

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 7

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 1-2

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Hey everyone, welcome back for another deep dive. Today we're going to be looking at the power of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity, specifically how it fueled the movement's incredible growth. We're going to be unpacking lecture notes from Dr. Craig Keener's course on the Book of Acts, focusing specifically on chapters one and two, and hopefully we'll uncover some surprising insights about the Spirit's role and what it all means for us today.

Yeah, you know, these chapters really lay the groundwork for everything that unfolds in Acts. It's like the mission statement for the early church, energized by the Holy Spirit to spread the good news of Jesus. To the very ends of the earth.

The very ends of the earth. It's like Dr. Keener says Acts 18 is a thesis statement for the whole book. Right.

You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. But is it really as simple as just telling people about Jesus? There was a lot of talk about signs and wonders. Is that part of the mission too? That's an interesting question because, you know, in Acts 4, 4 through 8, Jesus specifically tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit.

Right. And he emphasizes that it's more important to wait for the Spirit's power than to rush out and try to do things on their own. Yeah.

And, you know, it's a crucial lesson for us today. Oh, absolutely. I think we often want to rely on our own abilities to make things happen.

Yeah. But you're right. We need that power from the Spirit to make a real impact.

But how do we know if we're relying on the Spirit or just on ourselves? Is there a clear line? That's a great question. And, you know, it's a question that theologians have grappled with for centuries. Right.

But what we see in Acts is this idea of power evangelism emerging. Okay. It's not just about preaching a message.

Yeah. It's about the Spirit working through believers in extraordinary ways, confirming the message with tangible signs and wonders. Right.

Think of it like this. The words are important, but sometimes people need more than words to believe. That makes sense.

It's like the miracles become a way of pointing to something beyond the ordinary, something supernatural at work. But this idea of waiting for the Spirit, the disciples in Acts

seem to think it's connected to the end times. They asked Jesus about restoring the kingdom to Israel.

Like, is this the big finale? Right. And Jesus' response is so intriguing. He tells them it's not for them to know the exact timing of the kingdom's arrival.

Right. But what they do get is the Holy Spirit. Right.

A kind of sneak preview of what that future reality will be like. A sneak preview. It's this idea of the kingdom being already not yet present through the Spirit's power, but still to come in its fullness.

So we're living the preview, waiting for the full feature film to begin. That's a pretty wild way to think about it. It is, isn't it? And this concept of the Spirit as a foretaste of what's to come is echoed throughout the New Testament.

Oh, really? Hebrews 6 talks about tasting the powers of the age to come. Wow. Romans 8: 23 describes the Spirit as the first fruits of our salvation.

Ephesians 1 calls the Spirit the down payment of our inheritance. It all points to the idea that we have access to something incredible, something beyond our current experience through the Holy Spirit. Okay, so back to Acts 18, where Jesus tells his disciples to be his witnesses.

Dr. Keener emphasizes that this mission is rooted in Scripture. It's not just a random idea. He points to echoes of the prophet Isaiah in that verse, right? Absolutely.

And there's another subtle but profound point being made here. Okay. The disciples are called to be his witnesses, not just witnesses for God in a general sense.

Yeah. It's almost like Jesus is claiming the same authority and power as Yahweh, wouldn't you say? It definitely implies that Jesus is more than just a prophet or a teacher. Right.

But what about this ends of the earth bit? Yeah. Their understanding of geography was much different back then. Did they even know how big the world was? Well, they didn't have Google Maps, that's for sure.

But even then, the ends of the earth meant going far beyond their familiar surroundings. Places like Spain, Parthia, India, even parts of Africa were considered the edges of the known world at that time. Wow.

Okay. And interestingly, the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome. Okay.

The heart of the Roman Empire. Does that suggest anything to you? That the gospel was always meant to spread even further, like the mission has no boundaries. Exactly.

The book of Acts doesn't end with a period; it ends with a comma. The story is still being written, and you as a believer are a part of it. Oh, wow.

The mission continues, and it's not just limited to the 12 apostles. Right. Paul, Stephen, and countless others in Acts are called to be witnesses.

The Spirit empowers all believers to continue this mission. So we're not just reading about history; we're living in it. We are.

But after Jesus ascends to heaven, the disciples go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit's arrival. Right. It's not just sitting around, though; there's an element of preparation, right? Yes.

And one of the first things they do is reestablish their leadership structure. Okay. By replacing Judas, they get organized and put their house in order before the outpouring of the Spirit.

And there's a strong emphasis on prayer, men and women praying together in unity, anticipating what's to come. Dr. Keener highlights a pattern in Acts. Prayer often precedes significant movements of the Spirit.

It does. Jesus' baptism, the disciples being filled with the Spirit in Acts 4, even the Samaritans receiving the Spirit in Acts 8. Right. It all starts with prayer.

Yeah. It's like prayer creates the space for the Spirit to move powerfully. It's not passive waiting, but actively seeking God's will and inviting his presence.

Dr. Keener shares a powerful thought. Yeah. That the most important lesson he learned from studying Acts is that the church needs the Spirit.

Right. And prayer is the key to unlocking that power. That's a pretty powerful statement, especially coming from a scholar like Dr. Keener.

Yeah. It's a call to action for us, isn't it? We can't just hope for revival to happen. Right.

We need to be actively seeking God, asking for the Spirit to move in our lives and in our communities. Absolutely. And that brings us to the dramatic moment of the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost.

Yes. Acts 2:1 through 4 describes this incredible scene: the sound of a rushing wind. Wow.

Tongues of fire appear over each person, and then they start speaking in other languages. It's hard to imagine being there in that moment. I know.

The wind, the fire, speaking in tongues. What's the significance of all these signs? They're pretty intense. Yeah.

The wind and fire immediately call to mind theophanies in the Old Testament. Okay. Those moments where God's presence was visibly manifested.

Okay. It signifies that God is showing up in a major way. Wow.

Specifically, the wind in Ezekiel 37 is associated with resurrection life. Okay. God breathing new life into dry bones, and fire, while often symbolizing God's judgment, can also represent purification and refinement.

So it's like God's presence brings both judgment and renewal. Yes. Shaking things up and making all things new.

That's right. But why is speaking in tongues repeated at other key moments of the Spirit's outpouring throughout Acts? Is it just about the experience, or is there a purpose to it? You know, for Luke, speaking in tongues is significant for a very practical reason. Okay.

It facilitates cross-cultural communication. Right. Remember on the day of Pentecost, there were Jews from all over the Roman Empire gathered in Jerusalem.

Yeah. All speaking different languages. Suddenly, they can understand each other because the Spirit empowers them to communicate supernaturally.

So it's not just a mystical experience, but a practical tool for spreading the gospel. That's fascinating. Exactly.

And it foreshadows the global mission that's about to unfold. Okay. God is breaking down the barriers of language and culture, empowering His people to reach every nation with the good news of Jesus.

That makes a lot of sense. But let's be honest, the whole idea of speaking in tongues can be a bit confusing. Yeah.

Different denominations have different views on what it means when it happens, even if it's still for today. Right. Dr. Keener mentions his own experiences with speaking in tongues.

He does. How do we navigate all the different viewpoints and interpretations? That's a common struggle for many believers. Right.

I think it's important not to get lost in theological debates. Right. And miss the bigger picture.

Okay. Whether you believe tongues are evidence of the Spirit's baptism, a gift for personal prayer, or primarily meant for cross-cultural mission, the core message is clear. What is it? God empowers His people to be witnesses, breaking down barriers and building bridges of understanding.

So regardless of our specific beliefs about tongues, the takeaway is that the Holy Spirit gives us the power to share the good news, connecting with people from all walks of life. That's something we can all agree on. Yes.

And in Acts 2:5 through 13, we see this play out on a global scale. We do. The crowd gathered for Pentecost represents Jews from all over the known world.

It's like a snapshot of the mission to come. It is a beautiful picture of the Spirit's unifying power, but it goes even deeper than that. Dr. Keener points out that Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, interprets the events as the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in Joel 2, 28 through 32.

And Joel's prophecy talks about God pouring out His Spirit on all people, regardless of age or gender. It's this radical statement of inclusivity. God's power isn't limited to a select few.

And Peter picks up on this theme of prophecy repeatedly in his sermon. Okay. Connecting the Spirit's outpouring directly to the proclamation of the good news.

So the Spirit empowers believers to speak God's message boldly and effectively. Yes. It's not just about having a mystical experience, but being equipped to share the gospel, to be God's mouthpiece to a world that desperately needs to hear it.

What does that message actually sound like? Well, in Acts 2:22 through 40, we hear Peter's powerful call to salvation. Okay. He boldly proclaims that Jesus, the one they crucified, is actually the Lord Yahweh himself, and that salvation is found only through him.

That must have been a pretty radical message for his Jewish audience. Oh, absolutely. He's calling them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus.

That wasn't exactly mainstream Judaism in the first century. Not at all. It was a complete paradigm shift.

Yeah. He's essentially telling them that their ancestors, their religious rituals, their good works, none of it is enough. Wow.

They need to turn to Jesus to be cleansed and made new in him. Okay. And baptism becomes this powerful symbol of that transformation.

So it's not just about believing certain things about Jesus. Right. But about a complete change of heart, a surrender to him as Lord.

That sounds like a challenge for us today too. It is. It's easy to get caught up in our own ideas about what it means to follow Jesus.

Yeah, you're absolutely right. That call to repentance to turn away from ourselves and towards God is just as relevant today as it was back then. Absolutely.

It's not just about intellectual assent or having warm feelings. It's about a complete change of heart and mind. Right.

And what's amazing is that Peter's message didn't just challenge people's beliefs. Yeah. It actually changed their behavior.

It did. Acts 2:41 through 47 describes what happened next. 3,000 people were baptized.

Wow. And joined the fellowship of believers. That's incredible.

Talk about a church growth explosion. Yeah. But it's not just about the numbers, is it? The text describes tangible evidence of the Spirit's work in their lives.

It's true. Their transformation went far beyond just a headcount. Right.

We see them devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread together, and to prayer. It's a picture of the Spirit creating unity, love, and generosity among these new believers. And that generosity goes beyond just warm feelings.

It does. They're sharing their possessions, even selling their property to meet the needs of others. That's right.

It sounds like a radical expression of love and sacrifice fueled by the Spirit. It's not a forced communal living situation. Right.

But a spontaneous outpouring of compassion. Yeah. They're prioritizing people over possessions, relationships over riches.

Right. Because they've experienced the transformative power of the Spirit. And that same Spirit is available to us today.

Imagine what could happen if we truly allowed that same Spirit to work in our lives and in our churches. That's an incredible thought. It really makes you think about how we live out our faith in the 21st century.

But we'll have to save that discussion for part two of our deep dive. Yes, we will. Welcome back to our deep dive into the power of the Holy Spirit.

We just left off talking about the radical generosity of the early Christians, selling their possessions, sharing everything they had. It's a powerful image, but is that kind of communal living what's expected of all believers? That's a great question, and one that often comes up when studying the Book of Acts. It's important to remember that the early church faced unique circumstances, and their response to those circumstances was an outpouring of love and compassion, not a rigid set of rules.

I think the takeaway for us is the spirit of generosity, the willingness to put the needs of others before our own. So it's more about the heart behind the actions than the specific actions themselves. That makes sense.

Earlier we were talking about the gift of tongues and how it facilitated cross-cultural communication. Is there more to it than just speaking different languages? You're right to point that out, because it goes even deeper than just the speaking in tongues phenomenon. Dr. Keener emphasizes that the tongues described in Acts weren't just gibberish.

They were actual languages that people could understand. It's like God was giving them a supernatural ability to connect with people from different backgrounds, which is essential if you're trying to reach the ends of the earth. Right.

Makes sense to me. God was saying, here's a taste of what I can do. I can break down language barriers, empower you to connect with people who seem totally different from you.

That must have been so encouraging for the early Christians, especially those who were going out to share the gospel in new and unfamiliar places. Imagine the impact that would have had. They could go into a new city, start speaking in the local language, a language they had never studied, and people would be amazed.

It would open doors for them to share the gospel in a way that would have been impossible otherwise. It's like a sign confirming the message they were preaching. But didn't this idea lead to some problems down the road? I remember Dr. Keener mentioning that some early Pentecostals went a bit overboard with the whole tongues thing.

You're right. Some groups took this concept of missionary tongues a bit too far. They traveled to foreign countries, expecting to speak fluently in languages they'd never learned, and things didn't always go as planned.

It led to a lot of disappointment and confusion. It seems like they might have missed the point a little bit. It's not about expecting God to do everything for us, is it? We still have a responsibility to learn to grow, to use the gifts and talents God has given us.

That's a wise observation. I think the early Pentecostals, even with their sometimes misguided enthusiasm, were tapping into something profound. They understood the power of the Spirit for cross-cultural witness, and they were passionate about reaching the world for Christ.

We need that same passion, that same dependence on the Spirit, to break down barriers and reach people who seem unreachable. So we can learn from their mistakes and their passion. It's about finding that balance between relying on the Spirit's power and taking responsibility for our own actions.

But let's go back to Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Dr. Keener said it was the first Christian sermon that explicitly acknowledged Jesus' divinity. How did that play out in his message? Peter doesn't hold back.

He boldly proclaims that Jesus is the Lord Yahweh Himself, and that salvation is found only through Him. This was a radical claim, especially coming from a Jewish leader. He was challenging everything his audience thought they knew about God and their relationship with Him.

It's like he's saying, forget everything you thought you knew. This changes everything. It must have been quite a shock to hear those words.

But what did Peter tell them to do with this new understanding? He gave them a clear call to action. Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. It's a simple message, but it was revolutionary for its time.

He was calling for a complete change of heart, turning away from their old way of life and embracing a new way of life centered on Jesus. And that call to repentance is just as relevant for us today, isn't it? We can get so caught up in our own routines, our own ideas about what it means to be a good person. But true repentance requires us to look honestly

at ourselves, to acknowledge our need for God's forgiveness and to turn our lives over to His leadership.

That's the heart of the gospel message. It's not about trying to earn our way into God's good graces. It's about surrendering to His grace, allowing Him to transform us from the inside out.

But how did the people respond to Peter's message? Did they embrace this call to repentance? Well, according to Acts 2:41, about 3,000 people were baptized that day and joined the believers. Talk about an amazing response. It seems like Peter's words really struck a chord with the crowd.

It's a powerful testament to the power of the Spirit working through Peter's words. But their transformation wasn't just about getting baptized. It was about embracing a whole new way of life.

Acts 2:42-47 paints a beautiful picture of this new community. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread together, and to prayer. It's an inspiring picture of the Spirit creating unity and love among these new believers.

And this spirit of unity extended beyond just their religious practices. They were incredibly generous with each other, sharing their possessions and resources to make sure everyone had what they needed. Dr. Keener pointed out that this wasn't some kind of mandatory communal living arrangement, but a spontaneous outpouring of love and compassion.

They understood that following Jesus wasn't just about personal salvation, but about living out the values of the kingdom in tangible ways. They were putting people before possessions, relationships before riches, because they had experienced the transformative power of the Spirit. And that same Spirit is available to us today.

So what can we learn from their example? How can we apply these principles to our own lives and communities? How do we move beyond simply believing the right things and start living out the gospel in a way that impacts the world around us? That's the question we all need to wrestle with. But before we jump into that, let's take a closer look at how Peter used Scripture in his Pentecost sermon. He doesn't just quote isolated verses.

He weaves together passages from the Psalms and the prophet Joel, connecting the dots and showing how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament hopes and promises. It's like he's showing them a bigger picture, revealing hidden connections they might have missed before. He's not just teaching them about Jesus.

He's helping them see Jesus through the lens of their own scriptures. But what's the most important point Peter makes in his sermon? The most significant connection he makes is between the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the name of Jesus. It's a bold claim, essentially saying that to call on the name of the Lord is to call on the name of Jesus.

This elevates Jesus to a level of divinity that was unheard of in Jewish tradition. That's a powerful statement, and it leads directly to his call to action. Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

There's no ambiguity here. Peter clearly articulates what it means to turn to God and receive his gift of salvation. And that message resonates throughout the rest of the book of Acts.

We see people from all walks of life, rich, poor, powerful, powerless, asking the same question. What must I do to be saved? Like the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus looking for eternal life, or the Philippian jailer who's shaken to his core after witnessing Paul and Silas's miraculous escape from prison. They all come to a point where they realize they need something more than what their current lives can offer.

And even though their individual journeys might look different, the core message remains the same. Turn to Jesus, surrender to his lordship, and receive his gift of forgiveness and new life. It's a message that transcends cultures, time periods, and theological differences.

It's the heart of the gospel, the good news, that has the power to transform lives and change the world. But how does that message translate into action? How do we move beyond just believing in Jesus and start living like him? That's the question that will lead us into the final part of our deep dive. How can we as modern-day believers experience the same power, the same boldness, the same unity and generosity that we see in the early church? Stay tuned to find out.

Welcome back to our deep dive into the power of the Holy Spirit. We've been like tracing the Spirit's work in the early church, and it's been pretty inspiring, wouldn't you say? But how does all of this ancient history connect to our lives today? Like, how can we as 21st-century Christians experience that same power and transformation that we see in the book of Acts? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? We've seen how the Spirit empowered the apostles to preach boldly, to heal the sick, even to speak in other languages. But can we expect that same kind of dramatic display of power in our own lives? Right.

It can feel like a huge gap to bridge from the miracles and wonders of the first century to our everyday routines. I mean, I haven't seen anyone speaking in tongues at my church lately. So does that mean the Spirit isn't working in the same way anymore? Not necessarily.

Remember, the book of Acts isn't a rulebook dictating exactly how the Spirit should move in every time and place. It's more like a story showing us what's possible when people surrender to God's leading. The specific expressions of the Spirit's power might look different today, but the underlying principles are the same.

So it's not about trying to replicate the exact experiences of the early church, but about seeking the same Spirit, the same heart of surrender and obedience. Exactly. The same Spirit who empowered Peter to preach at Pentecost is still alive and active today.

He's longing to work in and through us to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, as Ephesians 3.20 puts it. But it's not a passive thing. We have to actively seek Him, cultivate a relationship with Him through prayer, through studying His Word, through surrendering our lives to His Lordship.

It's like any relationship. It takes effort, intentionality. We can't just expect the Spirit to magically show up and do all the work; we have to meet Him halfway, so to speak.

That's a great way to put it. It's about partnering with the Spirit, allowing Him to guide our thoughts, our actions, our relationships. And that includes embracing the radical call to love and unity that we see in the early church.

The Spirit breaks down barriers, whether they're cultural, racial, socioeconomic, or even denominational. He creates a new family, a new community where love and generosity reign. That sounds beautiful, but honestly, it can feel so idealistic.

The world feels so divided right now. Is unity even possible? Especially in the church. We disagree on so much.

You're right. The world can feel incredibly fragmented. And the church isn't immune to those divisions.

But that's exactly why we need the Spirit's power more than ever. Remember, at Pentecost, people from all over the Roman Empire, speaking different languages, coming from different cultures, were suddenly united by the Spirit. If He could do it, then He can do it now.

So it's not about ignoring our differences, but about allowing the Spirit to bridge those differences, to create unity in the midst of diversity. Exactly. It's about recognizing that we're all part of the same body, united in Christ, even when we disagree.

And that unity isn't just about feeling good. It has practical implications. Remember the generosity of the early Christians.

They shared their possessions, cared for the poor and the sick, and welcomed strangers into their homes. Their love was tangible, visible to the world around them. It's like their actions were a reflection of their transformed hearts, a natural outpouring of the Spirit's work in their lives.

But how do we cultivate that kind of generosity in our own lives? It's easy to get caught up in the busyness of life and focus on our own needs and desires. You're right, it's a constant battle. But I think it starts with recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God.

Our time, our talents, our possessions- they're not ultimately ours to hoard, but to steward for His purposes. When we start to see things through that lens, our priorities begin to shift. We become less focused on accumulating more and more for ourselves, and more open to sharing what we have with others.

So it's about aligning our hearts with God's heart, allowing Him to reshape our values and our desires. It's not about following a set of rules or trying to earn God's favor, but about allowing Him to transform us from the inside out. That's beautifully said.

And that transformation will inevitably lead to action. We'll find ourselves naturally drawn to serve others, to meet needs, to speak up for justice and righteousness. It won't always be easy, but we can trust that the Spirit will empower us and guide us every step of the way.

So as we wrap up our deep dive into the power of the Holy Spirit, I think the key takeaway is the same Spirit who empowered the early church is still available to us today. He's longing to work in and through us, to break down barriers, to create unity, to unleash generosity, and to empower us to be His witnesses in the world. Beautifully put.

The Book of Acts isn't meant to be a museum piece, but a living, breathing inspiration for us today. It reminds us that God is still moving, still transforming lives, still building His church, and He invites us to be part of that incredible story. And that's an invitation worth accepting.

Wouldn't you say thanks for joining us on this deep dive? We hope you've been inspired and challenged by what we've discovered together. Until next time, may the power of the Holy Spirit be with you.