

Church 1.0
Acts 8:1-4
“The Original Outreach”

1. In his 1906 book, “Quiet Talks on Service”, writer S.D. Gordon shares an imagined scene that took place in heaven, just after Jesus had returned from His earthly ministry.
2. Gordon writes, “...the Master is walking down the golden street one day, arm in arm with Gabriel, talking intently, earnestly. Gabriel is saying, ‘Master, you died for the whole world down there, did you not?’”
3. Jesus answers, “Yes.” Gabriel goes on a little further and asks, “And do they all know about it?” Jesus responds, “Oh, no! Only a few in Palestine know about it so far.”
4. To this Gabriel says, “Well, Master, what’s your plan? What have you done about telling the world that you died for, that you *have* died for them?”
5. Jesus then explains to Gabriel that He has asked Peter, James, and John, and a few others to make it the business of their lives to tell others, who will then tell others, who will then tell others, “...until the last man in the farthest circle has heard the story...”
6. Gabriel knows how human beings can be, and so with some hesitation, he asks, “Yes – but – suppose Peter fails. Suppose...John simply does not tell others. Suppose their descendants, their successors away off in the...twentieth century, get so busy about things...that they do not tell others – what then?”
7. The story imagines that to this question, Jesus answers, “Gabriel, I haven’t made any other plans – I’m counting on them.”ⁱ
8. The truth is that God in His infinite wisdom and sovereign ordering has chosen that the heavenly message of the gospel is to be communicated through human beings who have experienced its power, and know the truth of Jesus Christ for themselves. That is His only plan.
9. In Acts chapter 8, as we continue to study the early days of the Church, we find this plan being put into motion as God used persecution to spread out the original church.
10. Verse 4 says, “*Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*” This verse and its context, speaks to us today about the importance of reaching out to the world around us with the message of the gospel.

11. As we look at this original outreach, we find three things that our outreach should *not* be. Notice these with me. First of all:

I. OUR OUTREACH SHOULD NOT BE RESTRAINED BY OUR FEARS

1. Dickens' famous line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" might be a fitting title to the eighth chapter of Acts. The church had experienced remarkable growth and expansion, but she had also seen her first martyr – Stephen.

2. Verse 1 says, "*And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem...*" It was an exciting time to be a Christian, but it was also a dangerous time.

3. No doubt, it would have been easy for these early Christians to mute their witness for Jesus out of fear for their lives. Yet, verse 4 says, "*Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*"

4. Here the first church reminds us that whatever our fears and apprehensions may be, we must not let them keep us from sharing the gospel. These early Christians remind us of a couple of specific fears we must put aside in order to share the gospel. First of all, we must overcome the:

A. Fear of what we might endure

1. In Acts 8, we are introduced again to the figure of Saul of Tarsus, the man whom God would eventually save and use mightily in His work. However, in this chapter, he is an enemy of Christ and the church.

2. Verse 3 says, "*As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*" Listen to how one writer translates this verse. He renders it, "But Saul kept on ravaging and devastating the church, entering house after house, dragging both men and women by their feet along the street, consigning them to prison."ⁱⁱ

3. These early church members faced the very real possibility of being arrested and imprisoned, or even killed, as with Stephen, if they continued to proclaim the gospel.

4. In spite of what they might have endured, they continued to witness to the truths of the gospel, even as they were chased from their homes.

5. In our day, at least in this country, persecution of Christians is nowhere near the level that was experienced by the first church. Nevertheless, there are many Christians today who do not witness for fear of what they might endure.

6. Some fear being ridiculed or belittled for their witness. Others fear that they might lose friends or social status if they speak up for Christ. Some fear that they will hurt their careers if they try to witness.

7. The reality is that whether we suffer on a small scale, or whether our very lives are threatened, the message of the gospel is too important to restrain because we are afraid of what we might have to endure.

8. Adonirum Judson endured the heat and hardship of the Burmese mission field for 18 years without a single furlough or convert. His wife died while there, and Judson admitted that he never saw a ship sail that he did not want to jump on board and go home.

9. Judson endured in Burma, because he would always strengthen himself with these words: "Life is short. Millions of Burmese are perishing. I am almost the only person on earth who [knows] their language to communicate salvation."ⁱⁱⁱ

10. Whatever we might have to endure, it is worth it to communicate the saving message of Jesus Christ. We must put aside not only the fear of what we might endure, but notice further that these early Christians remind us that we must put aside our:

B. Fear of who we might encounter

1. Look again at our text, and notice verse 1. Because of the persecution, "*...they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.*"

2. Here are people being uprooted, and entering into to new areas, where they would encounter new people – people they had never met. Yet verse 4 tells us that as they entered these new regions, they went everywhere "preaching the word."

3. Many people do not actively and regularly share their faith because they are simply afraid of speaking to people they do not know. There is a "stranger barrier" that keeps them from confronting new people with the gospel.

4. The church in the book of Acts reminds us that new people are nonetheless needy people. Any fears we may have about talking to strangers must be set aside in order to introduce those strangers to the Savior.

5. The truth is, though we may not know them, God does. Christ died for them, and it is our obligation to ignore our nerves, overcome our fears, and tell the old story to new people.

6. Internationally known evangelist, Leighton Ford once said, "I have preached to crowds of 60,000 people and yet I still get nervous in speaking to an individual about Christ."

7. We all have fears and apprehensions about personally sharing the gospel, but whatever our fears may be; the first church reminds that our fears must not hinder our witness for Christ.

8. The soldier may fear the dangers of the battlefield, but it is only on that field, and in that fight, that the soldier can fulfill the mission he has been given.

9. Notice something else we draw from this text that should not be the case with our evangelism and outreach. *Our outreach should not be restrained by our fears*, and notice also secondly that:

II. OUR OUTREACH SHOULD NOT BE RELEGATED TO A FEW

1. Notice a couple of verses from our text. First of all, in verse 1, we read, "...and they were all [the members of the first church] scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles."

2. Now, combine that with what we read in verse 4. "*Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*" The Bible tells us that the individual believers that made up the first church were *all* involved in the spreading of the gospel.

3. Herein lies the difference from the church in the book of Acts, and the average church of our day. In our day, the work of evangelism and witnessing is relegated to the preachers, or to a handful of zealots with pockets full of gospel tracts.

4. The statistics vary somewhat, but all of them are sad and alarming. It is estimated that less than 2% of professed Christians are actively involved in the ministry of evangelism. Not surprisingly, 95% of professed Christians have never personally led another soul to Christ.^{iv}

5. The early church had minimal resources, fewer facilities, basically no technology, and they were a tiny, minority sect when they began in Jerusalem. Yet, within a few decades, they penetrated most of the world with the message of the gospel.

6. Their secret was that they understood that evangelism and outreach with the gospel should not and cannot be relegated to just a few believers. They recognized that witnessing is the work of every Christian.

7. Notice a couple of things of which they remind us when it comes to the shared responsibility of outreach. They remind us first of all that:

A. Every Christian is commanded to witness

1. These first church members were still close enough to the apostles and to their teaching to know that just before Jesus ascended back into heaven, He left this promise and command. In Acts 1:8, He said, *“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”*

2. Those words were more than a Bible verse to these early believers. These were the commands of Christ, and they understood that it applied to all who belonged to Him!

3. There is no easy way to put it. If you are not actively sharing the truth of the gospel, and witnessing for Christ, then you are a disobedient Christian.

4. You may attend all the services. You may give your tithes and offerings. You may teach a Sunday school class. You may pray every day. However, if you are not personally sharing Christ with other people, you are disobeying the Lord Jesus, and you are living in sin.

5. Imagine you are standing on a road, and just around a bend behind you a bridge has fallen. It is a dangerous situation, as drivers cannot see the danger around the corner until it is too late. Do you not have a moral obligation to warn them?

6. Now imagine that you are a deputy, placed in that same road before that bend and ordered to warn every driver that comes that way to turn around. Now, you have not only a moral obligation, but a personal obligation, because of the oath you have taken as an officer.

7. If you and I as believers know that those who do not turn from sin to Christ are going to perish, and spend eternity in a literal hell, then we have both a moral and a personal obligation. We are personally obligated because of our relationship to Christ, to tell anyone and everyone we can about the gospel.

8. These early Christians remind us of something we have forgotten. Every Christian, not just a few, is commanded to witness for Christ. We cannot relegate outreach to just a few of our members. We have all been commanded. Not only is every Christian commanded to witness, but notice also further that:

B. Every Christian is capable of witnessing

1. Look again at verse 4. It says, *“Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.”* Notice that word “preaching”. The same

word appears in verse where it says that Philip went to Samaria and “preached” Christ.

2. In the original language these do not come from the same word. The word translated “preached” in verse 5, is a word that means “to herald a message”. It is the word that describes what I am doing this morning – preaching.

3. The word translated “preaching” in verse 4, is a different word. It is translated from the Greek word that gives us our English word “evangelize”. It literally means “good message” or messenger of the good news.

4. In other words, these scattered believers were not preachers, in the vocational sense. They were just common believers that told others about the good news of Jesus Christ.

5. What this says to us is that you don’t have to be a Bible scholar, a pastor, or a preacher to tell others about Christ. All you need is to know the truths that Jesus came to this earth, died on the cross in the place of sinners, rose from the dead, and now calls all men to repent and come to Him by faith.

6. If you were to ask me to tell you about my wife, Angel, I would not need some special class or any additional training in Angelism before I would be able to share with you about her.

7. I am prepared right now to tell you about my wife, because I live with her everyday. I know her personally. Therefore, I am qualified to tell you about Angel.

8. In much the same way, each person who comes to know Christ, has the capabilities of telling others about him. Someone was once seated next to a missionary at a church dinner. The person asked, “So, is it true that you are a missionary?” The man answered, “It is true, madam, that you are not?”

9. The first church reminds us that in some way, we are all missionaries. Notice a third truth we draw from this text. Notice not only that *our outreach should not be restrained by our fears*, nor should our outreach be *relegated to a few*. Notice lastly that:

III. OUR OUTREACH SHOULD NOT BE RESTRICTED IN ITS FOCUS

1. Up until this point in Acts 8, the early church had grown within the limits of the city of Jerusalem. The converts that were being added on a daily basis had come from the population of the great city.

2. However, in Acts 1:8, as we read just a moment ago, Jesus had commanded His followers to be witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but also in, “...*all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*”

3. God used this persecution, and the dispersion of believers that it caused, to scatter the gospel witness beyond the narrow focus of the city of Jerusalem.

4. In this text, we are reminded that our responsibility to reach out with the gospel extends beyond a localized, centralized place and population. Our outreach should not be restricted in its focus. Let me explain what I mean. First of all, when it comes to our outreach:

A. It should have no perimeters

1. As the church members were pushed from their homes in Jerusalem, they were forced to enter into new regions, and now areas. As they did, verse 4 says that they, "...went every where preaching the word."

2. The gospel was not a message that was restricted only to the city of Jerusalem. It was a global message that was to be taken to the uttermost parts of the world.

3. You may never visit a foreign mission field, but the great commission nonetheless calls upon you to do your part in helping to take the gospel to new regions and distant places.

4. You have a responsibility to pray for missionaries, and for the work of the Kingdom in other parts of the world. You have a responsibility to give money to support that work and enlarge its capabilities.

5. There was a terribly sad article in the recent *Christian Index*. It explained how at the last International Mission Board meeting, the president, Jerry Rankin, tearfully led the trustees of that agency to limit the number of new missionaries that they appoint to the field.

6. The article explained that the money needed to support additional numbers of missionaries, and to replace many retiring missionaries, is simply not there.

7. The writer of the article asked this piercing question: "In an era when more God-called individuals are coming to candidate conferences to explore potential service [in missions] and more students are enrolling in SBC seminaries with the goal of being appointed as Southern Baptist missionaries, have Southern Baptist decided they don't need any more missionaries?"^v

8. The reality is that if anything, we need *more* missionaries to go out into the field. We, as individual believers, and as whole churches, must do more to see that our outreach has no perimeters!

9. Our prayers should stretch beyond our local community, and our participation should reach to the uttermost parts of the earth! Notice something else we learn

from this text about the not restricting the focus of our outreach. Notice not only that our outreach should have no perimeters, but notice also further that:

B. It should have no prejudice

1. Look again at verse 1. It tells us that these scattered believers, moved into the regions of Judaea and Samaria. One of those regions in particular caught my attention. It was the region of Samaria.

2. In the gospels we learn that there was a deep seated racism by the Jews against the Samaritans, the residents of Samaria. In John 4:9, the woman at the well explained the situation. She said, “...for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.”

3. Yet, in Acts chapter 8, we find the gospel being carried by these Jewish-Christians into the region of Samaria. The remainder of the chapter tells about a great revival that broke out in Samaria under the preaching of Philip.

4. The early church reminds us here that our responsibility to share the gospel overcomes bigotry and bias. Racism and evangelism do not work together.

5. Jesus did not die for any particular region or race, class or color. Those who share the message of the gospel are to be color blind, class blind, and culture blind.

6. We should share the gospel with those who are like us, and those with whom we have nothing in common. We must witness to upper class, the low class, and no class.

7. Business often have what they call a “target audience”. They advertise their products on particular TV channels, and radio stations, and in certain magazines that they hope will reach their particular target audience.

8. Does the church have a target audience? Absolutely! Our target audience is sinners. We don't care who they are, where they are, or what they've done. Their race, religion, region, and reputation do not matter to us.

9. We say to them all, without prejudice:

*Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore,
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and pow'r^{vi}*

1. An author, writing about this text says this: “The church was able to grow with such great acceleration because the message was so rapidly communicated. How was it communicated? It was communicated by the common disciple...”^{vii}

2. If we want to recapture the explosive growth and global impact that the church had in the book of Acts, than the outreach of the church must once again become the responsibility of the “common disciple”.

3. No longer can we allow our fears to restrain us. No longer can we hope that a handful will be able to reach the multitude. No longer can we close our eyes to the world around that is dying without Christ.

4. I pray that the Word of God will challenge every person who hears it with their responsibility in the outreach of this church and kingdom of Christ.

ⁱ Gordon, S. D., *Quiet Talks on Service*, (Fleming H. Revell, London, 6th edition), p. 107-109

ⁱⁱ Wuest, Kenneth S., *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*, (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1961), p. 290

ⁱⁱⁱ Commitment, *sermonillustrations.com*, accessed 6/11/09, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/commitment.htm>

^{iv} Evangelism Statistics, *NETBible*, accessed 6/13/09, <http://net.bible.org/illustration.php?id=2107>

^v Chitwood, Paul, IMB board chairman: ‘Change CP formula’, *The Christian Index*, June 4, 2009, p. 3

^{vi} Hart, Joseph, *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy*, pub. 1759

^{vii} Laurin, Roy L., Acts of the Apostles: Life in Action, (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985), p. 142