

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 14: THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH

Today, Christians associate the kingdom of God on earth with the believing community within the visible entity which we call 'the church'. However, the kingdom of God on earth, understood as people submitting to the sovereign will of God and living a life of obedience to His commands, has existed from the beginning of time. Old Testament saints are as much citizens of God's kingdom as Christians. The key difference as we saw last week, is that since Christ's coming into the world as Lord and Saviour, the kingdom of God on earth is being established on different principles. In the Old Testament the principle governing citizenship was the Mosaic covenant and Law, established by God as the standard by which people would be judged. Now it is on the sole basis of the atoning work of Christ's earthly ministry. The NT writer who saw this most clearly was Luke. So, our first landmark is about how this writer covered the spectrum of the inauguration, emergence, and expansion of the kingdom of God on earth. Luke's two-volume work of the gospel and Acts make up 27.1% of the whole NT. However, because the two books have been separated in the NT order, people seldom see them as one continuous account of how God was directly intervening in human affairs to inaugurate His kingdom on earth through the Christ event; and extending it through the coming of the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and direct it both collectively and individually.

Luke 24:45-49 (NIV) Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Acts 1:4-5 (NIV) 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. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Scholars have tried to depict the unity of the two works in various ways, and we do not have the time to explore them. But what can be said with certainty is that what is recorded in the gospel of Luke finds its mirror counterpart in Acts. Craig Blomberg, for example, takes Jesus' progression from Galilee, through Judea and Samaria and on to Jerusalem, mirrored by the progression from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and on to Rome. For people living in the eastern Mediterranean areas, Rome was the end of their world. From seeing the births of John the Baptist and Jesus in terms of the fulfilment of OT prophetic promises, Luke ends the gospel with the death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. This is followed by an interval until the next stage in God's plan is reached. That involved Jesus commanding the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power. Luke 24:49 is a direct link to Acts 1:8 forming the bridge between the end of the gospel and the beginning of Acts. Just as Jesus had given the Twelve and Seventy-two the power and authority to witness to Him in Palestine, while He was on earth, they had to wait for the special and permanent anointment of the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses, this time, to the ends of the earth. Until they received this commissioning and empowerment for that purpose, the expansion of the kingdom on earth could not proceed. Hence, our second landmark is the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which in Luke's ordering of events, was the natural outcome of Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God. To many, the title of Acts should be the Acts of the Holy Spirit rather than the Acts of the Apostles.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

And those examples have to start with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The coming of the Spirit marked by tongues of flames was a dramatic way of making sure those present were fully aware of that they had received divine power for the task ahead. In the power of the Spirit Peter preached to the multi-national crowds gathered in Jerusalem. Each nationality heard the gospel message in their own language and 3000 people entered the kingdom of God on earth that day. Crowds, amazed at the healing of the lame man, gathered, and Peter took the opportunity to preach to them as well. In Acts 4:4 Luke records that another 5000 joined them.

Acts 10:44-47 (NIV) While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 47 “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

Acts 11:18 (NIV) When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

This slide is just included, not for you to try to read, but just to show only 25 of the 50 mentions of the Holy Spirit in the NIV translation of the book of Acts. Just these examples confirm that it was only the presence of the Spirit which enabled God’s kingdom on earth to emerge and grow as it did in the 30 years or so covered by this record. They also show that it would be impossible to mention all the activity of the Holy Spirit Luke has recorded for us in one evening, so this landmark will concentrate on a few examples which characterise the Spirit’s direction of the kingdom as it emerged on earth.

While never as spectacular as the experience of the 120 in the upper room, believers’ reception of the Spirit was always a palpable occurrence and often accompanied by signs like speaking in tongues. One very underestimated occasion of this was Peter’s encounter with Cornelius. Both men had been prepared for their meeting by visions. Cornelius was a centurion stationed in a major Roman military base at Caesarea Maritima. The conversion of Cornelius and his household was called by one commentator ‘the Pentecost of the Gentile world.’ Note how the Jews who had accompanied Peter were astonished that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles. It was so incredible to those who were not present that Peter was summoned, by fellow Jews, to account for his actions in flouting strict separation rules about even entering a Gentile home. But after hearing Peter’s version of events in full, the Jewish leaders, also understood that God showed no partiality, stating “So then, even to the Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). This was, in fact, a major turning point in the expansion of the kingdom of God on earth, because now the message had overcome its first major hurdle – the ethnic division between Jew and Gentile.

Then we have a different kind of situation when Paul met with a group of believers.

Acts 1:5 (NIV) 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 19:4-6 (NIV) Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” 5 On hearing this, they

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

At Ephesus he met disciples of John the Baptist who told him they had never heard of the Holy Spirit, but had only received John's baptism. The fact that they had received John's baptism for the repentance of their sins had made them ready to receive the Holy Spirit. In this case, fulfilment of prophecy was a key factor in the encounter. It fulfilled both what John the Baptist had prophesied about his baptism being superceded when the kingdom had arrived; and of what Jesus had told the disciples before His ascension. Again no one was left in any doubt that the Holy Spirit was now at work in the lives of these disciples.

Being filled with the Spirit was the essential initiation into the kingdom of God. 'Filled' with the Spirit' was Luke's way of saying this represented blessing and enablement to become citizens of God's kingdom. It represented the inner presence of God and the power of God in the life of the believer. Being 'full of the Spirit' was a description of the seven men including Stephen, the first martyr, denoting their spiritual maturity. Barnabas, being filled with the Spirit, had the ministry of encouragement and was responsible for seeking out Paul in Tarsus (11:24-26). It was as a result of their joint ministry in Antioch that believers were given the name 'Christians'. Paul, himself, was filled with the Spirit through the laying on of hands by Ananias (9:17). These and all of the other references to the reception of the Spirit heralded the new period of the expansion of the kingdom.

Acts 5:3-4 (NIV) Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

Acts 16:6-7 & 9-10 (NIV) Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to..... During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

The other activities of the Spirit are wide ranging, but in each instance taught something about how the kingdom was to proceed and function. We find the Spirit giving Peter insight in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5. Peter explicitly states they lied not to mere men, but to the Holy Spirit and to God in verses 3 and 4. Three times in John 14:17, 15:26 and 16:13 the Holy Spirit is called the 'Spirit of truth' and the One who would lead Jesus' followers into all truth. In this event, the Spirit inspired insight preserved the integrity of the community by exposing lies and deception and revealing truth. While the demise of the husband and wife may seem severe to us, it clearly demonstrated that this kind of behaviour would not be tolerated within the new community. God would insist that given the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, His citizens were expected to live lives honouring Him.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

As a contrast we can look at the Spirit's action while Paul was travelling concerning those which were to be brought within the kingdom through the preaching of the gospel and those, for the time being, who were to remain ignorant of it.

Acts 16:6-10 (NIV) During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

We have no idea of how the Holy Spirit communicated to Paul that he was not to preach the word in the province of Asia. But, we can understand that his vision of a man calling to him from Macedonia was given by the Holy Spirit. And Paul's response was immediate obedience to that call. Paul's experience of guidance as to where he was to minister clearly demonstrates the dynamic work of the Spirit in directing evangelistic efforts to the places which would receive the message of the kingdom. They show that the Holy Spirit was the driving power behind the expansion of the kingdom. Jesus' promise had not only been fulfilled, it was fulfilled in such a way that the church was equipped, through Spirit inspired activity, to perform its mission of taking the gospel message to the ends of the earth.

That takes us to the next landmark on our route. The two key messengers of the gospel were Peter and Paul. It is primarily their speeches recorded in Acts that give us the essence of the preaching and teaching of the early church. As you would expect, primacy was given to the Person of Jesus. A study of just the names which were used of Jesus in the book is a measure of their beliefs and conviction of His sovereign supremacy over the communities that would emerge from their mission. Peter's assertion in Acts 2:36 that Jesus, whom they had crucified was both Lord and Christ could not have been more emphatic. Christ means 'Anointed One' and the speech makes clear that that anointing came from God. The title, however, that encapsulates all the others is the title of 'Lord'. Familiarity with Jesus' titles can sometimes blind us as to their importance. We return again to Peter's words to Cornelius for this a key episode one which illustrates the significance of this comprehensive title.

In chapter 10, Peter is recorded as telling Cornelius that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. We cannot imagine the impact this would have had on a soldier, a servant of the Roman emperor, who claimed lordship, with the power of life and death over every citizen of his empire. The claim that Jesus was even greater and more powerful than Caesar, and was Lord, not just of an earthly empire, but of everything, would have implied the elevation and exaltation to a status even above the highest deity in the Roman pantheon. Peter is, in effect, telling Cornelius that Jesus has the sovereign authority of the supreme God of the universe, and to deal with Jesus is to deal with God Himself. This was the leap of faith Cornelius and his household had to take in order to enter the kingdom of God on earth. That those present did so, evidenced by the coming of the Holy Spirit being seen by Peter and his companions, is the reason why, justifiably, as already mentioned, the event has been called the 'Pentecost' of the Gentile world. This inclusion initiated through the Holy Spirit's vision to this first Gentile convert is Luke's central theme regarding the expansion of the kingdom. Until the Gentiles were prepared to accept that Jesus Christ was the exalted Lord, the gospel message would not extend beyond Palestine. Often this episode just makes a nice story, but its significance had far-reaching consequences. Peter's defence of this event, repeated at the Council of Jerusalem, where he was supported by Barnabas' and Paul's reporting of Gentile conversions during the first missionary journey, convinced the Jewish leaders that God had extended salvation to the Gentiles. Scholarly

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

consensus dates the Council of Jerusalem as AD49-50. Thus, in less than two decades, the kingdom had crossed the ethnic divide and the witness of the kingdom had spread far beyond Jerusalem and even Judea and Samaria.

But, apostolic preaching and teaching had a second equally important function. The presentation of information about the Person and work of Christ was followed by a call to repent and be baptised, in view of the coming judgement

Acts 10:42 (NIV) He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

Acts 13:38-39 (NIV) “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

Acts 17:30-31 (NIV) In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 26:20 (NIV) First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.

We have throughout Route 66 seen that the call to repent appears at every step of our way. Now, it carries the urgency first preached by John the Baptist, for as we have also seen, Jesus’ earthly ministry resulted in a revised operating system in the kingdom of God in heaven. In effect, this constituted the last opportunity humanity will be given to respond to the offer of entry into God’s kingdom on earth. From Peter’s first call to repent on the day of Pentecost to the end of Paul’s ministry, the message was the same. These 5 verses encompass the whole message of the prophets of old. Peter’s first speech in Acts 2 and Paul’s first recorded speech in Acts 13 at Pisidian Antioch both state explicitly repentance was necessary for the remission/forgiveness of sins. Peter was speaking to Jews in Jerusalem: Paul was speaking to Jews in the synagogue after they had heard readings from the Law and the prophets. Their hearers on both occasions did not have to be told that sin involved rebellion against God. Paul’s mention of Moses and the law would have brought to mind rebellion of people in the past, and the retribution that came throughout their history as a result of their failure to repent. Emphasising the fundamental principle of repentance as a prerequisite for entry into the kingdom was a primary and permanent element of the preaching and teaching of the gospel. But now, the judge of whether or not repentance had taken place rested in the judgement of Jesus.

Acts 13:39 gives us our first mention of ‘justification’, which will later become a key doctrine in the development of the kingdom. Justification, to people of the time, and, indeed to us, means unequivocal acceptance by God and restoration to His favour. But, in this initial stage of the emergence of the kingdom, Peter and Paul and all the other apostles focused on justification of sinners resting on acceptance of the message that it was the recent history of Jesus’ death on the cross that provided an atonement for the sins of the world. His resurrection was proof positive that God had accepted that sacrifice on behalf of humanity. Thus, as exalted Lord and Saviour, as Peter told Cornelius, humanity’s acceptance or rejection of His Person

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

and His work is the standard by which God will judge the world. Only repentance denotes acceptance, but as Paul states in 26:20, repentance has to be evidenced in how people then live their lives. These words were a summary of his message from the time of his first missionary journey in AD45-47 to this present defence before King Agrippa and the Roman governor, Festus, in AD60, after which he was taken as a prisoner to Rome. Even as a prisoner his witness continued, Luke recording he preached there for two years chapter 28:30. The date of Paul's death is not known, but we have no reason to doubt he continued to preach the same message of the kingdom until that time.

With Paul's arrival in Rome, we reach our final landmark on this stage of Route 66 the expansion of the witness which Jesus said would be taken to the ends of the earth. Luke's account gives us a clear picture of how this was achieved.

Acts 1:3 (NIV) After his suffering, he presented himself to them 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.

Acts 8:12 (NIV) But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Acts 14:21-22 (NIV) They Paul and Barnabas) preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

Acts 19:8 (NIV) Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.

Luke's account traces the extension of the kingdom from the initial 3000 people who had entered it on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem to its expansion through Philip in Samaria, through Paul to the provinces of Asia (present day Turkey) and Greece and then to Rome. Paul had even spoken in chapter 15:24 & 28 of journeying to Rome and from there to Spain. These verses indicate that a principle element in their message was the coming of the kingdom of God. Since Jesus had impressed this upon His disciples, speaking of it to them for 40 days after the resurrection, it would have been a key element of their preaching and teaching. Luke does not give us any direct examples of what any of the apostles or Paul said in relation to the kingdom, except in 14:22, indicating that while there was great blessing in being a citizen of the kingdom, it was not without its difficulties as well.

In fact, it did not take very long before the first believers found this out. Peter and John were imprisoned by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin then had, Stephen, the kingdom's first martyr, stoned to death on the basis of his testimony to Christ. Then Saul's persecution of the followers of 'The Way' is estimated to have started just 4 years after Jesus' ascension. But this persecution had the opposite effect to what he had intended. Unintentionally, his action resulted in believers being scattered (Acts 8:4) and spreading the message of the kingdom wherever they went.

This extended the witness to the next location in Jesus' statement to the disciples – to Philip's ministry in Samaria, Azotus and Caesarea. And much further afield as well, for guided by the

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Holy Spirit, he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch. As a result of this conversion, the message of the kingdom was taken to his land in the horn of Africa.

After his Damascus Road encounter with the risen Christ Paul became a dedicated missionary taking three missionary journeys and facing many dangers including barely escaping with his life. Yet in spite of imprisonment and beatings and forced removals from towns, he continued to preach the message of the kingdom. Chapter 19:8 is a particularly interesting one because of the length of time this good news was being preached and taught in just one place. The verse mentions three months in the synagogue at Ephesus. Because the Jews there were maligning 'The Way', Paul and his fellow disciples were thrown out the synagogue and for the following two years he spoke daily in a lecture hall owned by Tyrannus (v 9). The verses imply that the message of the kingdom was a key concept and an essential element of Paul's presentation of his gospel. And in his very poignant last address to the Ephesians, in 21:25 he tells those who had heard him speak about the kingdom that they would never see him again. He spoke true. He was going to back to Jerusalem and, although innocent of all the Jewish charges against him, as a result of his appeal to be tried by Caesar, he was sent to Rome. But, although through the Holy spirit he knew prison and hardship awaited him, he was determined to finish the task Christ had given him.

Luke's account ends with Paul preaching for at least two years in Rome. As far as the early church was concerned, Rome was the end of the world. In the time of the Roman empire, quite literally, all roads did lead to Rome. As the capital of the empire, what religion was accepted in Rome would inevitably spread to the furthest reaches of the empire. So, a look back on Paul's career and those of the other apostles, shows that in the three decades following Christ's death and resurrection, the coming of the kingdom of God had been consistently proclaimed and had expanded to the known geographical limits of the time.

The Acts of the Apostles, inspired, empowered, guided and directed by the acts of the Holy Spirit is a record of men, so devoted to their Lord and Saviour, that His command to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth was obeyed – even at the cost of their own lives. This book is the record of how the kingdom of God on earth emerged in the form of believing communities which collectively became known as the 'Church'. We owe our existence as Christians today to the boldness and courage of not just Peter and Paul but to all the others who pro-actively dedicated their lives proclaiming the kingdom in which God's will would be done on earth as it was in heaven.