

The Message of Acts

by G. Campbell Morgan

The book of Acts reveals the principles and perils of the age of Pentecost, and teaches us that the master passion of the Church must be that of the glory of God.

Scripture: Acts 1:1

Topics: "Empowerment by the Holy Spirit", "The Church's Mission"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the enduring values found in the Book of Acts, focusing on the Church's origin, nature, and function as established by Christ. He highlights the perils of prejudice, passion, and pride that threaten the Church's mission, while urging that the Church's master passion should be the glory of God. Morgan asserts that the Church is empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue Christ's work, revealing the importance of loyalty to the Lord and the necessity of yielding to the Spirit. He concludes that the Church's activities should be motivated by the glory of God and conducted through the work of the Son, ultimately appealing to the world through a Spirit-filled life. The message of Acts serves as a vital link between the Gospels and the epistles, illustrating the ongoing work of Christ through His Church.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching. Concerning the Church

i. The abiding Principles.

a. Origin. Created by the Son.

b. Nature. "Many Sons unto Glory."

c. Function. The Work of the Son.

ii. The revealed Perils.

a. Prejudice.

The Grip of the Past.

Judaism.

Lack of Confidence in the Spirit.

b. Passion.

The power of the Flesh.

Carnality.

Lack of Yielding to the Spirit.

c. Pride.

The Lure of the World.

Apostasy.

Lack of Obedience to the Spirit.

II. The Abiding Appeal

i. The master Passion of the Church is that of the Glory of God.

The unveiling of Himself.

The Establishment of His Kingdom.

ii. The inclusive Principle of the Church is that of Loyalty to the Lord.

Realization of His Life.

Prosecution of His Work.

iii. The sufficient Power of the Church is that of the Holy Spirit

Likeness to the Lord for the Revelation of God.

Direction in His Work for the Glory of God.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Church

i. A Question of Motive.

The Glory of God.

ii. A Question of Method.

The Work of the Son by the Spirit

II. To the World

This Book as a Book, has no application to the World.

This book is of great importance to the students of the New Testament. It is the link of continuity, binding together into one great whole the historic records of the life of our Lord, and the didactic and devotional writings of the apostolic period. In the gospel narratives, as the writer of this book reminds us, we have the story of beginnings; the beginnings of the doing and teaching of Jesus; and this is the only historic record upon which we can depend, as to those events which immediately followed His death and resurrection and ascension.

Turning to the other part of the New Testament, I find constant references to churches. The word church has no full and final explanation in the four gospel stories. Thirteen of the pamphlets in that which remains of the New Testament were written by a man whose name was Paul. He is never mentioned in the four Gospels. In order to understand the continuity of the story commenced in the Gospels we need this book. In order to an interpretation of all that follows in the great didactic and devotional writings we need this book. It is the link between the first four books and all that remains, binding them together. It is the bridge over which we cross from the story of the beginning of the doing and teaching of Jesus, to those writings which are the result of the fulfillment of the promise He made to His people that, after He had left them as to bodily presence, they should have full and spacious teaching for all life and service. He said that it was better for them that He should go away. He declared that when He went away the Spirit should be given, Who would bring to their remembrance the things He had said to them, guide them into all truth, and teach them concerning things to come. In the epistles and devotional literature we have the fulfillment of these promises in interpretations of the Christ, and in teaching concerning things to come. How the promise was fulfilled we find in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, in the account of the coming of the Spirit, and in the record of that Spirit's ministry in and through the disciples of Jesus.

In our study of the content we laid great emphasis upon the one word "began" ; and in our analysis of the book we devoted a section of the first division to one verse, because the light from it flashes back upon the story of the Gospel, and forward upon the story of this book, and upon all the writings that follow.

That word "began" gives the true value to the gospel story, showing that it is not the account of consummated work, but the story of the initiation of work. It also flings its light upon the book of the Acts of the Apostles suggesting that it is the story of the things He continued to do and to teach. One Christ is presented to our view both in the Gospels and in the Acts. In the Gospels we see Him in limited, localized, and straitened circumstances; the limitation, localization, and straitening necessary in order to completion of the initial, preparatory work. In Acts we see the same Christ, no longer limited, no longer localized, no longer straitened; the unlimited nature of His work, the universal application of His power, and the unstraitened operation thereof, all resulting from the mystery of the things He began to do and to teach in circumstances of localized limitation.

Now when we begin to seek for the message, there is another word upon which we must lay equal emphasis. It is the first word of the second verse; "until the day in which He was received up, after that He had given commandment through the Holy Ghost unto the apostles whom He had chosen." In the former treatise we have the account of the things He began to do until. That word "until" carries over the force of the word "began" into the new book. In the first book we have the things He began to do and to teach until He was received up. In the book of the Acts we have the things He began to do after He was received up. This book is also the story of beginnings. Nothing is finished. That quality creates its value. When we discover it, and remember it, and depend upon it, we are very near to the discovery of its message. It is not the story of a completed movement. It is the story of all He began to do after He was received up. He has never ceased the doing until now. The work is going forward. He is still doing. He is still teaching. The

risen, ascended Lord is the living centre of His Church.

The beginnings of Divine activities are always ideally and potentially perfect; but they are always actually and effectively imperfect. I turn to the first book of the Bible and read, "In the beginning God created." That was the beginning of Divine activity in creation. In the Gospel of John I read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" ; and that declaration prepares the way for the teaching concerning the beginning of the Divine activity of redemption in human history when the Word became flesh. The third new beginning is in this book of the Acts of the Apostles. The beginning in creation; the beginning of the new departure in incarnation; the beginning of the new departure in the Church; these are the three great beginnings of Divine activity which our Bible reveals to us, and in each case we see beginnings ideally and potentially perfect; and actually and effectively imperfect.

As we look at the creation as it is revealed in the poetic, majestic, true story of Genesis, it is ideally, potentially perfect. The morning stars sang together over that first creation, and I think I know the burden of their song; The whole earth is full of the glory of God. In the midst of the earth is man, made as the psalmist now afterwards sang, "but little lower than God," crowned with glory and honour that he might have dominion over the whole creation. That is creation ideally, potentially perfect 1 But actually, effectively it is imperfect, in that it is waiting for development. The perfect earth needs cultivation, development; needs that man, its king, shall discover its secrets and obey its laws, in order to the discovery of its hidden mysteries and wonders. Man to-day is standing in the presence of the wonders and hidden forces of the earth saying: We have but scratched the surface, and have hardly begun to understand the depths. But all the forces and all the glories and all the beauties were resident in the earth on that morning flushed with beauty when the sons of God sang together over creation. The Divine beginnings are always ideally, potentially perfect; and actually, effectively imperfect.

If with profounder reverence we look upon the mystery of the incarnation we find the same facts. Mark the perfection of it; " We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." That was the beginning, ideally, potentially perfect; but actually and effectively the beginning was imperfect. The life must be consummated: and the death must be accomplished. The beginning of the Divine activity was perfect, ideally and potentially, " It was the good pleasure of the' Father that in Him should all the fullness dwell . . . in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." But there was work to be done; through the processes of passion, death, and resurrection the work must be accomplished; actually and effectively the beginning of the incarnation was imperfect.

Now we come to the beginning described in the book of the Acts. "Having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath poured forth this, which ye see and hear." That statement is full of suggestiveness. That was the new beginning; the dawn of a new day; as wonderful a thing, a more wonderful thing, than the dawn of creation long ago.

It was a new beginning, ideally and potentially perfect. The risen and ascended Lord, in His own Person, by virtue of the victory on the purity of His life, and the passion of His death, had received the plenitude of the Spirit of God as a deposit for a;: for whom He lived and died. This gift He poured out upon His waiting disciples, and in the upper room there was the dawn of a new creation, the break of a new day, the initiation of a new movement.

It was a new beginning, actually and effectively imperfect. These waiting men in the upper room received the Holy Spirit, but they had to learn the law of the Spirit, to discover the method of the guidance of the

Spirit ; through long processes they had to learn the meaning of the power that had come to them through Christ. This book gives us the picture of the new beginnings. That is its value. A note of warning is immediately necessary. We must not go back to the Acts of the Apostles and try to imitate the incidentals. We must go back to it to discover its essentials, and these essentials are not nineteen centuries away from us; they are with us perpetually. This book then is of supreme value because it reveals the principles and the perils of the age of Pentecost. These constitute the message of the book, and create its abiding appeal.

The central teaching of this book concerns the Christian Church, and deals with fundamental matters. Through the incidentals we see the essentials.

First, it is a revelation of the abiding principles of the Church of God. For purposes of conciseness and brevity I want to group these under three heads; the origin of the Church of God; the nature of the Church of God; the function of the Church of God. The revelation is all the more wonderful, and all the more valuable, and all the more perpetual, because it is not formulated. I know that some would be far more comfortable if they could have a book with a formulated system of Church government; but spiritual intelligence thanks God for atmosphere.

As to origin, the Christian Church is the creation of the Son. He prepared, during the three years of His public ministry, a little group of men and women; stored their minds with truth, which they did not then understand; impressed upon them the fact of His personality, which they did not then apprehend. Then He left them, prepared for something larger and greater, yet unable to move forward until they should be "clothed with power from on high."

Then having risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father, He received the fullness of the Holy Spirit and poured it out; "There came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost." That is the Christian Church; created by His humiliation, by the perfection of His human life, by the mystery of His passion, by His victory over sin and death and all the enemies of the race, by His triumphant resurrection, by His ascension, by the Spirit bestowed as the result of His own accomplished victory. When He poured the Spirit out upon that handful of people, the Church was born. The Church consists then of all those men and women who are made one Spirit with the Lord, who share His very life by the coming of the Spirit, who are united to Him, no longer upon the basis of human sentiment, no longer by the limitation of geographical situation, but because the one Spirit of God that fills the risen Man in glory, perfectly fills men and women who trust Him in the world. The unity of the Church is not ecclesiastical; it is not based upon uniformity. I could hold a brief for Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism, or any other form of ecclesiastical polity upon the basis of this book. The underlying unity of the Church is that of the baptism by the Spirit into union with the risen Lord of all such as believe on Him. Thus is created and constituted the Church.

As to nature, the Church is of one life with the risen Lord. In the Gospel accorded to Luke, we saw Jesus as the racial First-born, the second Man, the last Adam, the Head of the new race; the representative Brother of all such as are in the new race; the Goel, or redeeming Kinsman. In this book we see the race springing from the racial First-born; the brotherhood resulting from the representative Brother; the redeemed kinsmen resulting from the redeeming Kinsman. The Church is the fulfillment of that which He uttered prophetically when His mother after the flesh, in anxiety because He was overworking, came to persuade Him to go home; "Who is My mother? and who are My brethren? . . . Whosoever shall do the will

of My Father which is in heaven, he is My brother, and sister, and mother." That was a great prophetic word, into the meaning of which the little band of disciples could not enter at the time; declaring that there is an affinity nearer and dearer than that of flesh and blood We behold in the Acts of the Apostles that new race; very foolish, very feeble, very faulty, but brothers of the Lord, kinsmen of the Kinsman Redeemer. Christ is repeating Himself in redeemed men and women. That is the nature of the Church. Through nineteen centuries she has been upon her march, growing ever, faulty, failing, trembling, but her life is ever His life.

As to function, the Church is the instrument of the risen Lord for carrying on His doing and His teaching. He came to perfect and bring to glory many sons; every son incorporated in the family by the communication of the life of the Son carries on that work. Life in the Spirit is the life of Christ communicated by the Spirit. Therefore it is life like the life of Christ; and consequently it is life for Christ. That is the story of the men revealed in this book. Its greatest interest centres in Paul and his missionary journeyings. In all kinds of peril he pressed forward, the regions beyond his perpetual watchword. That is the function of the Church. The life of Christ repeated in the power of 'the Spirit. So she marches, enlarging the opportunity of Christ, by multiplying the members of His holy and sacred body.

Life in the Spirit is also light in the Spirit. The Spirit chooses persons, indicates places, initiates practices. Choosing persons; Saul of Tarsus to the Gentiles; Philip the deacon to go to Samaria; nameless men, "Men of Cyprus and Cyrene, to Antioch, preaching the Lord Jesus." Indicating places ; the strategic centres, Jerusalem, the city of Judaism; Antioch, the gateway to the Gentiles; Corinth, the market of Greece; Ephesus, the centre of pro-consular Asia; Rome, the metropolis of the world. The centres occupied, and so the villages and hamlets evangelized. Initiating practices; we cannot read the Acts of the Apostles without seeing that where the Spirit of God is, there is liberty. The moment men try to cramp the Church's operations within rules and regulations they cripple and spoil her.

Not only life and light in the Spirit; but also and supremely, love in the Spirit. Love of the Lord, that is the master passion of this Church; and out of it grows love of the brethren, and love of the whole world. That is the function of the Church, life, light, and love, in the Spirit; or in other words, Christ's work continued.

The revealed perils may be grouped under three heads. There is first the peril of prejudice; the grip of the past, Judaism. It is manifest all the way through. The bondage of the past is always the result of lack of confidence in the Spirit in the present. How these things continue! There is no need to make application. How constantly the Church of God is hindered in her work because the grip of prejudice is upon her. "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be." That is not a Biblical quotation. The Spirit of God forevermore will break down traditions by doing new things.

Another peril is the mastery of Christian men and women by unholy passion. That was a peril of the Church at the beginning. It is a peril of the Church to-day. If prejudice is the result of lack of confidence in the Spirit; unholy passion is the result of lack of yielding to the Spirit.

The final peril is pride; the pride of the eye, the vainglory of life, the lure of the present world. Demas forsook Paul. Demas is a type. This results from lack of obedience to the Spirit; or lack of attention to the Spirit's teaching; or both. When we cease to listen to the Spirit's interpretation of the spiritual and eternal things, then the lure of the present world is upon us.

The abiding appeal of this book consists in the fact that it teaches us that the master passion of the Church must be that of the glory of God. She goes, as her Master went, to unveil God to the world, and to

establish the Kingdom of God upon the earth. That must be the master passion of the Church. It is not that of the amelioration of human suffering. God is glorified by the amelioration of human suffering; but our passion is that of the glory of God. It is not the bettering of human conditions. The best conditions of human life are in the purpose of God for humanity; but we are to seek them because they are in harmony with the will of God. The great discourses of the Acts of the Apostles were all delivered to the outside world, except the one Paul addressed to the elders of Ephesus. Read those discourses, and find that their purpose was always the glory of God.

The inclusive principle of the Church's activity is that of loyalty to the Lord Christ, Whose passion is that of the glory of God. The Church is to prove that loyalty by realization of His life and prosecution of His work.

Finally, the sufficient power of the Church is that of the Holy Spirit; sufficient for the life of likeness to the Lord in order to the revelation of God; sufficient for direction in work for the glory of God.

What then does this pamphlet say to the Church of God to-day? It institutes investigation along two lines. It asks the Church first, what is the motive of all its activity? It asks secondly, what is the method of all its activity?

The motive of the Church ought to be the glory of God, nothing less, nothing more, nothing else; and that means devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. The method of the Church ought to be the work of the Son, seeking and saving the lost by the Holy Spirit ; and that means fellowship in the cross and resurrection and ascension of Christ.

This book, as a book, has no application to the world. Only as the Spirit-filled race continues the ministry revealed here will like results follow in the world. It is not by this book I make my appeal to the world; but it is by the Church living and serving according to the pattern revealed in this book that she makes her appeal to the world. It is only thus that similar effects in the world will be produced; the arrest of cities; the adding to the Lord of men and women; the abandonment of idols. When the Church is true to the principles revealed in this book she will arrest the attention of cities again; she will always be adding men and women to the Lord; in the wake of her triumphant march idols will be destroyed.

When we are in this succession we shall set forth the God, ignorantly worshipped by the Athenians; we shall proclaim the evangel to the uttermost part of the earth; we shall win territory for the King; and hasten the coming of His final victory.

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