

The Foundation of the Church: *Built to Last*

Acts 1-7

"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Introduction: On May 1, 1893, the turnstiles whirled as people flooded into the sprawling grounds of the World Fair in Chicago. It was dubbed the **World's Columbian Exposition**, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first voyage into the new world, but was also a coming of age for a nation ready to compete with other world powers. This world's fair had the goal of not only competing with the one previously held in Paris (where Eifel's Tower was a show piece), but had designs to best it in size, scope, and decadence. Over the course of 6 months, **26 million** people enjoyed the 600 acre fair grounds, with hundreds of buildings, beautiful landscapes, and creative innovations. They enjoyed the tastes of cream of wheat, juicy fruit gum, shredded wheat, Cracker Jacks, and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer for the first time. They saw the first electric dishwasher, fluorescent light bulbs, zippers, spray paint, Aunt Jemima pancake mix, commemorative stamps, and pressed pennies. The showcase item was the 264 foot tall Ferris Wheel, which was such a big attraction some say it kept the Fair out of bankruptcy. 50 foreign countries and 43 States were represented, and even Walt Disney's dad was influenced by all that he saw and experienced as a builder of the Fair, undoubtedly influencing his son. It was known as the "White City", in part because of the gleaming buildings painted in a consistent white paint enhanced by thousands of lights for an evening spectacle that had never been seen, and partly in contrast to the filth of Chicago, that not only was a place of slaughter (pigs), but of moral degradation. It was hoped that it could represent what city planning *could be*, what industrial creativity and beauty could produce. And though there were advances in clean water, in city sanitation, and architectural integrity, in the end the city was left largely in ruin, burned by fire and left for squatters to inhabit. What was a shiny example of human achievement ended up a funeral pyre for the limitations of humanity itself.

We come to our summer series where we will endeavor to unpack the realities and glories of God's church in a way that helps us understand **who we are** as a church, and then **how we live** as a church. There is no minimizing the importance of understanding the **why** before we understand the **what**. This past week Marshall and I spent some time with pastors from churches in Fullerton and Camarillo to discuss this very importance, not only because Biblical knowledge has lessened among younger people, but because we all need to understand the "why". In the mornings we will deal with what God has called the church to and how the Bible describes it, and in the evenings we will discuss how this plays out with each other and by extension those outside of the church. What we all want to be convinced of by the end of the summer is this: the church is not some modern invention nor is it on the brink of extinction if we do not make radical changes to accommodate culture. **It is built to last.** It is God's design from the beginning, and will be God's instrument to display His glory until Christ's return. We are a part of something far larger than we could ever imagine, but we want to imagine it Biblically. Our hope is not only that we will grow in **confidence** concerning God's church, but also in **conviction** as to her purpose and our part in it.

Misconceptions of God's Church:

Before looking at the "why" of the church, it's important to consider the misconceptions of God's church, both by those inside and outside of it. These originate out of ignorance, assumptions, and bad experiences, shaping how one thinks about the organism as a whole. When this view is tainted, it's very

difficult to unpack and reform, and it must come out of a Biblical understanding rather than try to change some external functions.

- **Full of Good people** - If we believe that the church is simply about **morality**, then we would believe that all those belonging to the church are good people. Church people should be better, should live up to *our* measure of morality, and should do so consistently without failure. False religions have cornered the market on this thinking. Our Mormon friends are more moral than most, but they are far from the Kingdom. **The problem** with this thinking is it leads directly to a view that the church is full of **hypocrites** and leads to **disenchantment**. If the expectation is perfect morality, it would be absolutely accurate to assume everyone lives up to that standard, and anything less leads to marginalizing the whole.
- **For Good people** - Following closely to this is that church is FOR good people. It is for moral people who dress conservatively and live morally. I look at my life and I am a mess, I have past issues and present consequences, and don't feel like I measure up to whatever standard a church has. Maybe, just maybe, if I clean myself up FIRST, then I could enter in, but that is a monumental "if". Since I can't hang with such good people, I will simply stay away. Its easier to criticize than change.
- **Makes me a Good person** - Continuing the idea that my morality makes me acceptable to God, some believe going to church *makes* them good. This thinking is what causes people to feel guilty when they *skip* church, much like I feel guilty when I don't go to the doctor or dentist regularly (although that's a bad example because I don't feel *that guilty*). If God wanted *token moralism*, this would be adequate: come once in a while, for a check-up, to pacify your spouse, especially at *the biggies* (Easter and Christmas), and that's all God wants. This leads to many who count themselves as part of a church but are not really part of the church, but are visitors (just like *attending* a sporting event does not make me part of the team).
- **For my enjoyment** - All of these lead to our view that *church* is somehow primarily about me. What does the church do for me? What is there for my kids? Does it entertain me? Keep me awake? Is it short enough? What does it expect from me? If any of these questions do not breed the answer I'm looking for, there is a church down the street that will give a better answer. When a church begins to cater to this type of thinking, it becomes a business that markets to people and their felt needs, and no longer becomes about God's glory and creates a type of **Christless Christianity**, where God is talked about but not worshipped, Jesus is mentioned but not believed, and sacrifice is something that others do for me.

When we lose the meta-story of God's story, we get these pithy beliefs. Religion becomes a control mechanism, demanding loyalty and morality that no one can ultimately give, keeping people in perpetual slavery and dependency on an institution rather than Christ. God's story is NOT about our trying to make ourselves good, but a story of God's redemptive work, drawing and buying back sinful, wicked, bad people to Himself through the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus described Himself as a physician and shepherd (Luke 5:31-32; John 10:14-18), the one who saves and guides, dealing with our sin and our life, our past and future, moving us from death and separation to life and belonging. ***So how does the church fit in God's program?***

Origin Story of God's Church:

We like origin stories. Whether its biographies of people we admire like Jim Elliot, Adoniram Judson, or Abraham Lincoln, or the beginnings of Superheroes like Batman, Spiderman, or Superman, we are fascinated with where and how things started. The origins of the church reach far back, before our

realized American church, or even the early church in Acts. The church is part of a much larger story of redemption that IS THE STORY OF THE BIBLE. It may be helpful to think of the Bible like that of a great story broken down into **6 Acts**, with scenes for each act, some of which we have already seen and some that are still to come. We must recover the big picture to understand where we fit in the story.

Act 1: God Establishes His Kingdom: *Creation*¹

When the world burst forth out of nothingness, God displayed His invisible attributes, showing His eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20). What had been enjoyed among the Godhead before the world existed (John 17:5) was now put on revealed to the whole world. In a word, God's **GLORY** was shared with mankind, allowing us to enter into worship and service of the King. Adam and Eve were created as the highpoint of creation (Gen. 1:31), as image bearers (Gen. 1:26) designed to cultivate this world in a way that made much of God, acknowledging and enjoying Him as the greatest treasure in the universe. Far from slavish duty, this was freedom in action, as the first man and woman could enjoy marriage, eating, relationship, cultivation, creativity, and dominion over creation as acts of worship, seeing ALL through the lens of **God's glory**. There was no separation between any aspect of life and worship, for God was the ruler and originator of it all.

Act 2: Rebellion in the Kingdom: *Fall*

This perfection in worship did not last long. When Adam failed to lead his wife (Gen. 3:6) and ate of the fruit of the tree God explicitly forbade, not only did sin have consequence for this couple, but for the entire world (Rom. 5:12-14). Adam and Eve disobeyed, but they did something deeper than that. Sin is defined as **falling short of the glory of God** (Rom. 3:23), and it is something that we ALL share in common. Sin violated God's glory. This caused a separation from the Garden, death to all humanity, and separation of relationship between man and God. Mankind was now in a desperate situation, unable to return to the Garden and dependent on God to act.

Act 3: King Chooses Israel: *Redemptive Plan Initiated*

God initiated the plan He had before the world began (Eph. 1:3-5), and explained in the Garden (Gen. 3:15) through the nation of Israel and the man Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). He chose Israel by setting His love on her (Deut. 7:6-11), not because of her greatness but rather to show His **glory** through something small and seemingly insignificant. God established a kingdom on earth where He would be king, but Israel wanted a king like all the other nations. The height of this kingdom was realized through King David, through whom God promised a perpetual throne (2 Sam. 7) where Jesus would eventually come through. Israel was given a king and land where they could worship God alone, displaying God's glory to all the nations around (Isa. 46:13; 48:11; 49:3, 6) through the light of Israel. This was a time that **looked forward** to a time of final redemption, since there was a system of **sacrifice of animals** that could only cover sin, not pay for it.

Interlude: Inter-testamental Period – *Story waiting for an ending*

However, Israel's perpetual sin and rebellion brought a temporary end to her rule on the earth. God raised up foreign nations, Assyria in 722 B.C. and Babylon in 586 B.C to carry off and decimate the nation that once had God as her king. Though there was a return to the land (which we will study in Ezra and Nehemiah), the conclusion of the OT leaves a dispersed people, a paltry temple, and a departure of God's presence. This led to **400 years** of Biblical silence leaving those who believed in God to wait for

¹ Outline taken and modified from "The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story": Bartholomew & Goheen, p. 27

something to give. It was out of this silence that the heavens burst forth with the announcement of the angels (Luke 2:14) of **glory to God in the highest**.

Act 4: The Coming of the King: *Redemption Accomplished*

Jesus mission was to **glorify His Father** (John 17:1-3; Luke 22:42; Rom. 3:26), to be both JUST and JUSTIFIER of those who have faith in Him. Jesus ended the sacrificial system once and for all by being a perfect ONE that would pay for sin, satisfying God's wrath (Heb. 9:22, 26; 10:4). Jesus was a perfect sacrifice, the perfect priest, and is the solution to our sin problem. He fulfilled all the law, upheld God's glory perfectly, and offered to substitute Himself on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21) so that we could be NEW CREATIONS (2 Cor. 5:17). He did not come to die so that we could become more moral or so that we could now DO enough to appease God. He came because we **could NOT!** Our study in Luke showed what Jesus did and accomplished, that His death on a cross, resurrection, and ascension are finished, providing the power to overcome sin and death. Jesus was not a good teacher or moral example. He is Lord. He calls us to follow Him into His death so that we can now **glorify God in the way were designed to do, as slaves of righteousness rather than sin** (Rom. 6:17-19).

Act 5: Spreading the Good News of Redemption: *The Mission of the Church*

So where does the church fit into all of this? When Jesus ascended into heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His disciples in Jerusalem, which lead to them preaching the gospel, from which people were converted through repentance, which ushered in the visible church. It is to this group of people, and every believer after, that God has revealed His glory. **"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."** (2 Cor. 4:6). We have had the mystery of generations revealed to us, **"which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."** (Col. 1:27) And it is being so compelled to live for God's glory that we **"keep your conduct among the Gentiles** (non-believers) honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and **glorify God on the day of visitation."** (1 Peter 2:12) We not only have been called to glorify God by worship through Jesus, but are called to display His glory and make it known throughout the world.

This is a far cry from a pithy view of the church. The church is God's institution to display His glory to the world, a living organism of those called out of their sin into a relationship with the God of this universe. **Good people??!???** Hardly. We were called out of sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, greed, drunkenness, swindling, and reviling. This is who we **were**. **BUT, we have been washed, sanctified, and justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11). We are not good people. We are wretched people who have been washed, declared righteous and made righteous by Jesus Christ alone! He had to do it because we could not wash ourselves, nor make ourselves good. This means we are **changed people in need of continual change, redeemed people who still battle the flesh, and beggars who have simply been shown where the food is**. The very fact that we are IMPERFECT means that it is NOT ABOUT US. Our life is now about glorifying God, pointing to Him because we know how wretched and helpless we really are. If anyone asks me if I'm the head guy at this church, I say a resounding, "No", because I simply point to the GUY. This is our mission when we are compelled by the **glory of God** rather than ourselves. It also means that we understand that we are **NOT TRYING TO ESTABLISH A KINGDOM IN THE HERE AND NOW**. There will be a re-establishment of the kingdom, but its still coming.

Act 6: The Return of the King: *Redemption Completed*

There is a great act still coming in God's cosmic redemptive story. This is why we are not trying to create a utopia here on earth. It's why retirement on this earth cannot satisfy. It is why there will be suffering,

pain, persecution, injustice, and disappointment on this earth. The story is not over until God makes right everything that has been broken. He will redeem, restore, and reclaim a perfect Kingdom. The One who is receiving worship, glory, honor, and power (Rev. 4:11), will be the One who will reign on this earth as Israel's king. This will usher in an eternal Kingdom where God's glory will finally and completely be on display, making the light of the sun unneeded, since the "**glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb**" (Rev. 21:23). This is the day we long for, when we will once again be restored to the Garden (Rev. 22:1-5), where there will be unhindered worship because there is no possibility of sin. The worshipers will be of every tribe, tongue and nation, and service will be perpetual.

What does that mean for the church?

It means that our greatest goal is to glorify God. This purpose is what drives us, what sets our mission, what explains our existence, and what motivates all that we do. This answers the "why". We exist because of God's glory to display His glory. Everything else, all the "what" flows from there. As we venture into the book of Acts and trace how the visible church began and comes to age, we see it not as something that exists independently or as a recent creation, but as the exact institution God designed to let the world know about the glories of Christ. The church is not about morality apart from reconciliation to God in Christ, but about redeemed humanity living out the freedom bought by Christ. The church did NOT replace Israel in her failure, but was able to share the promises of God in Christ by being grafted into those promises. One day God will establish an earthly kingdom, and until then, we are instruments to display His glory.

Coming of Age of God's Church:

A quick preview/overview of the beginning of Acts:

Spirit-Filled Venture (Acts 1:2, 8, 16; 2:4) - In Jesus' absence, the Spirit empowered the disciples, both internally and externally. He gave the disciples the ability to speak in the native tongue of the visitors to Jerusalem at Pentecost.

Risen & Ascended Christ (Acts 1:6-11) - The power of the message was in the fact that Jesus was risen and had ascended, seated at the right hand of the Father.

Dependency on God the Father: *A prayer laden venture* (Acts 1:14, 24; 2:42; 4:31) - Prayer was not a token exercise but a life-giving action that they devoted themselves to. Prayer was part of regular worship and fellowship

Restored Witnesses Required (Acts 1:12-26) - The group of failures were restored, adding a replacement to their ranks after Judas. God used weak, feeble, common and uneducated (Acts 4:13) people to begin His church.

Clear Vision of Mission (Acts 1:8; 2:38; 3:19) - They had a given scope (start in Jerusalem and work out - to the whole world), preach a message of repentance, and baptize people in the name of Jesus. Those that repented and were baptized became part of the church (regardless of where they lived).

Unified in Heart (Acts 2:42, 44; 4:32-34) - This mission united, as well as devotion to the disciples teaching, fellowship, living life together and praying, sharing with one another so that there were no needs among them.

Embracing of Suffering (Acts 5:41) - Suffering and persecution was normative. This kept the church away from petty squabbles, and they believed that suffering was a sign that they were worthy of the Lord.

Fearing the Lord Drives (Acts 2:43; 5:11) - There was a sense of awe before the Lord. Far from being about them individually, God's fear drove their worship and their mission. They were more concerned with what pleased the Lord rather than what pleased themselves.

There was no dichotomy between the churches mission and their worship, evangelism and fellowship, reaching inward and reaching outward, loving each other and loving the lost, and hearing teaching and living it out. Everything was done for and by the glory of God, and that was the motivation and measure of success. In order to truly understand how that mission plays out (what we'll look at next week), this foundational reality must be understood clearly.