

ACTS OF HEAVEN

ACTS OF HEAVEN: EKKLESIA

Introduction

Aloha everyone! I'm Mark, and I'd like to welcome you to our service. Today we are going to kickoff a brand new mini-series called, *Acts of Heaven* where we will be learning about the reality of heaven in the local Church. When you look at the state of the Church in the world today, would you say we are living in the Golden Age of the Church?

Imagine being a fan of the Boston Celtics in the late 1950's through 60s. Led by Coach Red Auerbach and center Bill Russell, the Celtics won an unlikely 11 championships in 13 years. That was undeniably the golden age of the Celtics.

As a kid it was the Chicago Bulls in the 90s. (Yes kids, Pastor Mark was born in the late 1900's). Under the direction of Coach Phil Jackson and superstar Michael Jordan, the Bulls won six NBA Championships. "If I could be like Mike!" What a time to be alive!

In the world of football no one can deny the dynasty of the New England Patriots. Bill Belichick and Tom Brady led the team to 10 trips to the Super Bowl as well as many AFC championships.

Some teams have reigned in a number of different eras making it hard to determine their golden age. When was the golden age of the Lakers? Was it the 1972 team led by Wilt Chamberlain and Jerry West? How about the Lakers of the 80s led by Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul Jabbar? Then there was the Phil Jackson era with Kobe and Shaq.

When would you say was the golden age of the Church? It's easier when talking about sports because the measurements of success are clear – points scored, championships won, etc. But how do we measure the success of the Church in any given era? There were definitely several dark periods where we were at an all-time low (Crusades, Inquisitions, endorsement of slavery). But when were we at our best? Like the Lakers, maybe there are several eras we could point to (The Reformation, the Great Awakening, the Azusa Street Revival, the Jesus Revolution).

OG DISCUSSION QUESTION: *When would you say was the Golden Age of the Church? What metrics should we use to measure the success of the Church?*

The Church of Acts

In the minds of many Christians, the golden age of the Church was at its inception. We read about this in the book of Acts. At Pentecost Peter delivered a message to onlookers,

"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day," (Acts 2:41 NIV).

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⁴² "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved," (Acts 2:42-47 NIV).

Thousands believed and were baptized in a single day. Everyone was in awe of the many signs and wonders performed by the Apostles. There was supernatural generosity. The believers met daily and God added to their numbers daily. They turned the world upside down. It's almost hard to recognize this as 'Church' according to today's standards. I once heard Francis Chan say, "Imagine you were stranded on a deserted island and you discovered a copy of the New Testament. And imagine you had no previous knowledge of Christianity or the Church. And you read about the Church of Acts, the Apostles, and the impact they had. You read about how they lived and performed miraculous signs and wonders. Then one day you were rescued and came to America and visited a local Church. Be honest, would you say to yourself, 'This is exactly what I imagined Church would be like based on what I read!'"

OG DISCUSSION QUESTION: *In what ways do you think our Modern Western Church is different from the Church of Acts? In what ways are we similar?*

Unrecognizable

I think if many of us are honest, the Church of Acts seems almost unrecognizable to our own personal Church experience. Why is that? How have we come so far from what God originally intended?

Pastor Bill Johnson from Bethel Church tells the story of a Pastor who wanted to help with the building of his Church's new sanctuary. (The way things are going with our property in Mauka, we may find ourselves in the same boat!) This Pastor had none of the construction skills needed but was willing to do any job he was given.

So the contractor assigned him to cut 100 2x4 boards, into 6-foot lengths. Doing this would save the carpenters time when they showed up for work the next day.

The Pastor carefully measured the first board to the exact length and cut it with precision. But instead of using his tape measure to determine where he would cut the second board, he laid the first board on top of the second one, made his mark and cut. He then took the newly cut second board and laid it on the third board, drew his line and cut. He continued measuring like this until all 100 boards were cut.

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Having no construction experience, the Pastor did not know that using a previously cut board as the measurement for the next length would result in the cut mark on the new board being about 1/8 inch beyond where it should be. That extra length wasn't so bad when the Pastor cut the second board. But after using this method for every subsequent measurement, the last board was well over 7 feet long.

In the end, the work was useless to the builder. The next morning the carpenters had to recut the boards the Pastor had worked so hard on the night before.

Pastor Bill goes on to say that ministry is often done the same way. As long as we measure our lives and service by the previous generation, we are able to consider ourselves Biblically sound and successful. But when we go back to the original standard set 2,000 years ago, we find quite a difference between what Jesus started and now.

The Standard is Heaven

So what was the original standard Jesus set? We've been meditating on it all year.

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be Your Name,

¹⁰ Your Kingdom come,

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven," (Matthew 6:9-10 NIV).

If we simply measure ourselves to the recent standards of Church ministry, we might be tempted to think we're doing pretty well. After all, we have a decent sized congregation, a relatively nice building to gather in, and our finances are always in the black. Mission accomplished right? But what was the standard of success for the early Church? It was to 'Heaven-ize' the world! Tell your neighbor, "You're here to 'Heaven-ize' the world!"

Ekklesia

So if the purpose of the Church is to 'Heaven-ize' the world what is our strategy? For something so critical I imagine Jesus taught His disciples at length about Church strategy, Church leadership, Church budget, and so forth. Yet in the entire body of His teachings, Jesus only speaks about the Church twice!

But what He says about His Church, in particular, the word He uses for 'Church' tells us a lot about how it was meant to function. The first of the only two verses where Jesus mentions the Church is found famously in Matthew 16,

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it," (Matthew 16:18 NIV).

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As Jesus prepares to establish His Church, He must first decide what to call it. He could have said, "On this rock I will build my club." Or, "On this rock I will build my religion." Astonishingly, He also doesn't say, "On this rock I will build my synagogue." Or, "On this rock I will build my temple." Those would have been very familiar concepts to His Jewish disciples.

Instead, Jesus went with another word His followers would have been familiar with, but not in the way you might think. He said, "On this rock I will build my Church." Ok, well He didn't say 'Church', that's our English translation. He said,

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Ekklēsia, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it," (Matthew 16:18 NIV).

The reason this was an interesting choice was because, whereas the synagogue or temple were spiritual places of worship, Ekklēsia was a secular concept. How many of us know Jesus wasn't merely content with safe spiritual gatherings but His heart was for that which had yet to be redeemed.

Ekklēsia was a concept created by the Greeks and later adopted by the Romans. It referred to a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly.

This is why the Ekklēsia were also known as the 'Called out ones'. In the Roman Empire, these citizens, or called out ones, were deputized by the emperor to help administer the policies of Rome. The role of these citizens was to ensure that the policies and decrees of Rome were enacted and enforced throughout the region of their jurisdiction.

We read about this in Acts 19 when the city of Ephesus is thrown into an uproar over Paul and the believers. The city clerk has to intervene and says,

"If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly [Ekklēsia]," (Acts 19:39 NIV).

This 'assembly' ensured that the policies and decrees of Rome were enacted and enforced throughout the region of their jurisdiction. In other words, when Rome conquered an enemy region or territory, they would establish an Ekklēsia in that region to essentially 'Roman-ize' that territory. They wouldn't stop until that conquered enemy territory thought, spoke, believed, and lived like every other territory of Rome.

Franchise Owner

If you wanted to become a franchise owner of a McDonald's or Starbucks there would be certain guidelines you'd have to adhere to. You'd have to uphold a certain standard of service, train your employees the McDonald's way, and make sure your menu served all of the classic items. It doesn't matter if you go to a McDonald's in Hawaii, Japan, or Argentina. Every Mc-

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Donald's is going to look and feel a certain way, have the big golden arches, and sell "Biggumakku". Sure, there might be a few slight variations depending on the region (I'm sure the McDonald's in Montana doesn't sell saimin and spam and rice). But essentially every McDonald's is a representation of the flagship store.

The same is true for the Church. You may have some regional differences in style (some Churches might have a hula ministry while others have a line-dancing ministry). But essentially every Church is supposed to be a representation of the flagship store. What is the flagship of the Church? It's heaven.

"They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: "Be sure that you make everything according to the pattern I have shown you here on the mountain,"
(Hebrews 8:5 NLT).

We don't have the liberty to do and say whatever we want to. We have to represent the founder! We have to do and say what the Father tells us to. We are a representation of heaven on earth. When people encounter the Church, their first impression shouldn't be, "This is a well-run operation, or this is a slick production!" They should say, "This Church feels like heaven! I feel a love and unity unlike anything the world can offer and the best part is that God showed up!"

Golden Age of the Church

Jesus could have chosen any word for the movement He was starting. He could've said temple or even religion. Instead, He chose a different word they were familiar with – Ekklēsia (The called-out ones). Any by choosing this word, the message was clear. Jesus was saying, "I am calling you out of this fallen world to be My called-out ones. I am deputizing you with the authority of heaven to cast out unclean spirits, to heal diseases of every kind and to enact the will of My Kingdom in this world. Take heart because I have overcome the world and all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me. Now I am establishing My Ekklēsia (My Church) to heaven-ize this world until the day of my return. Until all live like a citizen of heaven.

The Church of Acts was not a Sunday Spiritual gathering. It was a world-changing force. They saw their mission as ushering in God's Kingdom to earth (Every home, every business, every city, and every nation). Within a couple of centuries they had turned the world upside down and even the Romans acknowledged Jesus as the true King.

I believe the Church is entering into another Golden Age. We are not contending for God to repeat what He did in a past era but to do a new work in our day. And we are seeing God move. We are experiencing another outpouring of activation in His Church. It's bigger than a Sunday expression. It's bigger than any one congregation. It's about heaven-izing the whole world!