

# Waking the Sleeping Giant - 1

## *Introduction*

This is the first sermon in a new teaching series in which we will work our way through the fifth book in the New Testament: *The Acts of the Apostles*. I acknowledge that 'Waking the Sleeping Giant' may seem like a provocative title, but I believe it is very appropriate at this point in our shared journey.

The 'giant' I refer to is the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a giant, because when we read the New Testament and gain an accurate understanding of what the Church really is and learn about the plan and purpose of God in establishing the Church, then we should regard the Church as the most significant, the most powerful and the most influential reality in the world. **From God's perspective, the Church is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the Church.**

The Church which we discover and encounter in the New Testament is not only established by the omnipotent Creator of the universe, but it's also empowered by Him on a daily basis through His Spirit, to be the light in a dark world. The Church was created to have a global impact - to touch every heart and life on this planet. That is the Church we are introduced to in the New Testament, but when we look around us today in our nation, we realise that the modern Church barely resembles the New Testament Church in its structure, methods, priorities, attitude and certainly its impact on the world.

Hence the title: *Waking the Sleeping Giant*. For all intents and purposes, the Church we see in the New Testament fell asleep at some point between Pentecost and today. We are still the same Church theologically speaking - for there is only one - and yet our presence and influence in society is at such a low ebb that it could be argued the Church is sound asleep.

It doesn't seem that long ago in this nation where political and social leaders in our society would approach the Church for an opinion on matters which impacted communities in a significant way. Not only do they not approach us anymore - we have to almost knock down doors to be seen or heard, and if we are given a hearing, very little respect is given to our position for we are now regarded as just another minority group in the society wanting to push our own agenda.

So, what happened? Why are the custodians of the best news any human being could ever hear, largely ignored, marginalised and treated like a joke? Why do those who are indwelt by the One Who created this entire universe seem so powerless against worldly leaders who possess no real power?

How do we wake up the sleeping giant? How do we encourage or initiate a re-birth of the true Church? In answer to those questions, I want to say that first and foremost we need sound teaching. We need to go back and re-discover the truth of our Christian heritage. We need to put our denominational traditions, our environmental conditioning, our personal worldview and perspective aside, and take a fresh look at the Church which Jesus birthed and promised to build.

Most of the New Testament will show us what that Church was like in those early days, but the Book of Acts is the best place to start if we want to put ourselves back at the birthplace of the Church. The sleeping giant will only wake up, rise up and begin to impact this nation when you and I get a firm grasp on what the Church really is at its core and what God's plan and purpose is for His people.

At the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, He gave us what we call *The Great Commission*. He told us to go into the world and make disciples, teaching them the truth and ushering them into the glory of the Kingdom rule and reign of Jesus Christ. Immediately following that *Great Commission*, we have all the information we need to be able to fulfil that calling. The book of Acts contains everything we require to embrace the whole plan and purpose of God for the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is one of the most exciting and helpful books in the Bible. However, it is also one of the most confronting and, at times, one of the most controversial books in all of Scripture. It certainly pulls no punches when it comes to power encounters with the supernatural realm and the day-to-day practical ministry of the Holy Spirit, whilst challenging us on every page to get out of our fortress and into the darkness of this world with the life-changing message of the gospel.

So, under the banner of *Waking the Sleeping Giant*, let's begin this thorough examination of what I believe to be the most relevant and most important part of Scripture for the Christian Church as we seek to understand the role of the Church in our broken world in the 21st century.

We will move through this slowly so as to allow the Holy Spirit some time to birth in us a life-changing, Church-renewing, society-transforming revelation of Christianity at its very best - Christianity as it was always meant to be. Pre-conceptions may be confronted. Traditions may be threatened. Theology may be challenged - but I believe lives and ministries, and indeed the whole Church, will be transformed, empowered and released in the process. I won't be preaching on every verse in the book of Acts, but I will be touching on all the main sections so that we gain a deep and broad understanding of why the Holy Spirit inspired Dr Luke to write this, his second work and why it needed to be in the Bible.

I firmly believe that the majority of Christians in this nation are neither satisfied with nor completely fulfilled by their Church involvement. A growing number of them are actually fed up with 'playing Church.' They are sick of the political games, factional tensions and the divisions which dominate so much of the Church. They're tired of just coming to services week in and week out while someone up front just turns the handle a few more times, cranking out another service, another sermon, another fix-it-all conference, another evangelistic rally, another small group meeting ... and the list goes on.

There are thousands of people sitting in services each week in this nation who desperately, deep in their souls, want to get to the end of the day, the week, the end of their life and say: *'The Lord has indeed won this battle. Evil has been pushed back. The Church that Jesus is building is alive! The kingdom of God is advancing, and I have had the privilege to see it, taste it and be part of it.'*

They want some action. They want to see a Church that has the motivation and the power to practise what it preaches. They want a Church that can stand up and be counted in society. They want it to be the norm where any person can walk into a worship service and actually encounter the living God Whom we worship. They don't want to be spectators anymore. They want to get onto the field and join the team and be participants in what God is doing across the world! When we read the New Testament that's not much to ask - in fact, that's normal, everyday Church life as God intended.

Well, my friends if you are one of those people, then I believe nothing could help you more in seeing the fulfilment of those desires than for us to study and understand the book of Acts and have the courage to apply what we learn. Peter Wagner once called the book of Acts: *God's Training Manual for the Church* - a growing number of Christian commentators and scholars in recent years have been brave enough to agree with him. Seeing what worked so well 2,000 years ago will directly affect our service to God and our impact on the world today.

A serious study of the book of Acts will bring a fresh and life-changing revelation of the nature, plan and purpose of God for us, the Church. Now there are thousands of commentaries written on the Book of Acts. I have at least a ten of the best ones on my bookshelf. But this teaching series will not come from commentaries, for I believe a practical, hands-on study of the book of Acts is what is so desperately needed in a Church that has more Biblical knowledge and collective wisdom than at any point in history - yet the lost are still lost!

History is vitally important and, in some respects, knowing where we've been, can inform and assist us in knowing where to head in the future. However, I am not as interested in the past as I am in the present and the future. Yesterday has gone, we have no control over it, we cannot change what happened before today. We should certainly learn from the past, but our focus and energy should be directed to the present and the future.

So, I do not want us to study the book of Acts as an historical document, even though it is certainly that. I want us to study the book of Acts in search of the heart of God; the universal plan and purpose of God; the principles of Church life that transcend all barriers of time, language and culture. If there is universal truth and some practical guidelines in this book which still hold true for the Church today, then I want us to discover them. I want us to spend as much time as we need, mining the gems of wisdom locked within these pages; gems which are intensely practical in helping us fulfil the important assignment we have all been given.

What is that assignment? Quite simply, we are called to fulfil the great commission; to transform this city and this nation into disciples of Jesus Christ. So, I desire to present the truths of this book in a down-to-earth, practical manner so that each of us can apply it to our lives and our ministry.

One of my deepest fears as a Bible teacher and communicator is boring my listeners with complicated, technical material, albeit accurate, that no one really cares about. I want us to come to this text with a freshness and a desire to know how this book impacts the Church today and tomorrow. As much as I respect the work of Biblical commentators, any commentary on the Book of Acts that is more than 15 years old is outdated in its application. It may still be very accurate theologically as the writer pursues the nature of God and the purpose of the Church for all time. But when it comes to saying what all that means for today's Church, it begins to fall down because, in case you haven't noticed, the Church and the world are not the same as they were in 1950, 1960 or 1970!

I want us to examine the book of Acts through a 21st century lense. I want us to discover the precious gems that have value in our day and our culture and are relevant to the Church as we experience it today. As we journey through the book of Acts there will be many issues and principles that surface and I want us to take the time to address them all if they are relevant to us today.

However, there are two particular issues which have been the subject of more sermons, books, study and application over the last few decades than could previously be imagined. They are the issues of power ministry and missiology. By 'power ministry' I refer to the overt supernatural phenomena of healing, deliverance, spiritual warfare, prophecy etc. This has often been referred to as the charismatic dimension of ministry. This theme of power ministry begins with the very words of Jesus Himself:

**Acts 1:8** *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

That power is then observed in the ministry of the Church on every page that follows. By 'missiology' I refer to the mission of Christ and the purpose of the Church. Again, Acts 1:8 sets the scene. It does not say you will receive power from the Holy Spirit for the sake of having power. No, that power is given for a purpose. The word *power* literally just means 'the ability to do.' The ability to do what? To be witnesses to Jesus throughout the whole world. We then read on from chapter one and see how the mission of Christ impacts the world around us.

One Biblical scholar has stated that we have learnt more about power ministries and missiology in this current generation than in all the previous generations combined. A passion for seeing people come to Christ is no longer confined to missionary societies ... the whole Church is starting to realise that bringing this world to Christ is not a particular ministry of the Church it is THE ministry of the Church and all other ministries must feed into that mission and purpose.

A desire to know the reality and the power of the Holy Spirit within us and to move in that power and see God perform miracles in and through us is no longer confined to the Pentecostal arm of the Church. Hundreds of thousands of Christians across the world have reconnected with the same Holy Spirit Who gave birth to the Church on the day of Pentecost and Who breathed life and power into the followers of Christ as they impacted the whole world with the gospel.

So why is the book of Acts in the Bible? Well, over half the New Testament (56%) is dedicated to explaining the origins and growth of the Christian faith (i.e., the Gospels and Acts). Another 38% deals with the life of existing Christians (i.e., the Epistles). Then the book of Revelation forms the remaining 6%. This shows us that the primary emphasis of the New Testament is directed towards understanding why and how unbelievers can become believers. Communicating the good news of Jesus Christ to the lost is the major theme of the New Testament. The Gospels and Acts are designed to inform us how that task was fulfilled in the past and, in most cases, how it should still be happening today.

The four Gospels record the beginnings of Christianity. Jesus called twelve disciples to Himself at the start of His earthly ministry. This group soon grew to 70 (Luke 10). By the time we get to Acts, 120 are meeting in the upper room following Jesus' ascension to heaven. We later read in 1 Corinthians 15 that 500 believers saw the risen Christ at once - a number that could have been over and above the 120, thereby giving a possible total of 620. Now some may wonder why anyone would consider this to be remarkable growth. Well, I know of very few Church planters in this nation who have started with no one and seen their Church grow to 620 in three years. In fact, statistics show that less than 3% of Churches across the western world ever grow past 500, let alone in only three years.

We know the writer of *The Acts of the Apostles* is Luke, the one Paul calls the 'beloved physician' and this is the second volume in Luke's two volume series on the origins and expansion of Christianity. The Gospel of Luke tells us what Jesus did and the Book of Acts tells us what He expects His followers to do. Luke was dedicated to spreading the Gospel to the unreached peoples of the world. Luke is, in fact, the only writer in the New Testament (or the whole Bible for that matter) who was not a Jew.

One of the reasons the book of Acts is such a practical book, although written by a well-educated academic scholar, is that Luke was also a practician. He was a field missionary. He got his hands dirty in the real world of ministry. As we'll see later on in our study, Luke writes several sections of this book in the first person ("we". .) indicating that he drew insights from His own experience as he participated in Paul's missionary activities. With an author possessing the practical, academic and spiritual qualifications of Luke, it is therefore no surprise that in the Acts of the Apostles, we have a book which forms a detailed and vitally important training manual for modern Christians.

The major theological framework for our understanding of the book of Acts is the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven). Acts starts with the Kingdom of God and ends with the Kingdom of God. It starts by affirming that prior to His ascension, Jesus spoke to His Apostles about the Kingdom of God. Then at the end of the book we find the Apostle Paul under house arrest in Rome preaching the Kingdom of God. So, what is the Kingdom of God?

The Kingdom of God is present first and foremost wherever Jesus Christ is acknowledged and served as King. 'Kingdom' literally means the 'king's domain' so it's the practical outworking, the visible manifestation of the rule and reign of Jesus Christ. It is not a geographical or geopolitical territory with recognised boundaries. It can't join the United Nations. It's a Kingdom that's not of this world, but nevertheless it is in this world. It's a spiritual reality but it's also tangible and has visible manifestations.

In one sense the Kingdom of God is a future reality. There will be a day when the Kingdom to God is the only Kingdom in existence - when Jesus Christ puts an end to all other rule and authority and power. Jesus must reign until He puts all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15). As long as death is with us, the total fulfilment of the Kingdom has not yet come. When it does, we will see a new heaven and a new earth. Until that day, we live in a world where many enemies of God and His people are still present. Satan, the supreme enemy, is spoken of as *'the God of this age'* and the *'prince of the power of the air.'* John affirms that the whole world lies under the sway of *the wicked one*. This language must not be taken lightly - it is used of Satan by those who live this side of the cross. Before Jesus came, things were even worse!

As a result of the strongholds provided through the sin of Adam and Eve, Satan succeeded in usurping the power and control of most human beings and social institutions. He had become so powerful that he could offer Jesus the kingdoms of this world, claiming that: *"this has been delivered to me and I can give it to whoever I wish."* Interestingly enough, Jesus never denied that Satan had such power. In fact, if Satan did not have that control, the temptation would have been a farce. No wonder Jesus later called him 'the ruler of this world.'

That situation was radically changed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus first came, John the Baptist announced that *'the kingdom of God was at hand.'* Jesus later sent His disciples out to preach that the Kingdom of God was at hand. These statements amounted to a declaration of war. According to 1 John 3:8, the purpose of Jesus coming to earth was clear. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. The Kingdom of God invaded the kingdom of Satan. Jesus' death disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public spectacle of them. Jesus pronounced the declaration of war when He said:

**Matthew 11:12** *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of God is forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it."*

By this, Jesus was establishing the pattern of things to come. His people would be recruited, mobilised and empowered to move with force against the enemy on behalf of the Kingdom of God. The weapons to conduct this warfare would be spiritual, not natural. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray: *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Jesus also said: *"My kingdom is not of this world."*

So, what does His kingdom look like? Well, His Kingdom is one where everything is perfect, where there is no sickness or pain or oppression; no demons or dark angels to torment His people; a kingdom of freedom, love, righteousness and peace. That is the Kingdom Jesus came to usher in.

That's why what He did in the Synagogue in His hometown at the outset of His ministry was so significant. By quoting Isaiah 61 and applying the words to Himself, Jesus effectively said:

*I have come to usher in the Kingdom of God by doing six things:*

- *Preach the Gospel to the poor*
- *Heal the broken-hearted*
- *Preach deliverance to the captives*
- *Preach recovery of sight to the blind*
- *Set free those who are oppressed*
- *And to preach the acceptable year of the Lord's favour*

Satan and the Kingdom of darkness is delivered a painful blow every time a sick person is healed; every time a demon is cast out; every time a lost soul finds Jesus; every time a variety of races and cultures live together in love and harmony; every time greed is exposed; every time families maintain standards of holiness and purity. Satan comes to steal, to kill and to destroy, but Jesus comes that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

When Jesus left the earth, He left the task of expanding His kingdom in the hands of followers, empowered by the Holy Spirit. By using the supernatural power resident within them, they were commissioned to declare and to demonstrate the kingdom of God. They were called to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that Jesus had commanded them. (Matthew 28:19-20)

When we turn to the book of Acts, we find more than in any other part of the New Testament, a clear explanation of how Jesus' disciples went about implementing their Master's desire that the kingdom of God be expanded across the whole world. Jesus told them very clearly what was about to happen:

**Acts 1:8** *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

I look forward to exploring with you how the early disciples embraced this new power dynamic in their desire to fulfil the mission of Christ.