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theme: The end and the beginning (Acts 1:1-11)

materials: Bibles, news story, paper, pens, envelopes, words and music to “Open the eyes of my heart”

welcome

When was the last time you wrote a letter? Write a letter, as a cell group, right now to someone who has been to your cell but hasn't been around in awhile, or to someone who you'd like to come to your cell. Decide what you want to write to them, and make sure someone from the cell gets the letter to the recipient this week.

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced divine community this week? Read **Luke 24:46-53**. Sing “Open the Eyes of My Heart Lord” together.

word

Read **Acts 1:1-11** (and keep it open during the discussion).

Why did Luke write his Gospel account and the book of Acts?

Why does Luke say that in his first book he wrote about what Jesus *began* to do? Was his work not completed when he ascended into heaven?

Why does Luke begin the book of Acts with another account of the same story he ended his Gospel with?

What is an apostle?

What does it mean to be “baptised with the Holy Spirit”?

Why did the apostles think that the Kingdom of God was going to come now? Why do some Christians today try to figure out the timing for the Kingdom of God to come?

What did they think the Kingdom of God was going to be like?

How did they misunderstand the Kingdom of God, according to Jesus?

What do you think the Kingdom of God is?

Why do the angels tell the apostles to stop staring into the sky?

Instead of speculating about when the Kingdom would come, or staring into the sky wondering when Jesus would return, what were the apostles supposed to be doing?

Where were the apostles meant to preach the gospel of Jesus?

What *kind* of power does Jesus promise to his apostles? How does it differ from worldly power?



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witness

The instruction that Jesus gives the apostles is not to expect the nations to come to them, but rather to take the message of the gospel to the nations. Mission is seen as going out, not bringing in. How is this different from the way many Churches witness? What does it look like for your cell to “go out” with the message of the gospel? Pray for one person each right now who you will go out and share the message of the gospel with this week.

action points

Remind your cell that the giving of tithes and offerings helps maintain the ministry of the cell / Church / Corps, and that it also goes towards ministries like sponsoring children overseas.

Continue reading through the entire books of Luke and Acts with one other person. If the other person is a fellow believer, read them through in a public place, like a café (not yelling it out or anything, just reading it to one another). Make a regular time to come in and read together, and more likely than not someone will eventually ask you what you are reading and why.

If the other person is not a fellow-believer, perhaps choose a less public place to read, but again set regular times, daily if possible, to get together and read the Gospel. You don't have to read it all at once. Read two to three chapters at a time, and then meet another day to read some more.

leader's guide

This opening passage in the book of Acts is a clear continuation of the Gospel of Luke. It is written to Theophilus, the same person to whom Luke dedicated his Gospel account. Luke says that in his first book, the Gospel account, he wrote about what Jesus began to do and teach until he ascended into heaven. In other words, he told the story of Jesus' life and teaching, from his birth until his death and then continuing on to his resurrection and the forty days after his resurrection as he instructed his followers. He finished the Gospel story with the return of Jesus to his Father in heaven, just as he begins the Acts story with the same account including more details.

If you end one book with a story and begin the next one with the same story, it probably means that you think the story is relatively important. Luke indicates in this opening passage that the story of Jesus' ministry does not truly end with his ascension into heaven. He is continuing the story because Jesus is continuing his ministry. The Gospel is the account of Jesus' ministry on earth. Acts is the account of Jesus' *heavenly* ministry, which would be enacted on earth through his apostles. Jesus' ascension into glory is the event that links these two parts of the story. It is therefore both an ending, and a beginning.

“Apostle” is a word that is perhaps misunderstood in parts of the Church today. The word *apostolos* refers to an envoy, a delegate, an ambassador, one who carries the authority of the one who sent them. The title apostle was first used of the witnesses that Jesus sent out in the Gospel of Luke (**6:13, 9:10, 11:49, 17:5, 22:14, 24:10**). But now the word is being applied specifically to those who had been with him during his earthly ministry and who had been chosen to be *eye-witnesses of his bodily resurrection*. Jesus had given them many proofs of his resurrection, had taught them about the Kingdom of God, had commissioned them to teach and preach in his name, and had promised that they would be empowered to do so by a gift from his Father: namely, the Holy Spirit. These then were the qualifications of an apostle: Chosen by Christ; Witness to the



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Resurrection; Commanded and Commissioned to preach and teach in the name of Jesus; and Promised the imminent gift of the Holy Spirit. One could say, of course, that all Christians share in these qualifications, and in a way that is true. We have been chosen, Christ has been revealed to us, we are commanded to preach in his name, and we are given the Holy Spirit. But there is a sense of a unique calling amongst these few who had seen Jesus in the resurrected flesh. Jesus was going to start his great world-wide mission through them, specifically. He continues it now through those who have come to believe as a result of their witness.

Luke records that Jesus spoke to the apostles of two main themes in the time between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven: the Kingdom of God, and the Holy Spirit. These two themes are of course intimately connected, as it is the Spirit of God who makes the Kingdom of God a lived reality for the people of God. So the apostles can be excused perhaps for jumping to certain conclusions when Jesus announced that they would shortly be baptised by (or in) the Holy Spirit. In saying this, Jesus was making reference both to prophecies in Hebrew Scriptures that the Spirit would be given as gift (**Joel 2:28ff, Isaiah 32:15, Ezekiel 36:27**) but also the words of his cousin John the Baptist, who prophesied in **Luke 3:16** that Jesus would come and baptize not with water, as John did, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The word baptism implies a total immersion in the Holy Spirit, and the person being baptized being made totally new through this process.

It was this gift, and his subsequent commands, that Jesus wanted the apostles to focus on. But instead they wanted to know if they should expect the Kingdom of God to finally be restored to Israel at that time. John Calvin has said that there were as many errors in that question as there were words. The apostles seemed to have assumed many things: that the Kingdom of God was going to be a political and territorial kingdom; that it was going to be a national kingdom, and specifically a Kingdom that would be identified with Israel; and that it was going to come about in its fullness immediately. Attached to these assumptions would be others like the liberation of Israel from Rome through acts of violent power, and the restoration of a King for Israel from the line of David. Followers of Jesus had been hoping for this kind of Kingdom during his earthly ministry; their hopes had flagged upon his death, but were now reappearing with his resurrection and his talk of the Kingdom and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus answered the apostles question by explaining that they would not get to know when the Father would establish his full and final sovereign rule over all creation. The Kingdom of God – the saving and sovereign rule of God - was already present in Jesus, and this would be an essential part of the message that the Church would spread all over the world. But the Father's timing for the culmination of the Kingdom was secret, and speculating about it would only serve to distract the apostles from their commissioned task, which was to be witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This witness, empowered by the Holy Spirit, would be the way that God would spread his Kingdom rule throughout the whole world. His Kingdom would not be political or national, it would be international, and spiritual. His Kingdom would not be spread by soldiers and violence, but by witnesses preaching the gospel of peace. It would not be spread by the power of the sword, but by the power of the Spirit, which would be given to the apostles in Jerusalem.

And this was what the apostles were supposed to be doing: obeying Jesus' command to wait for the Spirit to come in Jerusalem, so that they would be empowered for witness. Instead, they were staring into the sky, wondering when Jesus would return. Once they received this Spirit, they were to proclaim the gospel in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This describes the spread of the gospel through the story of Acts, which begins in Jerusalem but then makes its way eventually to Rome, and then beyond.