

What Is Jesus Up To

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 1995

Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] Text is from the book of Acts. Acts chapter 1, verses 1 through 11, and Acts chapter 13, verses 1 through 4. Acts chapter 1, beginning at verse 1.

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day He was taken up after He had, by the Holy Spirit, given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.

To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, which He said, You have heard from Me, for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, It is not for you to know times or epochs, which the Father has fixed by His own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and even to the remotest part of the earth.

[1 : 30] After He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside Him, and they also said, Men of Galilee, why are you standing looking into the sky?

This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way you have watched Him go into heaven. And then Acts 13.

Now, there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers, Barnabas and Simeon, who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaán, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. Spirit of the living God, one day as Luke, the physician, was thinking and wrestling and writing, you empowered him to write down these words.

[2 : 57] And I pray now that you would make these words come alive for us in a new and fresh way. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

There are three great questions that we disciples of Jesus Christ, that we, the church of Jesus Christ, need to keep asking, especially in these times of turmoil and change.

The first question is, Who is Jesus? Who is this Jesus who walks into our lives and calls us to follow him in a whole new way of life?

Karl Barth, one of this century's greatest theologians, once said, Tell me your Christology and I will tell you who you are. Tell me your view of Jesus Christ and I will tell you who you are.

Tell me what you make of Jesus and I can tell you who you are. So the first great question is, Who is this Jesus? Who is this Jesus that my soul irresistibly wants to follow?

[4 : 07] The second great question then is, Who are we in Jesus? Who do we become when we do follow him as disciples? What do we become when we follow him as disciples?

And last week we celebrated that. We celebrated, again, how good it is to be in Christ. And as a result of last week, the feedback from last week's sermon, the feedback that for many of you, it was so powerful for someone to tell you who you are in Christ again, I've decided to try to write a book

and to put together everything that the New Testament has to say about our new identity and put it together in one place.

And I ask you to pray for me. Who are we in Jesus Christ? We are new creations. The old has passed away. Behold, something new has come. The third great question to ask is, What is Jesus up to?

I think that is becoming for me now the most critical question for us in our time to be asking. What is Jesus up to? In my life, in your life, in the life of the churches here, in this city and in America and around the world, and in history.

What is Jesus up to? Well, today I want to dare to try to answer that. And that's where I'm not sure I'm on target.

[5 : 32] I use the word dare to answer the question, What is Jesus up to? And particularly, What is Jesus up to here in this church? I use the word dare intentionally because it's an audacious thing for a mere human being like me to tell other human beings what the Lord of life is up to.

As I have been trying to answer this question, I've been trying to be very careful not to impose on the church what I am up to or what I would want to be up to.

I've been trying very hard to try to step back and observe and listen and see what Jesus is up to in the church. Jesus is up to something.

Do you believe that? He says in John 5, 17, My Father is working until now and I myself am working. He is always working.

He is always up to something. He is always applying the benefits of His finished work on the cross. Now, this is a major theme of the book of Acts.

[6 : 48] Luke, the author of Acts, begins the first account I composed, O Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach and then the sentence doesn't end.

It's a run-on sentence that ends right in the middle of the air. That's because Luke is writing a two-volume work. In the first volume, The Gospel According to Luke, he tells us all about what Jesus began to do and teach.

And then in his second volume, he moves on to tell us all that Jesus, now ascended to the throne of the universe, continues to do and teach.

I grew up with the view that in the Gospel of Luke, we were learning about what Jesus was doing, and then in the book of Acts, we were learning about what the church was doing.

That doesn't seem to be the way Luke has it. Volume 1 is all about what Jesus began to do and teach in His earthly ministry.

[7 : 58] Volume 2, the book of Acts, is all about what Jesus continued to do in His exalted state. Volume 2, the book of Acts, is misrepresented when it's called the Acts of the Apostles.

Yes, it is the story of the church. It is the story of apostles like Peter and Paul and Phoebe and Priscilla and others. But the chief actor in the book of Acts is not Peter and Paul.

The chief actor in the book of Acts is the risen Jesus. So Volume 2 should be called The Acts of the Risen and Ascended Jesus Through the Person and Power of the Holy Spirit.

The story of the emerging church is the story of what Jesus continued to do and teach. Church history is His story.

The history of the churches around the world is His story. The history of the churches around the world is His story. So what is Jesus up to?

[9 : 09] In particular, what is He up to here? And that's what I will try to dare to answer. I'm already clear in my mind that I'm going to do only a few parts of what I prepared.

Because I do not trust my own wisdom, I have tried to discern what Jesus is up to here in the church by looking at us through the lenses of Scripture, and in particular, looking through the lenses of the book of Acts.

That makes sense, doesn't it? If the book of Luke, what He began to do and teach, and then Acts, what He continued to do and teach, I'm going to be on solid ground if I look out at the church through the lenses of the book of Acts.

More particularly, I've been looking at us through the lenses of the church in the first century city of Antioch. It was in Antioch that the first Jewish Gentile church came into being.

The first church outside of Jewish soil was formed in Antioch. And for Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, the Antioch church seems to be the model church.

[10:29] Not the great church, but the model church of the kinds of things Jesus is up to in any church. The city of Antioch is about 300 miles north of Jerusalem.

It was an international, interracial, multi-ethnic, international city in every way. And it was the first place where Jews took the daring step of reaching beyond the confines of Judaism and bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to Gentiles.

The Antioch church soon became the center of Christianity. It moved from Jerusalem, 300 miles north, to Antioch. And it was out of the Antioch church that the whole world Christian movement got started.

All of the Apostle Paul's three great missionary journeys began in Antioch. In a very real sense, you and I, non-Jewish disciples of Jesus Christ, owe our salvation to the church at Antioch.

They were the first to make the step of moving the gospel beyond the Jewish confines onto Gentile soil. The city was a great city for commercial prosperity, rich in cultural life, very superstitious and immoral city.

[12:01] The city of Antioch was the center for the worship of Daphne. If you know your mythology, you remember that Daphne was a mere mortal maid who Apollo loved and pursued.

And when Apollo got her, he wanted to protect her, so he turned her into a laurel bush. And at the temple of Daphne in the city of Antioch then, every night, the priestesses who were paid prostitutes and the worshipers who came to this temple would reenact Apollo chasing Daphne through the laurel bushes, which meant that Antioch was a sex-mad city.

It was Paris, Bangkok, and Los Angeles all rolled into one. And it was in that city that Jesus Christ was up to something, up to making disciples, up to making His church.

Now, when you study the church at Antioch, and you do so with the idea that it is the model church, you discover that there were six things Jesus was up to there.

And as I have been wrestling with what He is up to here, I'm concluding that He's up to six things that parallel those six things in Antioch.

[13:22] Let me start into them and see how far I get. Are we okay so far? My basic presupposition here, and I'm not, this is the presupposition not only for this sermon, but for everything that I'm doing with the session and with the staff.

My basic presupposition is that Jesus is up to here the kinds of things He was up to there. That what He's doing now will be the same kinds of things He was doing then in this church at Antioch. Let me just tell you what the six things are, because I'm not going to be able to finish them. I have an outline in the order of worship there for you. Let me just give you those words, and then I'll come back and work with a couple of those for just a little while.

The first one is that He is up to freeing us for authentic worship. I think we were experiencing a lot of that today.

Would you agree? And we have been experiencing that for weeks and months now. Moments of great breakthrough that I can't quite understand.

[14:30] I'm a human being, after all. That's nothing surprising. Secondly, Jesus, through His Spirit, is up to bringing down the walls that divide the old humanity so we can experience the new humanity.

Third, Jesus, through His Spirit, is up to releasing all the gifts of His Spirit so that ministry in the church and in the community happens.

Releasing His gifts. Fourth, Jesus is up to sending us into the world, reaching into the world.

Fifth, Jesus is up to teaching us about Himself, about His Father, about who we are in Him, about the world, about history.

And sixth, Jesus, through His Spirit, is calling us to a life of prayer. Now, you who have been around GPC for the last few years will recognize that I just outlined the vision statement that is presently in force.

[15:48] Wonderful vision. How many of you have never read the vision statement? A few of you? Okay, we're going to get copies and put that out. This vision statement that was in large measure part of the magnet that drew me from Sacramento to GPC.

You'll see I just basically outlined a lot of it. In fact, as I was working on this week, I figured that the persons who put together the GPC vision statement had visited Antioch.

They must have gone to Antioch. Let me just walk through the first two. And then, I think that will be what he says as far as I can go.

The first is that Jesus, through His Spirit, is freeing us up for authentic worship. It's the first thing on any list because it is the most important thing. Worship is the chief sign of spiritual vitality. Someone has said that a worship service is both the thermometer and the thermostat of a church's life. It's the thermometer in that it registers a church's health. It's the thermostat in that it controls a church's health.

[17:01] The Lord of life is always up to freeing us for authentic worship. Now, what I want you to notice in this passage is the way that Luke describes the worship life of Antioch.

Verse 2, he uses the phrase, while they were ministering to the Lord. You see that? While they were ministering to the Lord.

What does that mean? I'm not sure that I understand what it means. I really wish here that Luke would have said more about what that was and what it means and what it looks like.

Clearly, it is not suggesting that we are worshiping a Lord who has needs that we meet. That would be an awful thing to contemplate, that the living God has needs that only we can fulfill.

The whole universe is in bad shape. The Apostle Paul told the philosophers at Athens that the living God who made heaven and earth and all that is in it does not dwell in a temple made with hands as though he needed anything.

[18:09] I think that Luke's phrase, they were ministering to the Lord, is his way of stressing that worship is focused on the Lord. Everything that we do in a worship service is done before him and through him and in him and to him.

He is the point of this event, not we. They were ministering to the Lord. I think it's also Luke's way of saying that when we worship, our worship does something to the Lord.

That's amazing, isn't it? That the God who does not need anything is nevertheless moved by us when we worship. Which is why I regularly say that the question to ask after worship is not, what did I get out of it?

But was the Lord pleased? Yes, we get out of worship big time because the Lord we serve lives to give. He's the one who washes disciples' feet.

But getting is not the point of the event. If we come to get, we may not get. Getting is going to be the byproduct of coming to the Lord, singing to the Lord, kneeling before the Lord, bowing to the Lord, opening the heart with its joys and pains to the Lord.

[19:39] Now, so focused on the Lord was this church at Antioch that they were not surprised when while they were worshiping the Holy Spirit interrupted the service.

Did you notice that? While they were ministering to the Lord, the Spirit said, set apart Saul and Barnabas, for the task that I have for them to do.

I get the sense then that the church at Antioch expected God to do something that they had not planned in the worship service.

That is to say, they were ready for the inbreaking of the supernatural. They were, they were, after all, ministering to the Lord, to someone whose presence is bigger than all the universe.

And they expected things to happen which they had not orchestrated. They expected God to break in in ways that no one had planned for.

[21:02] Do we? Do we come to a worship experience expecting God to do something we had not planned to do?

Expecting God to break out of the nice, safe boxes that we like to put God into? Do we? Why then do we plan for something to happen ten minutes after worship service?

Why is it that as we set out the Lord's Day, we plan for this hour or hour and fifteen minute segment for worship and then fifteen minutes after we have scheduled something else?

Do you know what that says to me about me? That says I didn't expect anything to happen. That says I expected to go on living my life the way I chose it.

I do not expect God to do anything that could possibly upset my predetermined routines. And is that right?

[22:44] And so God does not do anything. One of the factors that drew me to GPC over two years ago now was the worship life of GPC.

Still draws me. And one of the things that intrigued me the most was a line in the worship policy statement, the line, we seek to be, we seek a spirit-led worship service.

Spirit-led. I said to myself, if those folks really mean what those words seem to mean, then I want to be part of such a worship service.

Spirit-led. I know what spirit-filled worship is like. Spirit-filled worship is worship when there is this almost palpable sense of the presence of the living God, where there's an unmistakable sense of holiness and love and power, spirit-filled, but spirit-led, where the Holy Spirit can move in, take over the order of worship, change the agenda, and have His way with us in a way that none of the worship planners had ever thought of?

why that means we would be out of control. And at the heart of the Presbyterian way is control.

[24 : 39] Jesus is up to freeing us for spirit-filled and spirit-led worship, and I don't know what that means.

I've got some clues. I think that when the Spirit leads in worship, there's always a note of remembrance. He's always leading us to remember what God has done for us in Christ. which means that spirit-led worship will always have the note of celebration because when we are led to remember what God has done for us in Christ and how good it is in Christ, we will want to celebrate.

I think spirit-led worship will also mean participation with all of us doing worship. worship, after all, is a verb, not a noun.

Worship is something that we do. When we say to each other at home, let us go to worship, we are meaning let us go and do something and let us do it to the Lord, which means that spirit-led worship will always have an encounter note to it.

[26 : 08] The whole point is to encounter the living God, which means that spirit-led worship will always have the goal of strengthening relationship with the living God.

Spirit-led worship is always deepening intimacy with God. Spirit-led worship is a love affair where the redeemed rejoice in the Redeemer, where the bride of Christ passionately enjoys the bridegroom.

And spirit-led worship will involve the whole self, the head, the heart, the mouth, the hands, and the feet.

Thinking great thoughts about God, feeling stirring emotions for God, and responding with the whole body, sometimes standing, sometimes sitting, sometimes kneeling, sometimes dancing.

I long for the day when I will be free to dance before the Lord in uninhibited delight in the lover of my soul.

[27 : 42] I don't know where it's all going, I don't need to know. Jesus is up to something with us, and I need only follow.

Can I go with one more? It'll just be about five minutes and then I don't want to get ahead of what the Spirit's doing with us. Can we do one more? Don't vote no.

There's a lot of yeses over here. Okay, this one. This is the other important thing I think He is saying to us. Second, Jesus, through His Spirit, is bringing down the walls that divide the old humanity outside of Christ so we can experience the new humanity in Christ.

And we see this in the church at Antioch in a very big way. The church in Antioch itself reflected the multi-ethnic makeup of the city. This is where I have to be careful not to be ahead.

The church in Antioch represented the multi-ethnic makeup of the city. And it was reflected particularly in its leadership team. Luke has five names in Acts 13, and these five names probably make up a microcosm of the larger community.

[29 : 13] There was Barnabas, a Jew, conservative type, wealthy man, an encourager. There is Simeon, also called Niger. Simeon is a Latin name. Niger means dark skin.

Simeon, called Niger, is a black man from North Africa. There is Lucius. Luke says he's from Cyrene. Cyrene is in Libya. There is Menaean, of the court of Herod, which means that at one time Menaean was in Herod's kitchen cabinet, if you will, which means that at one time Menaean was part of the movement to kill Jesus.

And then there is Saul, the Apostle Paul, a Roman citizen from birth, a Jew, a rabbi, brilliant intellectual strategist, a got-to-get-it-done- tomorrow kind of guy, today kind of guy.

And yet there they are together as a team. The walls of skin color, the walls of ethnic background, the walls of credentials, the walls of education, the walls of economics, the walls of sex have all come down in this church.

The biggest barrier, of course, was the barrier between Jew and Gentile. You know, we in the Los Angeles area have great racial tension, but it's nothing compared to the racial tension between Jews and Gentiles of the first century.

[30 : 35] And yet in Antioch, that wall came down. Some have suggested that the charter on the walls of the church at Antioch was Galatians 3, 28.

In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all one in Christ Jesus. In Christ the walls of the old humanity come down that we may enter into the new humanity, into the third human race, as some call it, which is multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-tongued.

Lloyd Ogilvie says of the church at Antioch that it is a world fellowship to start a world movement.

Now, I believe that Jesus is up to making GPC a world fellowship for a world movement.

I believe that Jesus is up to making GPC a model of a new kind of congregation where ethnic groups work and worship together.

I agree with Coach Bill McCartney who is spearheading the Promise Keepers movement that any work of the Spirit in America today has to be multi-racial and multi-ethnic.

[32 : 08] We at GPC presently house four ethnic congregations, Armenian, Filipino, Hispanic, and Arabic. And I'm glad we do.

It was, again, part of the magnet that drew me to GPC. But I believe that Jesus is now going to be moving us, and I don't know how, and I don't see the next steps even, moving us beyond simply housing these different ethnic groups into becoming a new kind of ministry.

How, I don't know, because racial prejudice runs deep in our souls. Fear of people from other cultures runs deep in our souls.

Resentment against people of other cultures runs deep in our souls. But Jesus is up to freeing us from that. And I'm convinced that Jesus wants GPC now to be a model and, therefore, a sign of hope to the rest of the greater Los Angeles area of what can happen with diverse peoples centered in Jesus Christ.

Having children that are in junior high and high school means that I've had to go to a number of graduations. Have you been to a graduation at a junior high or senior high in Glendale in the last few years?

[33 : 33] Put up your hands if you have, or Los Angeles anywhere. You know where I'm leading. Go to one of those graduations, even if you don't have a child this coming year. And it's amazing what faces you see at that graduation.

This is my conviction. And I think it's based on what Jesus was doing at the Church of Antioch. My conviction is that the face of a local congregation should reflect the face of the community as it is gathered at a high school graduation ceremony.

That was true of the church at Antioch. And it was at the church at Antioch that disciples of Jesus Christ were first called Christian. Christian means member of the third race, multi-ethnic, multi-community, all of God's new creation brought together in Christ.

I'll stop there. Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, we are your body.

We are your church. you are up to something with us. Please help us be open.

[35 : 07] Help us not resist. Help us cooperate. Help us move with you into your new work. I don't know where you're going, Lord.

But I guess I don't need to. Because it is you who is doing something and I need only follow. Help us follow. Amen.