

June 1, 2025—“Open Hearts”

Last fall, some members of my family had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend the Eras Tour concert at Rogers Centre by Taylor Swift. My wife Becky was lucky enough to get a Ticketmaster code, and her, my daughter, and one of my boys and his girlfriend dressed up in their favourite era outfits and fully embraced the global phenomenon that this concert tour had become. As a very from-a-distance Swiftie, it was fascinating to watch her popularity grow—from the dark days of the pandemic, through the 21-month long tour from March 2023 to December 2024, when it completed in Vancouver. The whole time it made me wonder: how did this movement grow?

In today's passage in the book of Acts, this is what Luke archives when it comes to the movement of Jesus in the first century: how, exactly, did it grow and spread? And, at first glance, I'll admit, the passage seems to read more like a travel journal, simply chronicling some significant time spent by the Apostle Paul in a few of the major centres of the early Christian church. It begins at the beginning of Acts chapter 18:

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth...

This first section archives about a year-and-a-half of time that Paul spent in Corinth, which was generally quite positive. Paul met some partners named Aquilla and Priscilla. He was funded by Silas and Timothy to do ministry full-time. He was able to establish a home-based facility to preach, that converted synagogue leaders and their family. Through Paul, many Corinthians believed and were baptized. And when Jewish opponents tried to charge Paul with similar allegations that resulted in Jesus' death, God protected him by granting him favour with political authorities. It was all good!

Interestingly, it was similarly all good at his next major stop: a place called Ephesus, where he spent the next two years. Similar to Corinth, Paul was able to establish a teaching centre there, and similar to Corinth, his preaching experienced dramatic reach. As well, similar to Corinth, there were opposers—this time some Jewish teachers who sought to cast out evil spirits. But, similar to Corinth, God supported Paul and his message, this time allowing the evil spirits to attack the Jewish opponents of Paul! This, again similar to Corinth, led to mass repentance and belief in Jesus. This two-year stint in Ephesus—on top of the year-and-a-half in Corinth—read like a highlight reel of up-and-to-the right impact through Paul and his preaching.

As I studied and reflected on these passages, it actually made me wonder: what's Luke's point in archiving them? There's no real problem in these two stories. In fact, they're not even really stories per se, because they seem to completely lack any narrative tension. Paul preaches, people respond, all good, wash-rinse-repeat.

But then I remembered something that Paul himself said about this time in his life and ministry. He wrote it directly to the Corinthian church, about his time there:

I came to you (in Corinth) in weakness with great fear and trembling.

It turns out, this highlight reel of impact wasn't automatic, because Paul was anxious and fearful to preach the whole time! But early in this section, Luke records this detail:

One night (in Corinth) the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

It turns out, all this impact was because Paul was courageous enough to trust God!

Then, as you dig deeper into this section of text, you discover that, in between the summaries of Paul's ministry in Corinth and Ephesus, Luke records two additional mini-episodes that—just like the archiving of Paul's time in Corinth and Ephesus—also feel like they're summarized in parallel with each other. The first involves Paul's teammates, Aquilla and Priscilla, and a man they met early on in their time in Ephesus named Apollos. Luke briefly captures what's going on in verse 25 of chapter 18:

Apollos had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

It turns out, Apollos had already been preaching in the Ephesus area—and preaching with all kinds of courage and confidence. But as Acquilla and Priscilla heard him, they realized his message wasn't complete. It was *accurate*, but not completely *adequate*.

Basically, the text says that Apollos “only knew the baptism of John”, meaning he was acquainted with the message of John the Baptist that preceded Jesus. That message pointed to Jesus as the coming Messiah—the promised Jewish saviour sent from God—and, in preparation for Jesus' arrival, people were encouraged by John to turn from their sin and open their hearts to the forgiving and cleansing work Jesus was looking to do. So, this “baptism of John” was a message of repentance—of turning away from sin—but it lacked the follow-up of the message of Jesus, and the reality of His Risen life to empower a new and free life following Him. Thankfully, Priscilla and Aquilla were able, as Paul's teammates, to provide that updated and upgraded content to Apollos' faith, that turned his message from accurate to more fully adequate in Jesus.

The second mini-episode, again occurring early in Paul's time in Ephesus, this time involves Paul himself. And, instead of an interaction with one disciple of the teaching of John the Baptist, this time it involves a group of about a dozen of them.

But the details are almost exact to those of Apollos. These disciples had only understood the message of John as a forecasting of the coming Messiah, and, as a result, a message of repentance where they'd been encouraged to turn from their sin. But, similar to the way Priscilla and Aquilla corrected the understanding of Apollos' theology, Paul was able to correct that of these disciples of John. Except with these disciples, it wasn't just their theological understanding that changed. Acts 19:4:

Paul said (to these disciples of John), "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.

In this case, not only did Paul upgrade their understanding he enhanced their *experience*. He allowed them to not only "get" the message of Jesus, he enabled them to get the full experience, receiving of the activity of His Risen Spirit in their lives.

See, similar to Apollos, they'd understood John's good news of a coming saviour as a one-day, in the future possibility. Not appreciating that Jesus was that Saviour, that He had come, and that, through His death and resurrection, He was now alive today and actively available to empower forgiven followers of His. So, for these disciples, that *corrected* theological understanding led to a more *complete* experience of the life, power, and activity of Jesus. Their gospel wasn't just corrected; it was completed.

What's significant about these two mini-episodes—tucked in the middle of these macro summaries of a year-and-a-half in Corinth and two years in Ephesus in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul—is the way these mini-episodes served to strengthen those two eras. Apollos, whose faith and understanding was made fuller and more adequate, left Ephesus and travelled to Corinth, where he served to strengthen the base that Paul had established with the early Christian church there. And these dozen or so disciples of John, after having their corrected understanding lead to a more complete experience of Jesus' activity, became a core group of founding leaders among the church at Ephesus. These two little stories serve to complement the preliminary work that God had done through Paul in these two major centres, by serving to both strengthen and support that work with more leaders sharing the message of Jesus.

That's why, at the end of all these stories, the passage ends this way in verse 20:

***In this way the word of the Lord spread widely
and grew in power.***

This entire passage is about how the message of Jesus spread—and the fact that it spread *both* widely *and* grew in power. But, more specifically, it inventories—through these pairs of macro and micro episodes—a specific *way* in which that movement of Jesus grew. This passage accounts for *how* the Jesus' work spread and strengthened.

It spread because Paul was *courageous* enough for Jesus to support him in overcoming his fear to share it. And it strengthened because the message of Jesus—when it was shared—was shared *completely*. On the one hand, it was shared completely in its *understanding*, and on the other hand, it was shared completely in its *experience*. Sharing Jesus message courageously and completely enabled its spread.

To me, this “how-to” passage in the foundation-laying purpose that Luke initially provided it, applies in the exact same way to our lives today. **The movement of Jesus spreading today requires sharing Jesus’ message courageously and completely.**

On the one hand, Jesus’ message spreading into more hearts in our society requires ordinary people like you and me overcoming our anxiety and awkwardness to share it with the people we rub shoulders with, and trusting in Jesus’ Risen Life and Power to support us in sharing it in ways where Jesus can affect other people’s hearts.

At the same time, it requires us to share that message not just courageously, but completely. Just like in Acts 18-19, it means our message needs to be complete—we can’t just share a message of how to get to heaven when you die, or share a message that simply encourages people to stop doing bad things. We need to share the fuller, grander vision of Jesus’ redemptive work, and the ways He wants to enter in and bring His spiritual vitality into our lives and world right now, on earth as it is in heaven.

Similarly, a more complete sharing of the message of Jesus, in our day, requires more than just the content of the message. It requires that the medium-that-is-the-message of our lives speak as powerfully as our words, so people can understand and enter into the experience of following Jesus—not just the academic pursuit of Him.

This is what the Apostle Peter meant when he described sharing Jesus this way:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Sharing Jesus today requires us sharing His message courageously and completely.

I'm sure, for at least some of us, when we read about the early spread of the message and movement of Jesus in the book of Acts, the degree of miraculous and outrageous activity makes us wonder whether God still wants to work that way these days. Maybe that was then and this is now, and times are different among us today?

If that's you, I'd encourage you to pay a little closer attention to the ways in which God's working these days. A couple weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending the celebration of life of a longtime participant in our community, a man named Ian Walker. Ian first connected with us at a really dark time in his life, suffering addiction and experiencing homelessness. But, through the message of Jesus shared through people around our shelter in St. Catharines, Ian opened his heart to Jesus. Opening his heart to Jesus led to his baptism in our community. It led to him getting a handle on his addictions. And it led to him becoming an encouragement and mentor to many others.

Years later, it also led to the remarkable relational reconciliation of Ian and his son, Scott. And, as Scott opened his mind up to people around here sharing the message of Jesus with him, he opened his heart to Jesus too. And in recent months, Scott was not only baptized in our community; he now serves on our staff in our homelessness services department, allowing the work of Jesus to come full-circle.

That level of miracle story, over the course of over two decades, is no accident. It's the product of so many people—including many of you—being willing to verbally articulate the good news of Jesus to people like Ian. And, beyond saying it, it's the way you lived out a new command of love in a compelling and consistent way that drew Ian, Scott, and many others into experiencing the radical difference Jesus can still make!

Who in your life could use that kind of miracle story of the work of Jesus today?