

# The Journey Continues - HIStory

## Acts 1:8

**August 31, 2008**  
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This holiday weekend our *Journey with Jesus* continues. We spent our summer in the Gospel of Luke and concluded last week with chapter 24 and Jesus' ascension to heaven. It's been a summer all about Jesus.

We could think that's the end of the story. A powerful three years. Resurrection? Wow! Off he went. End of the story. Little did these disciples realize that what they had just experienced would change the course of human history and eternity. History would forever be **HIStory**. Jesus' hinted at this with His final words to the disciples in Acts 1:8, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem**, and in all **Judea**, and **Samaria**, and to the end (**uttermost parts**) of the earth (clarification added).*

Today I want to tell you the story of how Acts 1:8 has been and is still being fulfilled now for 2,000 years including our church's place in the story. This story is a love story between a Savior and the people He died to save. It spans centuries, world geography, and the gulf between sinners and a holy God bridged by the cross of Christ. It is the unfolding of God's redemptive plan and shows how God preserved His gospel, His Word, and His people.

The vast majority of American Christians have little idea where their faith or belief system came from or how it was passed through the centuries to us. How important is it? If you were hiking around Northwest Indiana and came across a stream, as you considered drinking it, how concerned would you be with where it came from? Yet people drink in teaching and theology and belief structures all the time with no idea of where it came from.

This is also important because the story is amazing. It has been humorously suggested that when Jesus got to heaven, the angels asked Him how He was going to reach the world with the gospel. Jesus said, *I have given that responsibility to 11 of my disciples.* The angels respond, *You gave the gospel to them? Oh no!*

My dad has really gotten into our family's genealogy. It's a great story, but far from a pristine one. He has traced our family's genealogy back to 1200. I have found out I am related to Celine Dion and Hillary Clinton! I can't sing and I don't look good in a pantsuit. What he has also discovered is that the DeWitts have some skeletons in the family closet. All families do. Parts of the Church's story are uncomfortable also. This only highlights the supernatural nature of how it started with one Savior and 11 disciples. It has defined human history ever since.

This is a historical flyby and it is going to bend towards Western Christianity and Protestant Christianity since this is the part of the family tree we find ourselves in. Jesus gave us the historical outline in Acts 1:8.

### **Jerusalem (Acts 1-7) - Pentecost (Happy Birthday, Church!)**

The 11 disciples gathered with many others and the Holy Spirit came upon them just as Jesus said. Peter preaches the first sermon (Acts 2:14ff) and the result is that 3,000 Jews

receive Christ as Savior and Messiah. They are baptized that day and this new radical society of Jesus followers begins. Soon there are thousands more there in Jerusalem.

### **Judea and Samaria (Acts 8)**

But remember, Jesus said they were to go to Judea and Samaria. How was this spreading going to happen? In Acts 7 Stephen is the first martyr and persecution led by a guy named Saul begins and all these thousands of Christians flee Jerusalem and spread out to Judea and Samaria. You know the most important thing they took with them? Not their clothes or money, but the gospel. Everywhere they went, they told people about a risen Savior. The effect of this was the disbursement of the gospel and the planting of churches across Israel. We could ask, *If you spread Bethel Church out into the Midwest, would a similar effect happen?* These early Christians were zealous for the Lord.

### **Uttermost Parts of the Earth (Acts 9 through September 31, 2008)**

#### **33-100 AD - The Apostles**

Two huge and shocking developments happened in Acts 9 and 10. In Acts 10, the very first Gentile converts to Christianity (Cornelius) opening the Apostles' eyes to the width of God's love and saving desires. Jews and Gentiles. The second thing was that the persecutor of the church became a Christian and was designated by God as the Apostle to the Gentiles. The gospel is taken by Paul throughout the Roman Empire and to Rome itself. The other Apostles spread the gospel as well:

Bartholomew .....*Armenia*  
Andrew .....*Russia and Ukraine*  
Thomas.....*Persia and India*  
Matthew..... *Ethiopia*  
James.....*Egypt*  
Jude ..... *Assyria*  
Peter ..... *Italy and Rome*

Two things dominated the first century story. First of all, in 70 AD, Rome came and wiped out Jerusalem so thoroughly that the historian Josephus writes that you couldn't tell there was a city there. This is what Jesus prophesied would happen and it did. The other part of the story is that from the beginning there was terrible persecution of Christians. Beyond what the Jews did to Christianity was the Roman persecution. Christians were viewed with great suspicion and in particular, the Roman emperor Nero hated the Jews. He blamed the great fire of Rome in 64 AD on the Christians and killed thousands of them by impaling them on stakes and burning them at night to light the city. Nero also killed Peter and Paul. Horrible things were done against Christians. This persecution would continue for around 300 years until Constantine. We'll get to that.

So realize that the context of the first 300 years was Christians constantly being martyred for their faith. Why? Because Christianity taught two things: the Emperor of Rome is not a god and shouldn't be worshipped. Secondly, there is only one way to be saved and that is through Jesus Christ. The Greek and Roman religions were inclusive. Christianity is exclusive. And for that there was no toleration (sound vaguely familiar?). So they were thrown to the lions in the Coliseum and burned on stakes in the city of Rome. Again, we could ask, how would we do? Our 1<sup>st</sup> century brothers and sisters in the faith did admirably. You could read more about them in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. The famous saying is true: *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the gospel*.

90 AD was a turning point. The last living Apostle, John, died somewhere around 90 AD. This was a major turning point in the Church because in spite of the persecution, Christianity was expanding and growing throughout the world. John's death meant there was no apostolic authority alive. For 57 years, when there was a question, you asked the Apostles. Now there are no Apostles. Where do you turn for answers? Two places, apostolic writings and apostolic fathers.

The New Testament compilation of books wouldn't be identified as a whole for another 300 years. The writings of the Apostles and copies are floating around, but no one has compiled them so no one had all of them. Ephesus has Ephesians. Rome had Romans and Mark. And so on. We take it so for granted to have the complete Scriptures; it wasn't the case for more than 300 years.

### **100–400 AD - The Apostolic/Early Church Fathers**

The Apostolic Fathers is a broad term for the early church fathers' writings spanning the first 300 years of the church. These were the most humanly precarious times for the church. God used leaders and heroes like Clement (leader at Rome); Ignatius (pastor at Antioch); and Polycarp (pastor at Smyrna and martyr for the faith at the age of 86). These and others played a key role as the church struggled to protect the purity of the gospel against rising heresies and a church under severe persecution. You might think, wasn't that persecution horrible? Persecution has never been toxic to the church; it actually strengthens it. The Church in China is more vibrant than the Church in America. Heresy and compromise is the real cancer.

#### **Early Heresies**

##### **Gnosticism – Flesh is bad, spirit is good**

If the flesh is inherently bad, then Jesus' incarnation isn't possible nor is a bodily resurrection. Gnosticism denied both. Gnosticism led to asceticism which denied creation's goodness and the goodness of our enjoying of it.

##### **Arianism – Jesus was different in essence from the Father and created by the Father**

What strikes you as you look at church history is how key doctrines were forged out of controversy. A heresy would arise, a council would be called, a creed would be written, and the gospel would be preserved. By 300 AD, the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Christ had yet to be clearly defined. Then Arius came along and taught that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father and did not share the essential nature of God. This created a firestorm of controversy. One man in particular rose to the challenge and his name was Athanasius. He was Egyptian. Short. He was brilliant and his writings along with a council at Nicea called Arius a heretic and produced the Nicene Creed which said Jesus was begotten, not made, and equal with the Father as very God of very God.

A later council at Constantinople defined Jesus' humanity as well ushering the church out of the 4<sup>th</sup> century with the nature of Jesus and the Trinity defined with clarity that Jesus was fully God and fully human.

## **Pelagianism – Man is inherently good, saved by good works**

I mention this because this heresy was answered by one of my heroes. His name was Augustine. I can't say enough about this guy. Augustine's teaching would dominate the church for 1,000 years. He won the controversy over Pelagius and taught with great clarity on the nature of sin, the sovereignty of God, and the beauty of Christ and creation. I quote him often.

## **Special Note – Constantine/The Canon of Scripture established – Council of Carthage (367, 397 AD)**

There were two major developments in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. First, in 312 AD Constantine, Emperor of Rome, saw a vision of the cross, converted to Christianity, and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christians went from being hunted to heroes. Churches and pastors were funded by the Emperor himself. This would be like the President of China converting to Christianity today. So the persecution largely ended.

The second big thing is that the list of New Testament canonical books of Scripture was identified. A series of six councils known as the Council of Carthage established the measure for what writings were Scripture. This measure was known as the "canon." They did not choose the Scriptures; God chose them, wrote them, and the church identified them in 367 AD.

## **500-1500 AD - The Middle Ages and the Great Split**

We're going to take a big chunk of time now. The Roman Empire fell in 476 AD and from that time to 1500 AD is known to us as the Middle Ages. People themselves didn't call them that, "Hey, we're living in the Middle Ages!" During this time in the Western Church, Rome became the center of Western Christianity. As Rome rose, so did the papacy and the story is defined by the popes who ruled. Another trend was an increasing tension between East and West. Compounding this was the rise of Islam as a religion and increasing conflict between the two religions (sound like a newspaper you've read recently?).

## **1054 AD - The Great Split between East and West**

Tension increased between the Western Church centered in Rome and the Eastern Church centered in Constantinople. The tensions centered on the celibacy of the priesthood and the use of images in worship (known as iconoclasm).

Debate and rancor raged until a Roman delegation laid a "bull" or edict of excommunication on the altar of St. Sophia in Constantinople. The Greek patriarch (their version of the pope) retaliated. They excommunicated each other and that was the end of any unity in the worldwide Church. The Church was split in two. In the West was The Roman Catholic Church and in the east the Eastern Orthodox Church. As you drive around our community, you will see many Greek Orthodox or Macedonian Orthodox churches. You may have wondered, *Where did they come from?* They came from the Great Split of 1054.

Shortly after the split, the Turks and their Islamic faith conquered the Holy Land militarily. This began some bad centuries for the Roman Church. Long before this, the church had made the fatal error of making alliances with European emperors. This started in 800 AD with the king of France named Charlemagne. He became the head of the Holy Roman Empire. This created great problems as Popes and emperors disagreed on who was in charge. Can you see by now how far the church departed from Acts 1:8? Being witnesses.

Making disciples. Teaching them. With the pursuit of power came great corruption, so by the time the Turks conquered the Holy land, the church was way off mission and message.

This is another tragic example. The Church's response was to marshal armies of Christian warriors to free the Holy Land from Muslim rule. These battles were known as the Crusades. There were six of them over a period of 150 years. This was a real low point as soldiers under the banner of a cross massacred and pillaged. In spite of the Crusades, the end result was that Jerusalem was still in the hands of the Turks where it would remain for 700 years until World War I.

Remember, I told you there are skeletons in the closet? This is one of the nasty ones and it shows what happens when the Church gets off mission and becomes motivated by political power instead of by fulfilling the Great Commission. This might be good to remember in a presidential election year.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the winds of change were beginning to blow. In 1371 a guy named John Wycliffe challenged Church doctrine, said Christ was the head of the Church not the pope, and called for a translation of the Bible in the language of the people. The Scriptures remained in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. Only the priests could read it and the people just had to trust what they said. Wycliffe dreamed of a readable Bible. Jon Hus in Prague agreed and was burned at the stake for it. But the winds of change were in the air and the wind became a hurricane known as The Reformation.

### **1516 AD - The Reformation**

Most identify 1516 as being the beginning of the Reformation and Martin Luther as its architect. Luther was a Catholic monk who became convinced that salvation was not a matter of good works but came entirely by faith. This was a radical thought, but was the recovery of the gospel of Jesus, Paul, and the apostolic fathers. He nailed 95 theses or challenges to the Roman Church on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This led to the famous Council at Worms where Luther stood up to the Pope and said he could not deny Scripture or conscience. He was sentenced to death but was rescued, translated the New Testament into German in six weeks, and along with Zwingli and John Calvin, led a great revival of biblical Christianity known as the Great Reformation. The Reformation doctrines were: *Sola Scriptura* – the Bible alone is our authority; *Sola Fide* – salvation is by faith alone; and the *priesthood of all believers*. The Reformation swept Europe and its followers were known as Protestants.

Aiding in this movement was a new invention, the Guttenberg Press. Movable letters allowed printing of materials in mass numbers. This was a revolution. The first book ever printed? The Guttenberg Bible. Soon there were translations of the Bible in the languages of the common people. Now that the people could read it themselves, the horse was out of the barn. No longer was spiritual knowledge hidden in monasteries or Rome. God's Word was available to God's people.

This was scandalous! In 1525 a guy named William Tyndale translated the New Testament into English without permission. He smuggled English Bibles into England. He was caught and burned at the stake for it. That might make you look at your English Bible a little differently.

The key to this era is the Heidelberg Catechism, which is the most popular protestant definition of faith and in 1611 the King James Version of the Bible was produced. King James was no friend of historic Christianity. During his reign, separatists rejected the

Church of England (which itself was a breakaway of the Roman Church under King Henry VIII), boarded a ship called the Mayflower, and sailed to the New World. Later, Puritans also came looking for a place for the Reformation faith to be freely practiced and would form colonies in the Americas.

### **1700 AD-present - The Church in America**

The story of Christianity in America for 300 years has been the proverbial roller coaster. The Puritans and others who came originally were motivated in different ways, but largely shared a similar faith heritage in the Reformation. However, second and third generation faith is never like the first. By the mid-1700s, Christianity was at low ebb when there was a dramatic movement of God known as the Great Awakening. God primarily used three guys to awaken America spiritually. George Whitefield and John Wesley conducted mass revivals, and the brilliant teaching and preaching of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts led to at least 10% of New England converting to an active Christian faith. There have been other awakenings and revivals in America along the way.

By the 1800s, the social problems in America, predominately slavery, tore the country up. Thousands of Methodist churches and others were started as the country went west. Revivals led by guys like D.L. Moody and Billy Sunday kept a gospel voice present.

Rising as well was an increasing liberalism which was just the old Arian heresy warmed up again. Man is basically good and Christianity is about social reform and good works. At the same time, rising secularism in Europe influenced America. Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*. Secular science and prosperity urged Americans to NOT live their lives with reverence to God. The enlightenment's fruit was being born as man lived for man, and not for God. The doctrine of sin was denied and substitutionary atonement with it. The inspiration of Scripture was attacked resulting in churches with essentially no gospel and no authoritative Scripture. It was the Reformation in reverse.

Primarily affected were the mainline denominations who embraced the theological liberalism causing a reenactment of the *Mayflower*. Massive numbers of Christians left their churches and denominations and formed new ones trying to stay true to the gospel of Edwards, Tyndale, Luther, Augustine, Athanasius, Paul, Peter, and Jesus. The Church has always been about the truth of the gospel. As Paul said, "It is the pillar and foundation of the truth."

In the 1930s there was just such a group of people in a church that came out of a liberal denomination. The church was in north Gary, Indiana and thought it would be a good idea to plant a church in what seemed to be WAY south down in south Gary. They began as a Bible study. They later formed a church. They moved to Merrillville in 1969 and in 2000 to Crown Point, Indiana and you know it today as Bethel Church. Us.

The journey that began 2,000 years ago with the command, *Go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations*, continues on. God is still preserving His gospel, His Word, and His people. The faith we treasure is the same faith the Apostles taught so many centuries ago. We are a part of the unfolding of God's redemptive plan as much as Paul, or Wycliffe, or Polycarp or Billy Graham.

Remember, Jesus said something 2,000 years ago when Peter said He was the Christ. *On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* (Matthew 16:18) The gates of hell and heresy and persecution have tried, but for 2,000 years, the journey has continued. It is HISTORY.

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