

Follow where God leads - an extract from Malcolm Duncan's book *Risktakers*

The Acts of the Holy Spirit?

The book of Acts is really volume 2 of Luke's account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In Acts, Luke traces the journey of the first disciples from the Ascension of Jesus near Jerusalem (an event which is deeply important for the church but is so often ignored) to Paul's arrival in Rome. The book traces a journey through the Middle East, Asia and Europe and back again. It is full of riots and revivals, arguments and debates, schisms, splits and church plants. Luke writes in a fast pace, sometimes describing events of which he was not a part and at other times using the pronoun 'we', showing that he was part of the journey. It is a blow-by-blow account of the first thirty or so years of the church's history, and as such it gives us vital clues about the ways in which the early followers of Jesus understood themselves, the world they lived in and the cause of Christ.

As early as the fourth century, Chrysostom described the book of Acts as 'The Gospel of the Holy Spirit', because undoubtedly the central character in the story is the Holy Spirit Himself. I want to explore the lessons we can learn from this book for our own lives.

The early church was completely dependent upon the Holy Spirit. He guided, filled, inspired and protected them. He also nudged, challenged, rebuked and exposed them. He pushed them into new territory. He took their lives and expanded the possibilities in them. What He did with the early church, He does today with the lives of those who follow Christ — if we let Him. If 'stepping into the Unstoppable Story' and 'believing a bigger Gospel' are about discovering the great purposes and plans of God again, and 'saying 'Yes' to Jesus' is about walking in close relationship with God's Son, then 'following where God leads' is about learning to trust the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit in our lives once more, even if we do not know where He might take us.

There is a problem in this area, however. For many of us, the work and person of the Holy Spirit are a mystery. We call Him 'it' (a grossly wrong thing to do, in my opinion), we ignore His promptings, we run from His leadings and we resist the idea that He wants to encounter us, renew us and fill us. Many of us are so confused about who He is and what He does that we would not miss Him if He were not there. If He were to leave our gatherings, 90% of what we do would carry on as if nothing had changed.

Yet the Bible paints a picture of the Holy Spirit as a Person who speaks, thinks, feels, listens and responds. He is present everywhere in the creation, and Jesus breathes Him out upon His disciples. He leads us to truth, convicts us of sin, defends us before the world, equips us for mission and gives us assurance of our salvation. He forms Christ in us, produces fruit in our lives and endues us with supernatural gifts so that the Kingdom of God might be extended. He aids our understanding of God, deepens our worship and solidifies our resolve. He is the agent of the incarnation, the 'empowerer' of Jesus in His baptism, the One who propels Jesus into the wilderness where Jesus faces temptation from Satan. Without Him the Christian life is shallow and legalistic. With Him, anything can happen. The book of Acts tells us part of His story in birthing and solidifying the early church.

Be careful not to systematise God

We must be careful not to turn the book of Acts into something that it is not. I want to argue that looking back, we can see a structure and a direction in Acts that challenges us to trust the Holy Spirit - but we must be careful not to make the flawed assumption that the early church knew what was going on in these formative years. More often than not they were holding onto the 'coat-tails' of the Holy Spirit as He went ahead of them. I like to think of the book of Acts as a record of the moving of the Holy Spirit, and the church trying to keep up with Him.

Allow the sheer unpredictability of the story in Acts to sink in - and don't try to turn it into a systematic church-planting scheme. Of course, as we read the book we discover clear strategies and plans, but these are often changed, cancelled or moved around. Looking back, Luke was able to make more sense of what was going on during those years than he could have done in the midst of the journey.

I really don't think that as the Spirit filled the early disciples on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) they fully understood that this was the birthing of a movement that would change the world. I am not sure that they fully understood the significance of any of the events they experienced in the bigger scheme of things - whether that was the imprisonment of Peter and John (Acts 3-4); the arguments about care (Acts 6); the stoning of Stephen and the presence of Saul (Acts 7-8); Saul's conversion (Acts 9); Peter's

vision of Cornelius's house (Acts 10); the early journeys of Paul (Acts 11-14); the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15); Paul's trips to Asia Minor and Europe (Acts 16-20), or his journey to Jerusalem and then on to Rome, where the story ends (Acts 21-28). I think that as the story unfolded, the early church leaders were beginning to work out what God was doing, and they could see the bigger plans begin to emerge, but that must have been a difficult and unpredictable journey.

We need to learn from this, don't we? How often do we systematise God and arrange Him into our nice, neat little boxes? We put ourselves in the driving seat of our lives and ask the Holy Spirit to be our fuel - but that is just *not* how the first few years of the church must have been. They had to respond to the unknown without understanding the end of the journey. When they argued with one another, they had to work out what to do next. When they were attacked, they had to flee and start again. When they came across opposition, they had to deal with it and move on. The one thing they did not do was *stop*. Instead they just followed where the Spirit led them. At times it seems as though like they moved from one crisis to another — this is particularly true in Paul's case. Almost from the story of his conversion in Acts 9, we get the impression that wherever he went, there was either a revival or a riot!

What is the lesson for us? No matter how much we think we have Him figured out, God is always able to surprise us. He will not be systematised and boxed in. We need to risk allowing the Holy Spirit to be our Leader — to guide us, to challenge us and to forge us, as He wants. We need to give Him the steering wheel.

I recently spent some time preaching in America. During one of my sermons, in the 'Deep South', I wanted to challenge the notion that we can figure God out, so I said to the audience that they needed to remember that God was not a man, Jesus was not an evangelical, John the Baptist was not a Baptist and the Holy Spirit was not a Pentecostal. While there was widespread laughter at the obviousness of my comments, I have to say that at the end a number of people came to me to say that they were very surprised that I would think God was not a man, Jesus was not an evangelical, and so on. You get the picture? Without realising it, we box God in.

We box Him in with our plans and our ideas. We box Him in with our services. We box Him in with our controls and our explanations. We rationalise and explain away the fact that He is God and He can do what He wants, when He wants, how He wants. If we are not careful, it all ends up feeling as if we are suffocating Him — or maybe we are suffocating ourselves. If the Spirit is our breath, then maybe we need to breathe a bit more!

Follow where He leads

What is wonderful about Acts is that the early church did, in fact, follow the leading and guiding of the Spirit, even though they could not have been clear about where He was taking them. After the death of the traitor Judas Iscariot, they realised they needed to appoint another apostle, so they did (Acts 1). The risen Jesus had taught them about the Kingdom and had told them to wait in Jerusalem until they were filled with power (Acts 1:4, 8), and the disciples obeyed. When the Spirit filled them in Acts 2 and the crowd outside wanted to know what was happening, Peter responded and explained it to them in one of the greatest sermons you will ever read. When they were confronted by the crippled man outside the Temple, the disciples did what they knew they could: they proclaimed the healing power of Jesus over him, and the man was healed (Acts 3). When they were arrested as a result, and Peter and John were dragged in front of the court, they simply opened their mouths and let God speak through them. I wonder if they remembered Jesus' promise that He would do this for them (Mark 13:11; Acts 4). When Peter was confronted by the vision of the tablecloth as he was praying and was led to Cornelius, Peter changed his view — he acknowledged that he was wrong (Acts 10). The same thing happened in the Council in Jerusalem when he and Paul disagreed (Acts 15). When Paul wanted to go to Spain but was confronted by the vision of a man calling him to Macedonia, he did as God said and followed His prompting (Acts 16).

There is unpredictability in this story and there is risk — but there is *life*. These men and women are not straitjacketed by the need to be right all the time. They aren't afraid to do new things, try new ways, and take turns in the road that they were not expecting. Did they get it wrong sometimes? Of course they did. Who knows whether Matthias was a right choice or not in Acts 1? Who knows whether the arguments between Barnabas and Saul over John Mark could have been avoided (Acts 15)? Agabus's prophecy about Paul (Acts 21) was generally right but the details appear to have been wrong. Acts is full of these twists and turns but the twists and turns and risks show us that this was a church being *led forward* and a church that had to learn as it went.

Too often we try to map out our lives. It is good to have plans. It is good to set out - but it is also vital to be open, to be flexible, to be willing to manoeuvre ourselves into a better position to catch the wind when we need to. Whether the early church faced unexpected blessing, like thousands being saved (Acts 2) or healing (Acts 3 etc.), or unexpected disasters like persecution (Acts 4; 16 etc.) or even death (Acts 7; 12), they had a fundamental belief that God was with them and that they just needed to keep going, to press in, to respond to what was in front of them and trust that God would work it out.

That seems to me to be a far cry from how many Christians and many churches now operate. We need everything buttoned down. We need to be in control. We need to know what is coming, when it is coming and how we are going to handle it. I think Acts teaches us that we need to do the hard work of planning and praying (prayer is mentioned in *every* chapter of the story in Acts), but that we need to hold our plans very lightly. We follow where God leads, He does not follow where we lead. It is our task to do what He is blessing, not to ask Him to bless what we are doing.

Where might God be leading you? Have you been confronted with unexpected blessing or sorrow? Whatever is happening in your life, don't let it fool you into thinking that (a) God is not there, or (b) you are the most important person in the universe. As I write, some friends of mine are working out what to do with their lives. He has cancer and it appears he is going to die. They still believe that God can heal him, but they are also asking God, in the midst of the confusion and pain of this moment, to be glorified, so they are learning how to serve God *in* their current circumstances — and I have to say, they are doing an amazing job.

What is clear to me is this: if you cannot serve God where you *are*, you will never be able to serve Him where you *are not*. Far too many people are waiting for something to change before they follow God. They say, 'I'll follow You when this is fixed,' or, 'I'll wait until that changes, then I'll follow You.' If you are in that situation, let me be frank with you. You'll never follow Him. You'll never step into something new. None of us know what is round the corner. Oswald Chambers was right when he said: 'Faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading.'

You see, I don't have to understand God to trust Him, and nor do you.

Follow the Spirit, because He does have a plan

I want to say one last thing about Acts before we move on. Although I said that the early church could not possibly have understood all that was happening as it was taking place in the church's growth and development, they could understand it more *looking back*.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem. He told them to wait until they were endued with power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and that they would then be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. As you read through the book of Acts, you see that promise fulfilled. In Acts 2, the Spirit fills them and they are witnesses in Jerusalem. In Acts 4, they are propelled into being witnesses in Judea and the widening area. In Acts 10, the Spirit enables them to be witnesses in Samaria. In Acts 15, they make decisions together about what is at the heart of faith in Christ. This is a crucial moment when the early church acknowledges that faith in Christ is not just for a sect within Judaism. At this moment, the Spirit propels them into greater and greater witness. The book of Acts ends with Paul reaching Rome, and the very last passage in the book says he remained in Rome for two years, where he preached about Christ with boldness and received those who visited him with gladness, and the Spirit moved 'unhindered'. The very last word in the book of Acts in Greek is that word — 'unhindered'. Wow!

You see, although they couldn't see it, God's sovereign purposes and plan *were* being worked out in all the twists and turns they were experiencing. The Unstoppable Story was being worked out through their story as they said 'Yes' to Jesus. Acts is the story of the church moving from the centre of the religious world, Jerusalem, to the centre of the political world, Rome. The story ends, not with Paul's death, but with his arrival in Jerusalem.

The Spirit is always pushing us into new territory. He is always pushing the mission of God into other parts of the world. Even if we do not always understand that and see it, if we trust God to be good and sovereign and with us, then it does not matter what happens *to* us, as long as He is glorified *in* us. A bunch of young people I know have just received their examination results. Some did better than they had hoped and some did worse. Could they have changed the results if they had worked harder? Of course they could! Can God still use them, even if they did not get what they wanted? Of course He can!

They may not fully believe me when I say that to them now — but they will one day. You see, the overall orientation and direction of their lives is far more important than this one moment in their lives. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, addressed Stanford Business School in 2006 and one of the things that he said was, ‘You can only join the dots looking back.’ That is such a valuable lesson.

As a pastor and church leader, I have sat with hundreds of people over the years who have tried to work out an answer to the question, ‘What do I do now?’ What do I do now my child has died? What do I do now I have cancer? What do I do now I have the promotion? What do I do now my wife has left? What do I do now I have depression? What do I do now my leader has failed me? What do I do now the money is gone? My answer, always, is to say that God is still there. He has not left - He never will. Do what seems right to you ‘and to the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 15:28). Every turn in our lives gives us an opportunity to go back or to go on. God promises to journey on with us - but the journey forward into the unknown is always, always, always harder than the journey back. But it is always the right thing to do.