VCBC SLG 2022 Fall Term
The Book of Acts
Session #5: Lay-Power & Spread of Gospel beyond Jerusalem—Chapters 7-8

I. Last Lesson - Prayer

We were running out of time last Sunday and did not have time to look at the last "mark" highlighted by Luke about the 1st Christian community and that was:

They "obstinately persist" in prayers.

You have just spent a good season at SLG to study this subject, so I do not intend to say much about "prayer" itself, as it will take another 3 months to consider it.

Allow me to simply highlight how the 1st church expresses their stubbornness in making prayers an extremely important part of their communal life, gleaning from the 1st six chapters

Chapter one: **Prayer, a process of waiting and preparation**
"**[2]Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. [13]When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying… [14]They all joined together constantly in prayer**,"
I believe Pastor Brian has already addressed this first prayer meeting of the believers in detail, so I am not going to elaborate, except to say that it is more than obvious that

- they were praying for the baptism of the Holy Spirit to come and
- the Lord answered their prayers powerfully, and
- that time of praying and waiting certainly has contributed to the preparation of their boldness and wisdom in "handling" the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter two: **Prayer: the very essence of a church**
"**[42]They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer(s**)."

- As a group of brand-new believers (at least most of them should be), under the leadership of the Apostles, they have been taught to ground their new faith in Christ on prayers—something that they should emulate in discipling new believers—grounding their new lives in Christ in prayers
    - Before Pentecost, because of their lack of a living relationship to the God they prayed, the Jews took prayers more of a ritual, or as the Lord put it in Matthew 6:1 "***an act of righteousness***" the "performance" of which was believed to be able to gain righteousness before God, together with ***almsgiving*** and ***fasting***.
    - Now, it is an integral and inseparable part of their living relationship with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit not just individually, but also corporately.
- As we shall see from the rest of the Book of Acts, prayers truly make
    - who they are as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ personally, and
    - who they are as a witnessing Church of Jesus Christ.

Chapter three: **New wine in Old skin**
"**One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon**."

It appears that as long as they were not driven out of the temple and the temple still stood, the temple was still the "***House of Prayer***" for all God's people. That would be in addition to their corporate prayers offered as they gathered in homes (i.e. from house to house in small groups).

It is believed that the Jerusalem temple set time for public prayers three times a day—at 9:00 AM, 12 Noon, and 3:00 PM which was the time of this particular incident in this chapter (NIVAC, *Acts*, 138)

In principle, the Apostles should have abandoned temple worship as the priests had turned it into a "den of robbers' and they should have nothing to do with it. However, to them, it was still the "***House of Prayer***" and irrespective of whatever others, even the religious leaders had turned it into, it did not distract me to offer the right sacrifice (in this case prayer) to God.

As it turned out, the miracle so performed in the healing of the crippled bagger had generated true and genuine praise of this person being healed and that of others in the temple courts, and might have even contributed to the conversion of other priests (6:7).

Chapter four: **The power of corporate prayers**
"[23] On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. [24] When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said,

- **"you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.**
- **[25] You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?[26] The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.'**
- **[27] Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. [28] They did what your *power and will* had decided beforehand should happen.**
- **[29] Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. [30] Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."**

[31] After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

As much as Peter and John suffered persecution (for the first time)—they were imprisoned, (likely beaten) and warned, they stood their ground and reported back their experience to their "own people"—the congregation.
We can imagine that some would be quite afraid since this was the 1st time they met with such persecution, but how did they confront this 1st wave of persecution? by payers. And as they saw

their prayers answered with Peter and John being released and shared their experience, again they committed themselves in prayers which served as a model for all persecuted Christians in that:

- The God to whom they prayed is the Creator of all things—He is in total and ultimate control
- Therefor, God has already gained victory over the kings and rulers, and Christ's sufferings also as well as theirs had been decided "beforehand" by God in His word.
- And now they prayed ***not*** for avoidance of suffering, but for boldness to "speak your word" and
- For God to continue to perform signs and miracles through the name of Jesus (i.e. the continued demonstration of the power of His Name).

And the result of their prayer?

- The place was shaken
- They were filled with the Holy Spirit, and
- They spoke the word of God boldly!

I had watched a video many years ago of the result of a prayer meeting at a remote Indigenous town north of Quebec that their prayers against the enslaving evil spirits ended in the rocking of the place of worship as the Spirit filled their place of worship and ended in the repentance of many and the burning of books and CDs voluntarily by many of the youth in the community.

Yes, the power of the Holy Sprit is still alive and well, except that He awaits "Watchmen" to pray with contrite and broken spirits that are willing to cut ties with sins and evil spirits!

Chapter six: **Prayer that imparts the gift needed for ministry**
"**They presented these men (the seven deacons) to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them."** (v.6)

Commissioning prayer: Paul reminded Timothy that "**Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you**." (I Tim. 4:14)

- We often take such commissioning prayers lightly (and the same with Benediction at the end of the service), but Paul gives us spiritual insights into such prayers of commissioning in that it is not just for show, but as God is the One who chooses, He is also the One who hears our united prayer through the laying on hands and imparts the "gift" necessary to do what is being commissioned.
- And in the case in Acts 6, it is not just the gift needed to handle the food distribution, but the anointing of the Holy Spirit who gave Stephen boldness and power to preach and to suffer, and Philip to bring the gospel to Samaria.

Private and Public Prayers:

In summary, we see in these early chapters of Acts that the 1st believers had learned to use prayers as a means:

- To worship and praise God
- to activate the power of the Holy Spirit

- to prepare themselves to do the work of the Lord
- to understand the will of God
- to gather strength to preach and boldness to suffer, and
- to invoke the name of Jesus in the demonstration of His power, and in their case, the performance of miracles and signs.

While private prayers are a given and do not appear to be the emphasis of Luke's narrative in the first six chapters, the Holy Spirit definitely inspires Luke to give us an important emphasis on public prayers—Prayer truly defines the 1st Church.

What about us today?
Is our church defined by our prayer-life?

Well, it has, whether a church is filled with the Holy Spirit or a church is in slumber—it has been defined by her prayer-life.

"We work, we work, if we pray, God works!"

Conclusion:

But praise God, I see an awakening of church's prayer-life in Hong Kong, due likely to an increased sense of potential loss of freedom. One sister who has asked for my prayers over the last year as her husband is struggling with cancer treatments. As God has seen fit to answer our prayers in rather miraculous fashion time after time, she was prepared to give a public testimony and thank the congregation for their tireless prayer support, she sent me an audio recording of her testimony at the church "Prayer Meeting" and I discovered that this prayer meeting was attended by more than 100 people which was the norm every week.

Do not underestimate the importance and power of corporate prayers, because the Lord does not promise in vain that "**[19]Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. [20] *For* where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them**." (Matthew 18: 19-20)

Session #5: Lay-Power & Spread of Gospel beyond Jerusalem—Chapters 7-8

Upon finishing the reading of the 1st 6 chapters, we are about to leave Jerusalem geographically and enter into Samaria, Judea and finally to Rome (ch.28)—likely symbolizing "the ends of the earth" with which most commentators are in agreement.

Luke makes it very clear in 8:1 that this movement away from Jerusalem as commanded by the Lord in 1:8 was made possible or at least triggered by the outbreak of a "great persecution" and he chooses to detail in chapter 7 how this "great persecution" had come about.

Chapter 7**: The martyrdom of Stephen**

It was through the appointment of the seven deacons all with Greek names that we are introduced to Stephen. Once we learn that Stephen was acting more than just a deacon and was being used by God just as He did the Apostles performing wonders and signs, we find Stephen preaching the

gospel to the Grecian Jews in Jerusalem who were no match of his wisdom. So, these Grecian Jews were able to convince the religious authority to seize Stephen charging him on two counts

(1) speaking against the holy place, i.e. the temple
    - more particularly, for saying "**this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the place**" (6:14a)

(2) and speaking against the Law of Moses
    - more particularly, "**will change the customs Moses handed down to us**." (6: 14b)

While we would not go through the entire "defense" by Stephen which ended in his martyrdom, we cannot help but ask the questions:

- *Why would Luke bother to record such a lengthy sermon of Stephen?*
- *If this serves as a bridge to the movement of the gospel beyond Jerusalem, wouldn't a summary account suffice? And,*
- *If you read the sermon carefully, it was not much of a defense, because Stephen never really addressed the two counts of charges.*

Scholars have been debating the answers to the above questions for a long time, but most seem to agree that Luke reports it in detail to serve as a model of apologetics to convince Jews or even Judaizing Christians by demonstrating the view that there is a

*"**Relation between Christianity and Judaism. They share a common origin in the call of Abraham, in God's promise to him, and in the fulfillment of the promise in the living oracles given to Moses; but Christianity belongs to that critical prophetic strand of Judaism which refused to substitute institutions for the word of God, and claims that the final conflict between the two came to a head in the story of Jesus**."* (ICC, *Acts,* 340)

In addition, if you care to analyse Stephen sermons, you can see a rather clear pattern of emphases which include the following themes

- "The presence of God is not restricted to any one land or to any material building" (NICNT, *Acts*, 130)—so Stephen highlighted some of the most important of God's revelation to the revered patriarchs;
- But more than that, throughout the history of Israel, the major revelations and actions by God took place outside of the Promised Land of Israel
    - God called Abraham in the land of Mesopotamia
    - God used Joseph to save their patriarchs in Egypt
    - God spoke to Moses in the burning bush in the land of Midian
        - Rebuking their exclusive claim to God's favor and self-righteousness
- Their betrayal, stiff-neckedness and rejection of God permeated through their history
    - The betrayal of Joseph by the patriarchs, selling him into Egypt
    - The rejection of Moses not only by the one who wronged his neighbor in Egypt, but by all Israel as they built a golden calf in the desert
    - This pattern continues even now as they reject Jesus, "***the prophet***" foretold by Moses

Stephen's lengthy message concludes with these words

"**51 You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."** (7: 51-53)

In answer to the charges:

- Stephen did not address the destruction of the temple. But clearly told them that the temple was really of no import, because "**As the prophet says:' Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?' says the Lord. 'Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'"** (Acts 7: 48-50, quoting from Isa. 66: 1-2)
- And the law is of no benefit to them as they "have not obeyed it" and in fact their hearts "**are still uncircumcised."**

I have not tried it yet, but wonder if we invite an Orthodox Jew to read this passage, what might his reaction be? Well, we know how the Jews who heard Stephen's message reacted:
"**54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.** "
55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."
57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."

Martyrdom**: Following Christ's footsteps**
Luke appears to purposely highlight that Stephen suffered in the footstep of Christ in that

- They dragged him ***out of the city*** to stone him, and Hebrews 13: 11-12 says this about Jesus' death: "**The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so, Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood**."
- Stephen cried out, **"Lord, do not hold this sin against them"** just as Jesus also cried out**, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** (Luke 23:34), and
- Before Stephen died, he prayer, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"** just as Jesus also prayed**, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."** (Luke 23:46)

Chapter 8—**Lay-Power Unleashed**

" **On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and**

mourned deeply for him. [3] But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

[4] Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. [5] Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. [6] When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. [7] For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. [8] So there was great joy in that city."

This is undoubtedly a pivotal passage in the Book of Acts, as it describes the event that ushers the gospel to spread beyond Jerusalem as the Lord commanded His disciples to do in Acts 1:8. But there are at least two important questions we need to address about this pivotal movement of the gospel:

(1) Who were the ones who took the gospel to the other parts of Judea and into Samaria?

Q. Were the 12 Apostles? (who were obviously the key disciples to whom this Great Commission was addressed at the time)

A. As it turned out, the answer is **NO.** 8:1 makes it very clear the Apostles chose to stay in Jerusalem, and it was "**all except the Apostles"** who were scattered throughout out Judea and Samaria, and as they were scattered, they preached the gospel "**wherever**" they went. (v.4)

While v.1 describes Judea and Samaria in general, what we learn in chapter 4 (about the spread of the gospel in Samaria) is in fact also true all the way up to Syrian Antioch (ch.11) which did not happen *after* Samaria, but at the same time. It is also very clear that whether in Samaria or in Syria, it was the lay-believers (not the Apostles or the clergy, if you like) who were accomplishing the command of the Great Commission at this stage

- Spreading the gospel beyond the geographical boundary of Jerusalem, and
- Carrying the gospel beyond the Jews, but to the Samaritans (half Jews) and eventually Gentiles (which, in Greek, is the same word translated as "nations" in Matthew 28:19)

And, throughout the history of Christendom, this is the pattern how the gospel is being spread most effectively to the ends of the earth

- You heard of the Cambridge Seven and also Eric Liddell from the famous book and movie, the *Chariot of Fire*—these were no pastors or clergy by training but lay people who were champions of the gospel even before they served as missionaries to China.
- And most of us are witnesses, though at a distance, of how, after the Communist takeover of China in 1949, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, with no trained clergy actively serving the church, the Christian population has grown from a mere 1 million, to what some believe to be above 100 million today—yes, it is a demonstration of the power of the Gospel, but its spread has been made possible by "lay-power".

Indeed, the accomplishing of the Great Commission depends to a significant degree on the ***lay believers' understanding and commitment*** that the Great Commission is their charge, their responsibility! But we need to ask another question as this point:

Q. How then could the lay believers accomplish the Great Commission so effectively?
A. Well, 8:4 has already pointed out that, "**Those who had been scattered preached the word whenever they went"**; but 11:19 adds that "**Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cypress, Cyrene and Antioch, telling the message only to the Jews**."

In other words, those who fled persecution understood that as much as they were fleeing for their safety, first and foremost as disciples who inherited the charge of the Great Commission, they were in fact, "***Gospel Immigrants***"!

You have to understand that Jews, in general, are very shrewd and successful businessmen

- Even during their exile to Babylon, secular history tells us that, while in exile, the Jews established in first ever "bank" in the world
- That's how successful they were, even as exiles.

Now, as the first Christians in history, they—all Jewish Christians—fled Jerusalem

- They could have fled like all refugees in history
    - And as some landed in Samaria which was not too far away from the land of Judea
        - In this place of mixed ethnic race—half Jews,
    - Some landed in Syrian Antioch, which was quite far away from Jerusalem
        - And in fact, was the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire then, after Rome itself and Alexandria in Egypt, with about 500,000 people—a very prosperous city located at one of the main junctures of the Silk Road
- They naturally needed to survive, care for their families, build their careers like any other refugees or immigrants
    - But every single one of these believers (new believers for the most part)
    - Saw themselves see first and foremost "***gospel immigrants***"—**wherever** they went!

As the return of the Lord draws near, very near indeed, in order that "**this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come**" (Matthew 24:14), the ***same understanding and commitment*** by the lay believers is essential!

The 2nd question about this pivotal movement of the gospel beyond Jerusalem that I said we need to ask is:

(2) Why did the 12 Apostles choose to stay put in Jerusalem?

To answer this question, I have one hypothesis and one factual response that I would like you to consider.

(1) The Slowness of the Apostles:

When we come to the end of chapter seven, it is safe to assume that there would scarcely be one person in Jerusalem who had not heard of the gospel. Yes, most had chosen not to believe Jesus as the Messiah Savior, the Son of God, but none could claim that they had never heard of Jesus

and His claim, or that He had died on the cross and many claimed that they saw the resurrected Jesus.

So, in terms of spreading the gospel, Jerusalem had been saturated, and so was it not time for the Apostles to move on? except that as a pastor, I could understand their hesitation on two counts

- First, if they left, it appeared to indicate that they were afraid of suffering and for Peter, in particular, he was not going to betray his Master again by fleeing. So, the desire not to flee appeared to have trumped the understanding of the movement of the hand of God.
- Also, using Peter again as an example, he was charged to "feed" Jesus' lambs (three times indeed in John 21), except that if "all" (and mostly like meant the bulk) of the disciples had left Jerusalem, it really did not take all 12 Apostles to stay to feed the flock—there were not too many left to be fed!

[In any case this is also an important lesson for us to learn in that

- Evangelism and discipleship are not two distinct and separate ministries in a church
- Evangelism is in fact, an important component in discipleship training and there is no such thing as a good time for a believer to be ready for evangelism. Once we truly come to Christ, we are ready, and we are meant to witness for Christ.]

(2) The Stubbornness of the Apostles:

That's my hypothesis about why they might have chosen to stay put in Jerusalem, but I am afraid there is one factual reason that has led them not to leave Jerusalem and that has much to do with their understanding of the Kingdom of God.

Back in the first chapter, we have read Luke's description of that 40 days of Spiritual Retreat as after this Resurrection, the Lord "**appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the Kingdom of God**." (Acts 1:3)

However, toward the end of this Spiritual Retreat, they asked a really surprising question, "**Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?**' (Acts 1:6)

All the time, Jesus talked about the ***Kingdom of God***; all the time, the Apostles were thinking about the ***Kingdom of Israel***!

- In other words, to them the gospel is all about Israel, and
- As much as the "nations" or "Gentiles" have been mentioned by Jesus over and over again, it never appeared to them that non-Jews were really part of the Kingdom of God, perhaps, like what had happened to the proselytes to Judaism, they might join in to worship Yahweh, but only in the Gentile Court, not really being counted as the People of God!
- In other words, the gospel, to them, is primarily a Jewish Gospel!

And sure, there were few people in Jerusalem that had not heard of the gospel, but as long as the temple was there, there would still be hundreds of thousands of Jews who made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem each year to attend the various festivals, and as long as we were here in Jerusalem, we would still be faithful to the charge of the Great Commission (and the word "to go" perhaps, is more metaphorical, not to be taken too literally!)

The thought of the gospel being only a Jewish Gospel is also reflected by those lay-believers who fled to "**Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch telling the message only to the Jews**" (Acts 11:19)

But, the first breakthrough same through Philip, one of the seven deacons, who fled and "**went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there**" (Acts 8:5) and this resulted in many who believed and were baptised, "both men and women".

Interestingly, "**When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them**." (Acts 8: 14)

From what happened in subsequent chapters, I believe that they had sent the two Head Apostles to Samaria, not so much to disciple the new believers, but to check out if it was a fact that even Samaritans—those half-Jews, half-Gentile people—could be saved just as they were.

We know that as a rule, anyone who truly believe in Jesus would have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit already—like the crowd in the household of Cornelius, the Centurion (Chapter 10). Peter had yet to baptize them, but "**the Holy Spirit came on all who head the message**" (Acts 10:44).

But it was quite different in the case of these Samaritan believers: they had accepted the message and were even baptized, and yet, the Holy Spirt chose not to come upon them, and waited till the arrival of Pete and John and when "**Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.**" (Acts 8:17)

Why did the Holy Spirit make an exception in this case? Well,

- if the Holy Spirit came upon them as they believed and were baptized (likely by Philip), and the evidence of the coming upon them of the Holy Spirit (as evidenced by the early part of the Book of Acts 8:46) appeared to be the "speaking in tongues" at that very moment.
- Then, when John and Peter came to check them out, which would be weeks or months afterwards, they would likely have stopped speaking in tongues. But now, upon their laying of hands on them, the evidence of the Holy Spirit coming upon them (as I said, obviously by the speaking in tongues) made it unmistakable, and undeniable—even these Samaritans, not pure-bred Jews were saved as full-fletched people of God's kingdom.

Since I mentioned about the conversion of the household of Cornelius in chapter 11, it is note-worthy that, even with the unmistakable conversion of these Samaritans, Peter (and for that matters the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem) were still not convinced that Gentile Christians are full-fletch children of God as Jewish Christians (the Samaritans at least were half-Jews).

So, we read of Peter's reluctance to enter the household of Cornelius (if not for the vision of unclean food given to him) in chapter 10, and even upon seeing the Holy Spirit descend upon these Gentile believers and heard them speaking in tongues, Peter made a remark, "**Can anyone keep these people form being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as they we have?**" (10:47).

This remark is pretty telling. It means that Peter, as the presentative of Jewish believers at the time, did doubt if Gentiles could be saved just as they have been! In fact, when Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was instantly challenged by the "circumcised believers" for what he did in Cornelius' household, and he had to defend his action by retelling the full story, from seeing the vision to the coming on of the Holy Spirit, and ended his defense with these words, "**So, if God gave them the same gift as He gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God**?" (Acts 11:17)

Indeed, the Apostles were too slow to fully understand the fullness of the gospel that extends to all mankind, beyond geographical and ethnic boundaries, as they were enslaved by the nationalistic and ethnical pride and bias!

As they dragged their feet and hesitated, the Holy Spirit had to act as there was no time to waste—people needed the gospel!

The desperate need for the gospel has not changed today, and perhaps, because the return of the Lord is imminent, the need is far greater today, and I believe, the Holy Spirit does not have time to waste either.