

## Act Five: The Church

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### The Storyline

The biblical story begins by introducing the setting, main characters, and initial plot. In the first act of the biblical narrative, the reader learns that...

*Through the act of creation, God establishes his kingdom over all things and appoints human beings to rule on his behalf as his image bearers, to fill the earth and develop his creation into a glorious civilization.*

Like most every other story, the biblical narrative quickly runs into the conflict that needs to be overcome. The introduction of this conflict makes up the second act of the biblical story.

*Tragically, human beings rebel against God as they seek to rule God's creation their own way, resulting in the curse of evil and death upon the world, which infects every aspect of God's good creation.*

As the conflict of any story creates more tension, a path is laid out that sets the plot up to reach its climax. Act three of the biblical narrative does exactly this.

*God remains committed to his creation by initiating a covenant with Israel to undo the world's curse by being a blessing to all nations thereby reestablishing his kingdom, but Israel is continually unfaithful to the covenant.*

Eventually the central conflict of a story reaches its breaking point and so the storyline arrives at its peak. This is called the climax, and it occurs in the biblical narrative with the person and work of the Christ, Israel's king.

*In faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, God sends his Son as their Messiah to inaugurate and make possible the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension.*

Once the climax of a story has been reached, its effects begin to be implemented as the storyline moves toward its ultimate resolution. In the biblical narrative, this occurs in act five: the church.

*The work of Jesus results in the renewal of God's covenant and the creation of a transformed community called the church whose mission is to extend God's kingdom to every part of the world in the power of the Spirit.*

## The Place of Act Five in the Bible

The story of the early church and its growth is primarily presented in the book of Acts. The remainder of the New Testament consists of letters written to strengthen and encourage specific local churches during this time. This fifth act in the biblical story is also the one Christians today are living in, and it's still not complete.

## II. ACT FIVE: THE CHURCH

### The Context for the Church

Obviously the church doesn't pop into existence out of thin air, but rather it grows out of the story of Jesus. Luke makes this clear in the very first verse of Acts: *"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach."*

**The New Israel.** If the story of the church is the continuation of the story of Jesus, then by extension, it is also the continuation and fulfillment of the story of Israel. Even though Israel lived in exile at the time of Christ, God promised to gather his people again and empower them to fulfill their calling. This occurs through the work of Israel's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Those who follow him are now regarded as the new Israel, the renewed people of God called the church.

**The New Humanity.** If the story of the church is an extension of the story of Israel, then it is also an extension of the story of humanity and creation. In Romans, the Apostle Paul describes all of creation as groaning under the curse until the sons of God are finally revealed (8:18–25). The church, therefore, is meant to be God's new humanity, those in whom the image of God is restored so that they might rule God's world as God intended from the very beginning (Revelation 5:9–10).

*"For if, by the transgression of the one man, death reigned through the one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ." —Romans 5:17*

### The Growth of the Church in Acts

Luke is the only Gospel writer who continues his story past the resurrection of Jesus to include the formation and growth of the early church. His second-volume account is known as the Acts of the Apostles.

**The Church Commissioned.** The story of the early church begins with the resurrected Jesus giving his followers a task. After teaching about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), and in response to a question about the timing of the kingdom (Acts 1:6), Jesus challenges his followers to be his witnesses in the world. This commission is a pivotal point in the biblical story and connects back to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12, propelling the church forward to continue God's mission.

*"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." —Acts 1:8*

**The Church Empowered.** After the disciples are commissioned, they're instructed to wait for the gift from the Father. Without this gift, the church cannot accomplish her task. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit is given to enable those who follow Jesus to bring the life of the kingdom to the ends of the earth.

**The Church Community.** Throughout Acts, Luke employs various summary passages of the life of the early church so as to provide a glimpse as to what life in the kingdom of God is like. The early church saw themselves as a new family, even and especially across ethnic and socio-economic lines, with radical generosity being the norm.

- **Diversity**—the makeup of the church represents a reversal of the curse of Babel; people who speak different languages can now understand each other (Acts 2:5–11). Eventually it becomes clear that all people—Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female—are welcome to become a part of this new community (Galatians 3:28).
- **Confession**—the diversity of the early church is united around one central confession: “God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah by raising him from the dead” (Acts 2:36; cf. 10:36; 13:33; Romans 1:1–5).
- **Discipleship**—the early church regularly teaches each other about the person and work of Jesus Christ and what it means to follow him (Acts 2:42).
- **Generosity**—no one in the early church is in need because everyone shares his or her possessions (Acts 2:44–45).
- **Fellowship**—believers meet together, share life together, care for one another, and enjoy each other (Acts 2:42, 46).
- **Worship**—the early church continually gathers for prayer, to break bread, and to offer praise to God (Acts 2:42, 47).

**The Church Bears Witness.** The rest of the book of Acts describes the expansion of the early church according to the commission Jesus gives his disciples—first to Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), then in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12), and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 13–28). Throughout it all, the church is described as being empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to Jesus and his kingdom.

*“The book of Acts tells the story of how this new community of believers continues Jesus’ mission of gathering the lost from within Israel, then moves beyond old ethnic and cultural barriers to gather Samaritans and Gentiles into the kingdom.”*

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen  
*The Drama of Scripture*

## **The Teachings of the Early Church**

The letters of the New Testament consist of the early church's teachings about Jesus Christ and how the church is to pursue its mission. Though these letters are written to different church communities experiencing a wide range of unique circumstances, at least three significant themes come into view.

**The Kingdom Has Begun.** With the death and resurrection of Israel's king, the early church realizes that God's future is bursting into the present—the salvation promised by the Old Testament prophets has begun; world history has entered a new phase; the age to come has arrived in and through Jesus Christ.

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. —1 Corinthians 15:20–21*

**New Spirit Life in Christ.** As the gospel is preached, men and women respond in faith to Christ and experience the Spirit and the life of the kingdom. These new communities are then nurtured toward maturity by learning both what God has done to give them new life and how they are to live according to this new identity.

*You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. —Ephesians 4:22–24*

**For the Sake of the World.** The church's new Spirit life in Christ is meant to reach into the ends of the earth. The task of the church is to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God in the world. The book of Acts ends with Paul doing exactly that, indicating that the church is to continue this task.

*Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. —Acts 28:31*

### III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY

#### **A Contagious Community**

The life of the church is meant to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God. It is in this community that love, forgiveness, compassion, justice, and generosity are to be clearly demonstrated. People who would otherwise oppose one another are now united in peace around Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:11–22). Living as citizens of the kingdom of God makes the church an irresistible community.

#### **A Community on Task**

The church is to continue what Jesus began (Acts 1:1). Jesus brought Israel's story to a climax, inaugurating the kingdom of God through his life, death, and resurrection. The kingdom of God, however, is not yet fully realized. The church is therefore given the task of implementing Christ's achievement and anticipating God's promised future. The church is now God's means to restore his creation.

#### **A Community for the World**

If the church is called to carry God's mission forward, one major implication is that the church exists for the world. In fact, as Jesus makes clear, the church is to be God's sent people into the world: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). While the church must continually nurture and mature itself, these efforts must never end here; instead they should always be directed toward a world in need of complete healing.

#### **The Role of the Holy Spirit**

Before the disciples could begin carrying out the commission Jesus gives them, they are told to wait to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). The Holy Spirit is not only given as the gift of God's presence to the church, but also to empower the church to continue the work of Jesus, to administer and extend the redemptive and healing love of God to a broken world.

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*While those who follow Christ experience the new life of the age to come, they still find themselves living in the present age dominated by evil and sin. God forms these followers into a contagious community of love called the church, and he empowers them with the Holy Spirit to go into the world and continue the work Jesus began. They are to move God's story forward by proclaiming Jesus as Lord and bringing his reign to bear on every aspect of God's creation. This grand task requires that the church cares for one another and equips each other to live as citizens of God's kingdom in this world. In the meantime, they wait with hopeful anticipation for Christ's return when God's kingdom will ultimately be reestablished on earth.*