



What can one little church do to change the World?

by Nate Adams

IN ACTS 1:1-8 JESUS CHALLENGED
HIS FIRST FOLLOWERS WITH
FIVE BOLD NEW WAYS OF THINKING
AND BEHAVING TO CHANGE THEIR WORLD.
THEY LAY THE FOUNDATION
FOR A STRATEGY
MANY MISSIONS LEADERS TODAY
ARE CALLING
THE ACTS 1:8 CHALLENGE.
IS YOUR CHURCH CONSIDERING IT?
IS YOUR CLASS OR SMALL GROUP STUDYING IT?

I WROTE THE
FIRST NARRATIVE,
THEOPHILUS, ABOUT
ALL THAT JESUS BEGAN
TO DO AND TEACH
UNTIL THE DAY HE
WAS TAKEN UP, AFTER
HE HAD GIVEN ORDERS
THROUGH THE HOLY
SPIRIT TO THE APOSTLES
WHOM HE HAD CHOSEN.
AFTER HE HAD
SUFFERED, HE ALSO
PRESENTED HIMSELF
ALIVE TO THEM BY MANY
CONVINCING PROOFS,
APPEARING TO THEM
DURING 40 DAYS AND
SPEAKING ABOUT THE
KINGDOM OF GOD.
WHILE HE WAS
TOGETHER WITH THEM,
HE COMMANDED THEM
NOT TO LEAVE
JERUSALEM, BUT TO
WAIT FOR THE
FATHER'S PROMISE.

I admit that sometimes my church feels pretty small and insignificant. We rarely have all the workers or money we seem to need, and sometimes we even lose track of why we're really here. But, as I studied the first chapter of Acts recently, it dawned on me that the "first congregation" in the New Testament probably felt much the same way when Jesus spoke to them just before He left earth.

It was a momentous occasion but with modest beginnings. Only about 120 Christ-followers met in a rented room, and—while these early disciples were no doubt excited about the resurrection of Jesus—they had little idea what to do next. But in the first eight verses of this amazing little history, we discover five bold attitudes and actions Jesus challenged that first little Jerusalem congregation to embrace which would turn them inside out and allow them to change their world.

A WORLDWIDE PRIORITY

Jesus challenged the first church to understand that His primary focus as the risen Christ is on the Kingdom of God.

During the 40 days after Jesus' resurrection, the Bible tells us that He appeared to His followers and spoke to them with laser-like focus about one thing: the Kingdom of God. His primary purpose on earth—and now their primary purpose as a church—was to invite the Jewish people and ultimately all the lost peoples of the world back into the loving Lordship of their Creator. The good news is that all is forgiven because of the sacrifice of Jesus. We are invited to run back into the arms of God just as frightened, lost children would run back into the open arms of their Father. This one thing, this "mission" that led Jesus to the cross, is still to be the one thing that the first church—and now my church—is commanded by Jesus to keep in the forefront of its vision.

Surprisingly, even after the resurrected Jesus spoke to His followers for 40 days about the priority of the Kingdom of God, they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the

kingdom to Israel?" Their question conveyed an attitude that is still prevalent in churches today, where there seem to be two main perspectives among Christians. One simply says, "The church is for *me*. This is where I enjoy friendship and spiritual growth, and this is where I connect with God and find fulfillment in serving Him." The other perspective says, "The church is for *the world*. These wonderful things that take place within our church's walls are not ends in themselves but are designed to propel us out into the world where so many are still lost and outside the Kingdom."

Announcing the Kingdom of God to the lost is still the worldwide priority of Jesus for churches like mine today.

A WORLDWIDE PERSPECTIVE

Jesus challenged the first church to see both history and the world from God's point of view.

Jesus' second challenge and patient answer to that first church when they asked about "the kingdom being returned to Israel" was that God was ready to do something much larger than the nation of Israel. When Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority," I believe He was inviting His followers to step back and look at God's redemptive pattern throughout all of history and His loving heart for all of the world's lost.

Consider the "times and dates" that God had already revealed to His young church. God's glory—the glory reflected in His marvelous creation and in His ultimate creatures, man and woman—had been tarnished and corrupted by sin. At the Tower of Babel, the rebellious peoples had scattered into the world, their very confused languages a judgment by God for their own kingdom-building sin. Yet God had continued His loving, redemptive mission by initiating relationship with a man (Abram), a family (Abraham's family) and ultimately a people (Israel) who were invited again to reflect His glory and show the world what it meant to be the people of God. Israel had

proven it could not return the lost peoples of the world to God, but in the fullness of time Israel had been used by God to bring the world its Savior, Jesus. That Savior had accomplished His redemptive purpose on the cross of Calvary, and He now stood before that first little church promising to send them Someone who would lead them and empower them to reclaim the lost peoples of the world as worshipers of the King.

Jesus reminded that first church and my own church today that our little slice of history is only one link in a long chain of God's history-long, worldwide mission. He was saying, in effect, "Regardless of your current situation or challenges, step back and realize the bigger picture of what God is doing! God is not going backward to Israel at its zenith, or to your church's better days. God's epic, redemptive plan has been moving steadily forward since the beginning of time—now are you ready to discover the next chapter and your part in it? Are you ready to see how great God's salvation will be, even compared to your past experience?" And then Jesus gave them, and us, these "final words," this "Acts 1:8 Challenge" before He ascended into heaven:

But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8

A WORLDWIDE POWER

Jesus challenged the first church to rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit for boldness and effectiveness.

Jesus must have looked at that first little church and seen a room full of gunpowder that was about to meet its match. He had already told them that those who believed in Him would do the works He did and even greater, because Jesus was going to be with the Father (John 14:12). Later Jesus even said that His followers would *benefit* from His departure, because His going would mean the coming of the Counselor that would convict the world of its need for God (John 16:7-8).

He must look at my little church today the same way sometimes, wondering if we are ready to stop doing our own thing and rely on the Holy Spirit to lead and empower us back on the track of His mission to the world. It reminds me of my friend Bob, who told me about the hours he spent trying to blow the leaves in his yard on a windy day. His little gas blower could not move the leaves west as long as the wind was blowing to the east. Finally his wife came outside and suggested, "Why don't you work *with* the wind, dear?" When Bob changed his own plan, sought the direction of the wind and utilized its power, his task was finished in a few minutes! With his newly discovered power, he was able to make quick work of his neighbors' yards as well.

I don't understand everything about the Holy Spirit, any more than I understand everything about the wind. But every time I experience His power, I wonder why my little church and I don't stop and adjust to His movement more often.

A WORLDWIDE PLAN

Jesus challenged the first church to radiate the gospel to its own Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and Ends of the Earth.

In His "final words" to that little church in Jerusalem, Jesus makes clear that even little churches like mine are designed and commanded to have worldwide influence. And He maps out a plan for at least four types of mission fields where we are to have plans for that redemptive influence:

...a plan for my church's **Ends of the Earth**. While new people groups are being reached with the gospel every year, more than 1.5 billion people in about 5,000 people groups still have little or no access to the good news about Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. So thousands of people groups in the world are waiting for my church (and yours) to bring them the good news.

...a plan for my church's **Samaria**. For today's church, as for the early church,

"THIS," HE SAID, "IS
WHAT YOU HEARD FROM
ME; FOR JOHN BAPTIZED
WITH WATER, BUT YOU
WILL BE BAPTIZED WITH
THE HOLY SPIRIT NOT
MANY DAYS FROM NOW."
SO WHEN THEY HAD
COME TOGETHER, THEY
ASKED HIM, "LORD, AT
THIS TIME ARE YOU
RESTORING THE KING-
DOM TO ISRAEL?"
HE SAID TO THEM,
"IT IS NOT FOR YOU TO
KNOW TIMES OR PERI-
ODS THAT THE FATHER
HAS SET BY HIS OWN AU-
THORITY. BUT YOU WILL
RECEIVE POWER WHEN
THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS
COME UPON YOU, AND
YOU WILL BE MY WIT-
NESSES IN JERUSALEM, IN
ALL JUDEA AND
SAMARIA, AND TO THE
ENDS OF THE EARTH."

AFTER THIS
I LOOKED, AND THERE
WAS A VAST MULTITUDE
FROM EVERY NATION,
TRIBE, PEOPLE AND
LANGUAGE, WHICH
NO ONE COULD NUMBER
STANDING BEFORE THE
THRONE AND BEFORE
THE LAMB. THEY WERE
ROBED IN WHITE WITH
PALM BRANCHES IN
THEIR HANDS. AND THEY
CRIED OUT IN A LOUD
VOICE, "SALVATION
BELONGS TO OUR GOD,
WHO IS SEATED
ON THE THRONE,
AND TO THE LAMB!"

REVELATION 7:9-10

Samaria is "a close-by place that we rarely visit," and Samaritans are "those who live relatively near us, but who are not like us." It's estimated that in North America seven out of 10 people do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. North America's lostness is as deep as the world's lostness is wide. Today God still calls churches like mine to personalize the gospel for the diversity of people in and near our homeland.

...a plan for my church's Judea. For today's churches, as for early churches, Judea can be seen as the surrounding state, region or province in which people tend to share or adapt to a predominant language, culture and regional identity. If Samaritans are seen as "those who live relatively near us but are not like us," then Judeans can be seen as "those who live relatively near us and who, in many ways, *are* like us." The Judea mission field of the first century reminds us that a more homogeneous culture and some religious familiarity can provide bridges as well as barriers to the gospel. Yet one great challenge of the Judea mission field is the barrier of "presumed familiarity" that people have with the gospel. Those who were lost in a works-based religion in the first century were likely to declare "I'm Roman" or "I'm Jewish" just as those lost in the Judea mission field of the church today might declare "I'm Baptist" or "I'm Catholic." Those depending on a works-based religion rather than a grace-based relationship still don't understand the gospel. And God calls Christians to nearby people who may share regional identity or religious familiarity but not real fellowship with Christ.

...a plan for my church's Jerusalem. The Jerusalem mission field is the surrounding community where we live, work, shop, play and go to school. And it requires just as much intentionality as the mission fields of Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Every week Christians drive by countless people who, for a variety of reasons, might never set foot in their church building.

Just as the Holy Spirit compelled that first little church out into the streets of its Jerusalem, God calls my church—and me—out into our local community, even to people who need a new or different church.

5

A WORLDWIDE PARTICIPATION

Jesus challenged the first church to be witnesses—personal participants in the worldwide mission of God.

I suppose that first little congregation in Jerusalem could have affirmed Jesus' challenge and then chosen to stay within their rented room, waiting for their resources to increase or their problems to be solved or their strategy to become clearer. But they didn't. Every one of them became not only a worshiper but also a witness. Every one chose to participate in the worldwide mission of God and to tell what they had seen and heard. They spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem and beyond with such boldness that the world was changed, not only then, but throughout history and for eternity.

And like that first church, my little church should be out gathering worshipers from the peoples of the world as if gathering treasure to present to our beloved King.

I admit that sometimes my church seems pretty small and insignificant. We rarely have all the workers or all the money we seem to need, and sometimes we lose track of why we're here and what God's purposes are for us. But when I read again what the Holy Spirit did through that first little church, I pray that He will do it again and again, beginning with little churches like mine.

For information and help with how your church can embrace The Acts 1:8 Challenge, visit www.ActsOne8.com.

Adapted from The Acts 1:8 Challenge: Empowering the Church to be On Mission, by Nate Adams, vice president of Mission Mobilization, NAMB. This 2005 Doctrine Study is available from LifeWay Christian Resources at www.lifeway.com or 1-800-458-2772.