

Acts Series Part 52

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[0 : 00] I wonder how many people in Aberdeen have heard the gospel, have heard the good news concerning who Jesus is and what He has done. How many have been exposed to a clear, perhaps very simple, very brief, but a clear presentation of that good news concerning Jesus Christ?

I don't know the answer to that question, but I think the question is an important one. It is sometimes suggested that we live in an age, a generation of gospel rejection, if we can use that term. But I pose the question for you to consider, is that true? Is that so? Can we, for example, say that somebody has rejected a message that they have never heard? How can we speak of our fellow citizens of this city having rejected the gospel if it is the case that many of them, perhaps the vast majority, have never actually heard it?

How fair is it? How reasonable is it to use the language of rejection, if that is the case? We maybe can further pursue this line of thought or inquiry and ask, why is it that so many have never heard? Is this a God thing? Is it that God has chosen for reasons that fall within His divine prerogative to largely withdraw the work of His Spirit with the resulting spiritual barrenness that surrounds us? Is that what is going on? That argument could perhaps be used in a scenario where many are hearing the gospel, and yet there is little or no response to what they are hearing. In those circumstances, we might be able to say, well, this is something that lies within God's purposes that we maybe find difficult to understand. What we can't do is hang on God, the fact that so few have even heard the gospel.

That is not His responsibility. That people would hear. That people would hear. And that's all we're talking about at this moment. That people would hear.

No concern at the moment, or no interest at the moment with measuring the response. That people would hear is very clearly our responsibility.

[3 : 00] Now, what can we do to ensure that more people hear the message? How could we ensure that all of this city, the city of Aberdeen, hear the message? The response, we will gladly leave in God's hands.

But what must we do that they might hear? This morning, I want us to learn from what we could call a case study in saturation evangelism from the book of Acts, and particularly the passage that we've read already this morning in Acts chapter 19.

There we read in verse 10, and verse 10 will be our starting point. We're going to begin in verse 10. We're going to notice there a very astonishing statement that is made, and we're going to work back and try and work out why it is that Luke is able to make this very astonishing claim.

More than a claim, a statement of fact. What is it that Luke says there in verse 10 as he summarizes, as it were, the work of evangelism under the leadership of Paul in Ephesus and the province of Asia, of which Ephesus is the capital? What is it that Luke states there in verse 10? Well, we can read it together. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Now, we can easily read that, no doubt we have on many occasions, and pass it by, and not ponder or pause for a moment to just consider how astonishing this statement is. Ephesus was a very large city. We don't know for sure the population when Paul was there, but the theater that was located in the center of the city could hold over 20,000 people.

That alone gives you some idea of the scale in terms of the population. At a conservative estimate, we could talk about a population of no less than 200,000 people in Ephesus. And that's just Ephesus.

[5 : 15] The province of which Luke is speaking there in verse 10 included many significant cities. The seven churches to which letters are addressed there in the book of Revelation, they all fall within the geographic remit of this province that Luke is speaking about, of which Luke says, all the

Jews and Greeks who lived in this province heard the word of the Lord.

In the whole of the province, again, conservatively, we could speak of several hundred thousand people. Do you appreciate just what a remarkable thing is being said here?

That under the leadership of Paul, supported by the other disciples in Ephesus, those who were coming to faith in these two years that are spoken of, the whole of the province was in a very meaningful and thorough way evangelized. Now, it is perfectly reasonable to recognize that when Luke here uses the language of all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province heard the word of the Lord, we don't need to understand it, nor, I think, would it be reasonable to understand it as claiming that every single individual without exception had been the subject, if you wish, of a gospel presentation and had heard the good news. Of course, we could understand it in that way, but it is reasonable to understand it not as a statement of that kind, but what it certainly is saying, that in a thorough way, in a very real and significant way, the whole of the province, Ephesus, the other towns and villages from north to south, from east to west, had been evangelized. The good news had been proclaimed, and all who have lived there certainly would have had a reasonable opportunity to hear the message concerning Jesus Christ. And again, I want you to just ponder what a remarkable thing that is, that this small band of believers could have been so effective in saturating that province with the good news. The question I want us to consider this morning is, why was it that all heard? To use the very language of verse 10. Why is it that all heard? How was it that all heard? What can we learn and do so that all might hear? How they respond? We leave in God's hands. But what can we do that all might hear?

I think I can identify, or we can identify, five means that are presented to us in the preceding verses. Verse 10 is the conclusion. It's the summary of what happened. In these two years, this happened. The previous verses can give us clues and hints as to how this happened, and that is what we want to look at and consider. The first thing that I want us to notice, and it's first in order of importance, but also it's first in the sense that it provides the foundation for what follows. And bear with me as I explain what I mean by that. But the first means of this saturation evangelism that I find in this passage is this one, Spirit-filled disciples exercising Spirit-given gifts. We read there in verse 6 of these 12 men in Ephesus, and we read that when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Now, the first seven verses of Acts chapter 19, and then the following three verses, verses 8 to 11, that's four verses, those two sections generally are treated separately. Generally, those who write commentaries on the book do not see great links between the two. They're deemed and they're treated as distinct passages. Interest in the twelve men that are spoken of there in these first seven verses generally revolves around what their spiritual status was when Paul finds them in Ephesus. [9 : 58] Many questions are posed. Were they Christians at all, these men who had never heard of the Holy Spirit? Of whom were they disciples? Were they disciples of Jesus? Were they disciples of John the Baptist?

What is meant by speaking of them as disciples? In what sense do they believe? Paul asked them, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believe? The implication being that they did believe something, but what was it that they believed? Some suggest that maybe here you have the language of appearance. They appeared to believe. They appeared to be disciples, but they didn't actually. And there are innumerable suggestions and proposals made concerning the spiritual status of these men.

A connected theme is the interest that this passage, these first seven verses particularly, the interest that this passage awakens in regard to their experience of the Holy Spirit.

Are we being presented with a group of men who first believe and then subsequently receive the Spirit as at face value would appear to be what is happening? And if that is so, is this order normative for Christians today? Or do they become Christians in response to the instruction, the fuller instruction of Paul concerning who Jesus is and what He did? And so, concurrent with believing faith, they receive the Spirit as is described there in verse 6. It seems reasonable to conclude that these men were not, when Paul arrives in Ephesus, were not born again New Testament believers, if we can use that language. They maybe can be thought of as Old Testament believers who believed certain truths concerning Jesus. We don't know what they were.

We simply aren't told how much information they had. But that information that they did have, be it from John the Baptist himself, though the time that has elapsed between John the Baptist's ministry and this occasion is over 20 years. So, perhaps it hadn't been directly from John the Baptist,

perhaps disciples of John the Baptist. We simply don't know. But these men knew something, had heard something about Jesus, that which they had been taught they believed, but it is only now that they experience conversion and new life in Christ. That seems to me a reasonable conclusion.

[12 : 47] Well, so much more could be said about this, but that is not our primary concern this morning. Our concern is to highlight that these men, certainly as they are described there in verse 6, are Spirit-filled men. They are Spirit-active men. They are exercising Spirit-given gifts.

They speak in tongues. They prophesy. Filled with the Spirit of God, granted these spiritual gifts, they exercise these spiritual gifts. And gifts, may it be highlighted, that were particularly relevant to mission and to communicating the gospel. They are communication gifts. The purpose of these gifts and different views can be held, but there is no doubt that they are gifts of communication.

They are to help people communicate. They are to help people better tell others concerning Jesus. And so these men, they receive the Spirit. They are filled with the Spirit of God.

They are granted spiritual gifts, and they exercise these spiritual gifts. All of these things we can state without any fear of contradiction. It's there before us. It's very clear. And the point is this, that for all of Asia to hear the gospel, as was what happened and what Luke relates to us there in verse 10, that just two years later, all of the province of Asia had heard the Word of the Lord. For that to have happened, it was necessary that these men and others like them be filled with the Spirit of God, receive spiritual gifts, and exercise those gifts in the work of a mission. Paul alone clearly could never have made known the Word of God. We have made known the Word of the Lord to all of Asia. Our Lord Himself was limited in His capacity to communicate the truth that He had brought to all of Israel. Most of His ministry concentrated in a very small part there in Galilee. He was limited in His ability. He couldn't be in two places at the same places at the same time. Well, equally that is true of Paul. For verse 10 to have become a reality, it was necessary that there be others who, together with Paul, would make known the Word of the Lord. I think the applications are so self-evident that we don't need to labor them. But maybe a couple of things we could say, especially as we consider just for a very brief moment the status of these men and whether they were believers at all when Paul finds them there in Ephesus. And that is an opportunity, perhaps, for us to just ask ourselves the question, well, where do we stand concerning Jesus Christ? Are we born-again believers who have received the Spirit of God? Or are we perhaps those who have heard certain truths concerning Jesus, and we say, well, yes, I believe that's true. I believe He's the Son of

God. I believe He died on the cross. I believe He rose again. I accept these facts as being ones that are accurate. But have we responded to these truths? Have we put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior?

[16 : 26] And as we have done so, have we been indwelt by the Spirit of God and so able to receive the gifts that He is more than ready to give us that we might be involved in the work of mission? But I think there's also an application for those of us who, by grace, are able to answer yes to that question. Yes, I do believe in Jesus Christ. Yes, I am trusting in Him. Well, if that is so, then you have received the Holy Spirit. That is the experience of all true believers. But you must go on and I must go on being filled with the Spirit of God. We must go on exercising our Spirit-given gifts in mission.

That is something that we must do. We cannot simply say, well, I'm a Christian. I've received the Spirit, and that's the end of the story. No, Paul exhorts Christians to go on being filled, to receive more and more of the Spirit of God, to identify and to exercise the gifts that He gives us.

Now, as we speak in these terms, are we entering into the respect realm of second blessing theology, to use language that isn't really used much today, but in the past has been the source of much controversy. I think my favorite comment on this matter of whether as Christians we should look for a second blessing is a comment that I was told is attributed to Professor Finlayson, who was a professor in the Free Church College some time ago, and he was asked once, I think at a youth fellowship, Professor, do you believe in the second blessing? To which he replied, I believe in as many blessings as I can get. And I think there's great spiritual depth in that.

As many blessings as we can get, as much experience of the Spirit of God in our lives as we can get, that we would go on being filled with the Spirit of God, exercising the gifts that He has given us. Well, how are we as a congregation? If we are to make known the Word of the Lord to all of Aberdeen, we must be a congregation of believers who are ever being filled by the Spirit of God, ever exercising our Spirit-given gifts. This first means of securing the saturation evangelism of the

province of Asia is not only, as I've already commented a moment ago, not only first in importance, but it also serves as a foundation for the further means that we can now go on and more briefly identify. The second means that I find in these first verses that lead up to the conclusion there in verse 10. The second means is this, disciples marked by a holy boldness. There you can see the clear connection between what we've just said about disciples filled with the Spirit of God. They also, not surprisingly, can be described as disciples marked by a holy boldness.

[19 : 34] Then in verse 8 we read, Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months. Now, this means, and the ones that follow, all are related to Paul himself. And yet, though they are related to Paul as an individual, I think we can agree that they are a legitimate example for all of us and the application is relevant for all of us. Verse 8 then speaks of Paul speaking boldly. Now, what does that mean, Paul speaking boldly? I think there are two overlapping elements that we can extract from this language of Paul speaking boldly. I think the first thing we can say is that it speaks of Paul's confidence in his message. He speaks boldly in that sense, in that he was confident in the message that he was proclaiming. He knew it to be true. He knows that this message is powerful. He is convinced and persuaded that the message that he brings can and will transform lives, indeed transform cities and provinces. That is a holy boldness as regards his confidence in the message.

Now, is that true of us? If we are to ensure that all of Aberdeen hears the message, we will fail miserably if we are timorous concerning the content of the message, if we are uncertain as to its power, uncertain even as to whether it is altogether true. And we are picking and choosing and saying, well, this part I think is okay, but I am not so sure about this part. People don't like this part. We will just leave that part aside. That kind of attitude will make us incapable of proclaiming boldly the message of the gospel. I think that is one aspect of Paul speaking boldly.

But I think there is another aspect, and as I say, these things overlap. There is not only confidence in the message, but there is courage in the delivery of the message. Remember, this is a man who has already known persecution following his preaching in synagogues. And yet here he comes to Ephesus, fully aware of what is likely to happen, and he boldly goes and delivers this message that will, he is sure, will, he is sure, bring opposition and violence and trouble for him. Indeed, and we are not going to look at it this morning, but even in this same chapter, while Paul was in Ephesus, there was, in due course, great trouble and violence as a result of this message that he was proclaiming.

But he is courageous in delivering this message, even though he knows what may come of it. Well, again, what of us? Is there in us this ability, this willingness to speak boldly? Will you speak boldly the good news? After Easter, we will be having Christianity explored here in the congregation again. Will you boldly think about those who you could invite and encourage to participate? In April, we will be hosting the parish visitation to invite our neighbors to Easter services, not only in our own congregation, but in other Christian congregations here in the city center. Will you boldly participate in that? Or will you say, well, that's not my kind of thing, it's so awkward and embarrassing, and I don't know what will happen. Will we boldly make known the good news? Will you, even in this week that has begun, boldly take the opportunities that will present themselves that somebody this week might hear from your lips the word of the Lord? Another means that explains why it is that Luke is able to conclude and tell us, as a matter of fact, that in all of the province of Asia, everybody had heard the word of the

Lord. There's another means that we find here in these verses that would explain that outcome. The third one that I just want to notice with you is this, that not only do we have spirit-filled believers exercising their spirit-given gifts, not only do we have believers who proclaim boldly the message, but we also have believers, disciples, who have a solid grasp of the gospel message and an ability to communicate that message persuasively. Notice what it says concerning Paul. Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. Particularly these words, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. Some might say, well, is it not the spirit who persuades? Well, yes and no. Yes, the spirit persuades, but he uses the persuasive arguments of believers to persuade the unbeliever. And so it is necessary for us to, with Paul, to know what it is to argue persuasively. Some might say, well, is that not a gift that some have been given? And of course that is a legitimate comment. There is no doubt that Paul was particularly gifted, spiritually gifted, in order to do this, to argue persuasively. We recognize that. We recognize that some are not gifted in that same way or in that same measure. But I think it is

reasonable to argue and to claim that all believers in some measure are required, and there is an obligation upon us to, in the measure that we can, to be able to present persuasively the good news concerning the gospel. It won't be maybe in a public gathering, in a public hall, as was the case with Paul, behind a pulpit or with multitudes in front of us, but even one-on-one with those whom we meet to be able to persuasively argue the message that we have. All are to communicate the message. And this involves more than just gifting. It involves practice. It involves hard work. It involves study. It involves prayer. If we dedicate ourselves to these things, we will become better at arguing persuasively concerning who Jesus is and what He has done. Do we imagine that in Ephesus it was only Paul who was engaged in arguing persuasively? I think it's entirely reasonable to conclude that it was not only Paul.

[26 : 26] Indeed, when Paul leaves the synagogue and makes his way to the hall of Tyrannus and is engaged in daily discussions, I think it's perfectly reasonable to conclude that this was not simply or solely evangelistic in reaching out to those who did not believe. But I am sure in these daily discussions, much time was spent in training and discipling the new believers and helping them and teaching them that they too might learn and be able, as Paul was able to do, argue persuasively about the kingdom of God. Indeed, it's very clear from the history of the growth of the New Testament church and from passages that feed into what we have here, that many in the province of Asia were trained by Paul and went to places that Paul never went with the message. We just give one example of Epaphras, who's mentioned there at the beginning of the letter to the Colossians. There it's clear that Paul never made it to Colossae, a town in this province. It wasn't far from Ephesus. It wouldn't have been difficult for him to make his way to that town, but he was concentrated in Ephesus, and he sent Epaphras and no doubt many others to take the message. He trained them. He built them up. He instructed them, and then they went and argued persuasively in the other towns and communities of that province. Well, again, how do we apply that to ourselves? Do we have a solid grasp of the content of the gospel? Do we take advantage of the means that are provided to secure that solid grasp? The preaching of God's Word, the opportunity to study the Bible with others in the context of our congregation, in the different neighborhood fellowships, in courses that are provided and made available to help us to learn more and to gain a better grasp, in the use of Bible reading notes that, again, are available easily within our own congregation, that in that way, day by day, we would build up our knowledge and secure a solid grasp of what the gospel is, and so be able to argue persuasively to not only know, but to communicate what we know.

Now, there is no doubt that in this matter of communicating what we know, desire is a key element, but together with that desire, there is also this element of practice, of learning in the doing. If we want all of Aberdeen to hear the Word of the Lord, then as was the case in Ephesus and in the province of Asia, we need disciples who have a solid grasp of the message and an ability and a desire to communicate that message persuasively. There's a fourth means that I want to notice here that we find in this passage that explain the outcome, and it is this, that we have, or we find here, disciples prepared for but not defeated by rejection and or apparent failure. We've read the passage. Paul goes to the synagogue. There in verse 8 and in verse 9, we're told the outcome of the time that he spent there, three months preaching, teaching in the synagogue. What is the outcome? Some of them became obstinate.

They refused to believe and publicly maligned the way. So, Paul left them. His message was largely rejected by those to whom he presented it. He wasn't surprised by that. It had happened so often before.

It was dismissed not only politely, but very aggressively. They publicly maligned the way, and indeed, that would seem to be the moment at which Paul says, I can stay no longer here. You can malign me, you can reject me, but if you malign the way, then I will no longer cast my pearls to swine, and so he leaves the synagogue. Paul had to endure this rejection of his message. He had to endure this apparent failure, three months in the synagogue. Now, no doubt there were those, even in those three months, who heard, and who responded, and who were a source of great encouragement to Paul, as indeed the men that we've commented on in the first verses of the chapter. But there was rejection. There was a measure of failure.

[31 : 17] Will we give up when we are rejected? Will we throw in the towel when there isn't the results that we would like to see? When people don't respond in the manner that we wish that they would?

Do not be surprised by rejection, and certainly don't give up in the face of rejection. In order for that province, and in order for all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province to hear the word of the Lord, it was necessary that there be disciples prepared for, but not defeated by rejection and failure. And one final thing that I want us to notice here, that again, I say together with all that we've seen thus far, helps us to understand this outcome that Luke describes for us in verse 10. And the final thing I want us to notice is this, that we find here disciples who think outside the box in order to do what must be done.

Well, first of all, what must be done? Well, what must be done is that the message must be proclaimed. And what is the problem that confronts Paul? We've already noticed it. Well, the problem is that his location for proclaiming this message, the synagogue, is no longer available. He can no longer make use of the synagogue for this purpose. And so what does he do in the face of this turn of events, of this closed door? Does Paul simply resign himself to this lamentable turn of events and say, well, I did my best. I've, you know, I've given it three months. That's not bad. It's time to move on. No, there were so many who still had not heard. There was so much still to be done. Ephesus was of great strategic importance. And so Paul knows that he must remain longer there. So what does he do? Well, very cleverly, very cunningly, very creatively. He identifies a hall where people were already accustomed to attending, to hear lectures on religion and philosophy, this hall of Tyrannus that is referred to in verse 9.

And he comes to some arrangement with the owner, whether he was favorably inclined to Paul, whether it was a commercial arrangement where he rented this hall. Seems a reasonable suggestion that there was simply an arrangement of that kind in the early morning. Perhaps Tyrannus himself was using it. Some manuscripts suggest that it was rented for or available for a certain time period, from 11 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. And that would certainly tie in with the use that that hall would have ordinarily. Perhaps Tyrannus himself used it in the early hours for his lectures. And then in the heat of the day when people largely would not have wanted to be gathering in a hall, that was the time that was left available for Paul to make use of it. It's a possibility. The point is that Paul does not give up, but creatively considers, well, how can I achieve what I must do? I must tell people, how will I do it? If I can't do it in this building, then I must find another one. If I can't do it by this means, I must find another means. I can't simply give up.

[34 : 42] And so Paul identifies a way of ensuring that the message continues to be proclaimed. And so for us today, if we are persuaded of the urgency and of the priority of making known the Word of the Lord, then we too must evaluate the manner in which we are doing it, evaluate how we might do it better, evaluate where and how, at what times, in what ways we can make known and ensure that those who live round about us, who live in this city, as those in Ephesus, hear the Word of the Lord. What are we to do? Are we to copy Paul and say, well, Paul did it that way, so we'll do it that way?

Well, that is to miss the point. What we do have to do is to take the principle of creative engagement and work out what would be and what would work in our own context, in our own city.

So as we draw things to a close, what have we got here in Ephesus? What have we identified that would explain how Luke is able to make this quite remarkable statement in verse 10, that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord? These countless multitudes across an extensive province made up of many significant cities and towns, how is it possible that that was achieved in something about two years, as we're told? Well, we've discovered at least some of the answers to that. We have Spirit-filled disciples. We have Spirit-emboldened disciples. Spirit-instructed, disciples. Spirit-driven, persistent disciples. Spirit-led and inspired, creative disciples.

That's why the whole province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord. And as we close, did they only hear?

Yes, that was Paul's responsibility. That was the responsibility of the believers there in Ephesus, that their neighbors would hear. They ensured that they heard. But did they only hear? Well, by no means.

[37 : 10] It is very evident from what follows, and indeed from all that we know concerning the church in Ephesus, and indeed in the province of Asia, that many, many not only heard, but responded in believing faith.

And so we can be confident today that if we also are faithful in doing what is incumbent upon us, which is to ensure that others hear, we can be confident that all of those who hear, there will be

those, and indeed many, who believe, who respond, and who put their trust in Jesus Christ. Let us pray.