, Yeshua the Messiah] for the forgiveness of your sins.” (Acts 2:38) – a radical and dangerous thing to say in the context of the ritual immersion that took place at Shavuot, and a red rag to the Jewish religious authorities. The **promise** that

“you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38) came with the assurance that it was “for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:39). The **warning** was to “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” (Acts 2:40). As Lynda reminded us last week, this same call, promise, and warning need to be spoken today.

With “about three thousand ... added to [the] number [of Jesus’ followers] that day” (Acts 2:41), what we now call the Church was born. The early believers were characterised by uncompromising **devotion** (Acts 2:42), expectant **faith** (Acts 2:43), radical **generosity** (Acts 2:44-45), unfailing **fellowship** and deep-seated **thankfulness** (Acts 2:46), **praise, joy, and fruitfulness** (Acts 2:47). As the Body of Christ, from this point onwards they were a bodily fulfilment of Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus applied to Himself when He preached in the synagogue in His home town of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). This Isaiah 61 call is upon those anointed by the Spirit of the LORD – that is us, by the way! – is “to preach good news [the Gospel] to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed [and] to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.” (Isaiah 61:1-2, Luke 4:18-19).

All this was the lead-in to where we pick up the story at the start of Acts 3. It was during this phase of the life of the Church that Peter and John went to the temple at one of the set times for daily prayer (Acts 3:1), since “every day they [the disciples] continued to meet together in the temple courts.” (Acts 2:46). Note, by the way, that right from the start these believers made a habit of public gathering and witness, as well as having more personal times of devotion, when they “broke bread in their homes and ate together” (Acts 2:46). It was from this place of regular public witness that God used Peter and John to bring about a step change in the reach and direction of the Church.

Now, the events described in Acts 3:2-26 were real happenings involving real people, but they are also a prophetic outworking of God’s intentions in and through His Body. That is the aspect we are going to focus on today, so with that in mind, let us consider the where, the who, the how, the what and the why of what took place.

Start with **location (where)**. Though we cannot be sure because Herod’s temple was destroyed by a Roman army under Titus in AD 70, the likelihood is that the Gate Beautiful was on the eastern side of the temple complex, meaning Peter and John approached from the east, as Jesus did when He rode down from the Mount of Olives and across the Kidron Valley during His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, John 12:12-19). On that occasion, Jesus cleansed the temple, driving out the money-changers (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46), and Matthew 21:14 adds the detail that He also healed the blind and the lame at this time. Here, Peter and John did the same, in a direct continuation of the Lord’s work – healing the man crippled from birth (Acts 3:2-8) and bringing revelation (that is, spiritual sight) to the onlookers in the temple courts (Acts 3:11-26).

The location, then, sets up a series of resonances with the earthly ministry of Jesus. We see there is no dislocation between what happened whilst Jesus was on earth and what came afterwards, but a continuum. And these resonances are not just backward-looking. They also point forward to the Lord's coming again: "On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem" (Zechariah 14:4), and He will enter the city just the same way He did over two thousand years earlier. In this in-between time in which we now live – the interval between Jesus' earthly ministry in the first century AD and His future millennial rule – these things remind us of the charge Jesus gave His Church, that we should "Occupy until I come." (Luke 19:13, KJV). To occupy involves taking and holding ground. It demands action, not just words. If we are to be occupiers, the Church must arise. This is the where.

Next, consider **people (who)**. The man crippled from birth is a type (picture) of the Church, made lame by looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place (money instead of healing, outside the place of God's Presence and provision rather than within it), and imprisoned by the poverty of low expectations. This man "used to sit begging at the temple gate" (Acts 3:10), unable or unwilling even to enter the outer courts of the temple. He was passive rather than active: when Peter and John met him, he "was being carried to ... where he was put every day to beg" (Acts 3:2). This is someone who had things done to him and for him. Literally and figuratively, he was not standing on his own two feet. His downcast eyes meant he could not see what was right in front of him till Peter caused him to look up.

Across this man's path God brought Peter and John. He could have used any Spirit-filled believer, but the LORD chose these two – Peter as "the rock on which I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18), and John as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 12:23, 19:26, 21:7, 21:20). They became the mechanism through which God provided a sure foundation for this crippled man's life, enabling him to receive restoration and healing, and to move in the love and worship of his Creator.

By virtue of the Holy Spirit residing within them, when Peter and John entered the temple courts, God did so, too. If the supposition above is correct, they came in through the Shushan Gate (named for the Persian city Susa, also called the Golden Gate, later known to Jews as Gate of Mercy – Hebrew, *Sha'ar Harachamimi*). Once again, God visited His covenant people with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2, KJV), applying the principle of "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16), as Peter pointed out to the crowd that gathered: "When God raised up his servant [Jesus], he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." (Acts 3:26). This is the who – not just the human actors in this story, but God, too.

Which brings us to **what the apostles said and did (how)**. "Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!'" (Acts 3:4). A Church that is passive and seeking the wrong things in the wrong place needs to see the example of victorious, faith-filled Holy Spirit life. It needs to stop looking down and start to look up – as Jesus said, "When

these things [end time events] happen, look up, for then you know that your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28). With the restoration and healing God brings when true believers manifest the Kingdom, the Church can be raised to its feet to praise the LORD, taking its witness into places where a religious spirit deadens the work of the Kingdom, and from there into the wider world. The formerly crippled man “went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping and praising God.” (Acts 3:8). This is how the Church is supposed to be, and this is what God wants to release it into in our day.

Like Peter, believers who are moving in Holy Spirit power and anointing need to call a crippled Church to give attention to who and what they are (“Look at us!”: Acts 3:4). This is not arrogant or egotistical. It simply recognises where we are and what needs to be done, just as Paul said, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Those who already walking in freedom and power need to help this Church to get to its feet (“Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up”: Acts 3:7). Because it is only when, in faith, we make the effort to stand that God will then bring His restoration and healing (“instantly [he stood up] the man’s feet and ankles became strong”: Acts 3:8).

All this is for the praise and glory of Almighty God and for **the fulfilment of His Kingdom purposes (the what – the what it is all about)**. When people see a Church cured of its lameness, they will take notice. (“When all the people saw him walking and praising God ... they were filled with wonder and amazement”: Acts 3:9). Then they will “[come] running” (Acts 3:11) to hear what the people of God have to say. All the while, “the beggar held on to Peter and John” (Acts 3:11), just as the Church needs to cling to the examples that help remind it and sustain it in who and what it is supposed to be.

Peter’s speech to the crowd began with what at first sight might seem a strange statement: “Men of Israel, why does this surprise you?” (Acts 3:12). They had just seen a man crippled from birth (Acts 3:2) miraculously healed and they were not supposed to be surprised! But after the (still recent) events of the first Pentecost and the explanation Peter gave then about what was going on, people should have realised what they had witnessed was a further outworking of the same move of God.

Incidentally, it seems that in the intervening days, Peter’s theology had moved on further, as God gave him additional revelation and understanding. Peter had a similar message for the crowd to when he preached at Pentecost in terms of the death of Jesus (“handed ... over to be killed”: Acts 3:13), His resurrection (“God raised him from the dead”: Acts 3:15), His ascension (“he must remain in heaven”: Acts 3:21), His being the Messiah (“the Christ ... even Jesus”: Acts 3:20, “a prophet like [Moses]”: Acts 3:22), and about the people’s complicity in His death (“you disowned ... you killed”: Acts 3:14-15). But now, he spoke about Jesus being “the author of life” (Acts 3:15) and “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14) – terms that signified God Himself. (For uses of the Holy One, see 2 Kings 19:22, Job 6:10, Psalm 22:3, Proverbs 9:10, Isaiah 1:4, Luke 4:34, John 6:69 and many other examples. For uses of the Righteous One, see Proverbs 21:12, Isaiah 24:16, Acts

7:52, Acts 22:14, 1 John 2:1.) And he made the extraordinary statement that, “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.” (Acts 3:16).

So, we come to **God’s intentions (why)**. Why are we talking about these things today? Because this is His word to the Church in our day. “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.” (Acts 3:13). The Church must avow and own that the God we worship is the God of Israel, that Jesus is king of the Jews, and that Christ will come back to rule and reign from Jerusalem. God has not finished with Israel and the Jewish people, and His promises to them will be fulfilled to the letter. Peter reminded his listeners that the Jewish people “are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with [their] fathers. He said to Abraham, “Through you all peoples on earth will be blessed.” (Acts 3:25). Nothing in the Bible says this has changed. In this New Covenant era, with the Church recently birthed, the apostle Peter affirmed that all God’s covenant promises to Israel still hold good.

Yet too much of the Church has fallen for Replacement Theology, believing the Church has supplanted Israel in God’s purposes. This is false. It is a canker in the Body and we need to cut it out. It is one of the things that are crippling the Church and making it lame. Peter’s words apply to us as individuals, but also to us collectively: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus.” (Acts 3:19-20). If the Church is to be cured of its lameness and enabled to step into the fullness of all God has for it in these days, this must be our starting point. God longs to give His Body times of refreshing and to pour out the Holy Spirit in a new Pentecost. He will do so in His grace, mercy, and sovereign power, but before He does, He is looking for a response from us. Let us take hold of the right hand of the crippled man today and help him to his feet.

Amen