

—The Message of Acts—

Lesson 2—*The Acts of the Lord: Practical Deism in the Contemporary Church*

- I. What is *deism*? It's the belief that "although the universe reflects the intelligent design and power of a Creator, God's direct and personal involvement with his creatures ceased after the moment of creation, when he established a network of orderly and regular processes, with which not even he himself will interfere."
 - A. Deism therefore enjoys the perks of a doctrine of creation (meaning, intelligent design, order, and maybe even a theoretical basis for morality) without the uncomfortable meddling of a God who intervenes in history through miracle, judgment, and salvation.
 - B. As an ideology deism has fallen by the wayside; but *practical deism* fills many churches today—even churches which preach and teach the Bible (cf. Practical Atheism by S. Charnock).
 1. In practice, many professing Christians behave as if God's "providential interference" in people's lives has come largely to a halt. Prayer is a last resort, worry runs rampant, evangelism runs on technique, preaching plays on emotions, biblical counseling has given way to self-help talks, and church discipline been replaced by live-and-let-live and love-covers-a multitude. All this is reflective of the conviction that God's real involvement is a thing of the past.
 - C. There are of course differences between the way God worked in the days of the apostles and the way He's working today; but it's unbiblical to say that God's neither present nor active in the contemporary church. God *attested* to the significance of Christ's once-for-all redemptive achievement by signs and wonders, Acts 2.22 (both while He was on earth and through His apostles after His enthronement); but the lack of those signs and wonders doesn't mean Christ is neither present nor reigning, Mt 28.20
 1. And this is where Luke is so helpful in writing Acts. In Acts, he says to us: "Let me show you how Jesus is still present and active in His church."
- II. The first thing to know about the church
 - A. Luke's story in Acts is, from beginning to end, the story of the *continuing* acts and teachings of Jesus after His ascension, cf. Acts 1.1-2. So the first thing Luke wants us to know about the church is that *Jesus is still at work, here and now*. "Reading Acts with an eye for the activity of Jesus will sensitize us to the supernatural character of the church." According to Luke, Jesus remains active in the church but the manner of His working in it has changed. What He did in the flesh, He now does through His body, the church.
 - B. Jesus continues to chose leaders for His church
 1. The church is not a democracy, it's a *monarchy* with Christ as Messiah (anointed King), the only Head, Lawgiver, and Lord. His wish is our command. Jesus is not president, prime minister, coordinator, counselor, or facilitator, but King. But is He a king in abstentia? Luke's answer is NO.
 - a) He completed the number of the apostles from the throne in heaven (Acts 1.12-26). The number of the disciples is significant since Christ said there were to be twelve (Lk 22.30; Mt 19.28). So when there are only eleven, the gap left by Judas had to be filled (Pss 69.25; 109.8). But rather than choosing the replacement themselves (cp. Acts 6), the apostles asked Christ (Acts 1.24), who chose them (Acts 1.2; Lk 6.13), casting lots to determine His will (cf. Prov 16.33; Lev 16.8-10; Num 26.55-56).
 - b) He called and sent Saul of Tarsus as a witness to the Gentiles, Acts 9.15. From His throne in heaven, Jesus came down, seized Saul, and pressed him into service (Gal 1.23). He appeared to Saul (making him an eyewitness of his resurrection) and vocally called him in order to satisfy the criterion for his apostleship.
 - c) He chose the church's deacons through the church's discernment. Though not chosen by direct revelation or the casting of lots, Christ had no less of a hand in the selection of deacons

in Acts 6 (and therefore no less of hand in the choosing of church officers today). Luke gives two indications that although the discernment and decision of the church were the means of their appointment, the Lord Himself was appointing them to this position of service. Thus the selection of officers in the church is not something “handed over” by Christ to the church itself, but something carried out by Christ Himself “through His Spirit-baptized people and leaders.”

- (1) The field of candidates was narrowed from the outset by certain essential criteria (cp. Acts 1.21-23)—the crucial one being that they were full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Thus the church’s choice of these men was a response to, and a recognition of, the extraordinary work of the Spirit of God within them (cp. Acts 14.23; Tit 1.5; Acts 20.28).
- (2) The OT background to the appointment of the deacons also sends the signal that the Lord Himself is involved in their selection, Num 27.15-23.
- (3) “God is telling us through Luke that we should not understand church elections as expressing the “will of the people,” but rather as *discerning* the will of the Lord. Clearly, then, such processes of seeking and discerning leaders gifted and called by God must be immersed in fervent, humble, confident, dependent prayer to the Lord (Acts 1.24; 6.6; 14.23), for he gives such gifts to his people as the “spoils of war” won in the victory of his crucifixion and resurrection (Eph 4.7-13).”

C. Jesus continues to teach and to do

1. Jesus the Teacher

- a) Jesus taught the Word both by empowering His messengers to preach and by working in those who heard their proclamation. Extraordinary phenomena attended the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost, but the spotlight in Acts is on the declaration of the wonders of God (2.11) exemplified by Peter’s sermon (2.14-40), the cause of which he highlights as Christ’s outpouring of His Spirit (2.32-33). And since Christ is the one who pours out the Spirit, references to the Spirit’s actions should be seen as references to the activity of Jesus Himself.
- b) Empowering His messengers, Acts 16.7; and walking with them in ministry, Acts 18.9-11. Although the manifestation of His presence among the apostles (audibly, visibly, etc.) is characteristic of that foundational era, yet the truth it communicates to us is an abiding one: that Jesus is with us (Mt 28.20).
- c) Illuminating their listeners, Acts 5.31; 10.30-33, 44-45; 11.18, 20-21; 13.48; 15.7-9; 16.14

2. Jesus the Doer

- a) Jesus continues His saving deeds after His ascension, Acts 3.6, 12-16, 25-26; 4.7-12, 29-30.

III. Toward a cure for our practical deism

A. What would change if churches today took Luke’s message more seriously—that the life of the church is the “continuing teaching and doing ministry” of Jesus, the risen and exalted Lord?

1. How would an awareness of Christ’s presence affect all the issues surrounding the *control and direction* of the church: planning, strategizing, budgeting, chain-of-command, sessions, church councils, etc.? It’s clear from Acts that it wouldn’t mean dismantling all structures of human leadership, leaving the church as an amorphous, emotion-driven mass of spontaneity, flowing in whatever direction the Spirit seems to “lead.” Christ gives leaders to His church and His presence among us by His Spirit doesn’t exempt us from careful planning and wise leadership. But it does mean that we don’t take *our* plans too seriously. We dare not *trust* in our plans for success, nor can we *bend* God’s Word or our own consciences to fit what seems expedient. “The presence of Jesus demands that we formulate and reformulate our fallible plans in order to keep in step with His invincible plan. We must stay alert to unplanned, unexpected opportunities for witness and service, remaining patient and full of hope when encountering setbacks, and being sensitive to the surprising resources He gives to all His people.”

2. How would a vivid consciousness of the presence of Jesus affect the *prayer life* of the church? “Acts shows us what prayer is like when praying people recognize the presence of Jesus the Lord. It is joyful and confident...there is awe-filled fear...a preoccupation not with ourselves (our ailments, comforts, conveniences, hurt feelings) but with the great cause of the King who walks in our midst. We ask to receive from His hand whatever will make us serviceable to Him, useful for His saving purposes. We pray, not because we must, but because we may; not out of lust for His gifts, but out of love for the Giver; not to bend His will to ours, but to bend our wills to His.”
3. How would a vivid consciousness of the presence of a Jesus who “continues to do and to teach” affect *what we expect* preaching to accomplish, Sunday School classes, Bible studies, small groups, and fellowships to accomplish? How will it affect our hopes for the resolution of conflict in the church, our hopes for the fruit of sharing our faith with others, our hope for the discipling of the world’s peoples through missions? Because our King is not an aloof designer or an absentee landlord, but a living Shepherd walking among His sheep, there’s hope for change in the church beyond anything human ingenuity can invent. Our King is ultimately present and powerfully active as the Champion and the Chastener of His church. We’ll never fully experience the powerful and wonderful presence of the Lord in His church until we raise our expectations to the level of His intentions.