

## Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

A Sermon on Acts 1:12-26

Knox @ Faith PCA in Tacoma WA

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At the end the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds his audience of the importance of a solid foundation. In that memorable illustration, he likens his teaching to a rock: sturdy, solid, dependable, and trustworthy. The person who trusts and obeys His words is like a wise man who builds his house on a rock. When the inevitable storms come, his house will stand, unlike the fool who builds his house on a worthless foundation of sand.

In Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul uses the same imagery of a house and a solid foundation, but he applies it to a different context. Speaking to Gentile Christians he writes, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the **household of God**, built on the **foundation** of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." Here the house is not the life of an individual Christian, but the church, and the foundation includes not only the words of Jesus, but also His prophets and apostles.

As Christians, we must be concerned not only about the house of our individual lives, but also about the house of God. After all, the church is, as Luther famously said, our mother. We are, as Peter says, living stones being built up as a spiritual house.

The first few chapters of Acts are about the church's foundation. They chronicle formative events such as the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus and His preaching about the kingdom of God; the Ascension, the promise of His return, and His commissioning of the Apostles; the empowering of the Spirit at Pentecost, the apostolic preaching of the cross; and the church's rapid growth.

Our text this evening is an interlude between Ascension and Pentecost, and it also addresses an aspect of the church's foundation: her apostolic leadership. But unlike the scenes immediately before and after, this text does not so much lay a foundation stone as repair a **crack** in that foundation, namely, the **vacancy** left by Judas' betrayal and suicide.

Acts 1:12-26

Please keep your Bibles open, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Acts 1:12-26 shows us that Jesus has laid a sure foundation for the church in the apostles. Three questions will guide us through the text and help us understand that foundation.

Question #1: Why was the vacancy left by Judas a significant crack in the church's foundation?

The vacancy left by Judas' betrayal and suicide was a significant crack in the church's foundation for two main reasons. The first is that it obscured the symbolic significance of the **12 disciples**. Of course, in a broad sense, Jesus had **more** than 12 disciples throughout His earthly ministry. Our text this evening tells us as much in verse 21. But remember that Jesus had specially elected, called, and trained **12** disciples to be His **inner ring**. In fact, in his gospel, Luke often calls that inner ring, "The Twelve." The number had symbolic significance for Jesus' mission.

We can see hints of the symbolic significance of the number 12 here in our text in several places. Notice how Luke begins this scene by listing 11 apostles, implicitly highlighting the absence of Judas. Notice the diction in verse 17 describing Judas' place among The Twelve, "For he was **numbered** among us and was **allotted** his share in this ministry." Compare this description with the selection of Matthias to replace Judas in verse 26, "and they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was **numbered** with the **eleven** apostles."

While our text this evening merely hints at the significance of the number TWELVE, the context of Luke's gospel elucidates it. Consider, for example, Luke 9:1-2, "And Jesus called **the twelve** together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." We see here that, in the gospels, THE TWELVE were not merely Jesus' biggest fans and supporters...they were not merely His padawans and proteges...they were in the process of becoming His image-bearers and His ambassadors. Here in Luke 9:1-2 we see **what they will become** as they preach their master's message, speak in His name, wield His spiritual power, represent His authority, and embody His ways.

Similarly, Luke 22:28-30 indicates something of the symbolic significance of "The Twelve" where Jesus says to them, "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the **twelve tribes** of Israel." In this passage Jesus connects the dots between his twelve disciples the twelve tribes of Israel. (*Quick reminder that the nation of Israel originated in the twelve sons of Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. Remember that it was through these 12 sons and their descendants that God would fulfill the promises of seed, land, blessing, and presence that He had made to Abraham.*) By choosing, training, and commissioning **12 disciples** to preach the good news of the kingdom to Israel and by assigning them thrones of judgment over Israel, Jesus was making a statement: Israel needs renewal...He is bringing that renewal, starting with his disciples. The calling of the 12 is a reconstitution, or reformation, of Israel.

The vacancy left by Judas, therefore, symbolically undermined Jesus' mission to bring about the renewal of Israel. Symbolically, it's roughly parallel to the crisis Israel experienced in the book of Judges when the entire tribe of Benjamin was in danger of extinction. To lose one of the 12 tribes would have been to fundamentally damage the identity of Israel, for she consisted of 12 tribes. In a parallel way, the vacancy left by Judas' defection was an identity crisis for The Twelve.

Secondly, the vacancy left by Judas was a significant crack in the church's foundation because it seemed to discredit Jesus. Now, as those who have the benefits of the complete canon of Scripture, a mature understanding of Christ, and 2000 years of hindsight, it may be hard for us to understand this objection. But try for a moment to put yourself in the shoes of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew, Greek, or Roman, hearing the gospel for the first time. Imagine hearing the story of the crucifixion for the first time and stumbling over the betrayal of Judas: The Son of God was betrayed by one of his closest disciples, someone from His inner ring, someone who had been joined to his hip for three years? He was betrayed by one of The Twelve, who had carried out miracles in His name, preached the same gospel, and who knew Jesus' teaching like the back of his own hand?

How could this be? If Jesus was so wonderful and so worthy of devotion, then how is it that one of his own bosom-buddies could betray Him so easily? If Jesus truly was the Son of God, then why would he have picked a disciple who would betray him? Didn't he know that Judas was going to betray Him? If he had foreseen that, then why did he elect Him to be part of The Twelve?

This wasn't just a potential stumbling block for the unbelieving 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew, Greek, or Roman. This was also a challenge for the apostles to come to terms with. Judas' defection must have been a kick in the stomach that knocked the wind out of them. Remember that, even at the beginning of the Last Supper, they were surprised by Jesus' statement that someone would betray him. It's not as if, when Jesus said, "someone will betray me," they all turned to look at Judas and muttered, "duh." They didn't know which disciple it would be. In fact, in typical fashion, Peter started arguing about how it wouldn't be him. It's not as if Judas was an obvious impostor all along.

This betrayal was something that had the potential to shake their confidence in one another, which would have undermined their apostolic partnership in the early days of the church, a time marked by intense outside opposition, when it was especially important to present a united front to the world. Perhaps it even had the potential to cast doubts on their own faith: if Judas could betray Jesus for money, who's to say that Andrew or James wouldn't betray Jesus in order to save his life?

The vacancy left by Judas didn't simply distort the symbolic significance of The Twelve; it also raised fundamental questions about the leadership of the church and about the credibility of Jesus.

At the bottom of these dark thoughts is an unsettling question: How could this have happened?

Look again at verses 15-20 and notice the two-fold answer to our second question: It was foretold by the Scriptures. Judas was judged.

The first part of the answer (*it was foretold by the Scriptures*) is clearly seen in verses 16-17 as well as verse 20. Look again at those verses and ponder Peter's implicit assertion of God's sovereignty over Judas' defection. First, notice how Peter, in verse 17, reaffirms that Jesus elected Judas to be part of the inner ring of the Twelve, "For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." Peter emphasizes here that Judas' appointment was not an accident or a mistake; it was part of the divine plan. Secondly, notice in verse 16, how Peter affirms that this happened in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled, "Brothers, the Scriptures had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas." This tragedy was no surprise to God. Not only did God foresee it, he foretold and foreordained it. It was **necessary** for things to happen this way in order that Christ might be our scapegoat.

And third, consider the quotations from the Psalter in verse 20. Psalm 69 and 109 are both imprecatory psalms in which a righteous speaker cries out to God for deliverance from wicked enemies. Peter sees these prayers for judgment as having their ultimate fulfillment in Christ, who is the epitome of innocent, righteous suffering. Peter sees the first quotation, from Psalm 69, as having been fulfilled in the judgment of Judas. The "desolate" "camp" with "no one to dwell in it" is the "Field of Blood" mentioned in verse 19. (Reminder that the Field of Blood was the land that was purchased with the money given to Judas for betraying Jesus. Remember that Matthew tells us that this field was hereafter used as a cemetery for "strangers," which is fitting, given that Judas had estranged himself from Jesus and the people of God.)

Peter sees the second quotation, from Psalm 109, as giving them guidance on how to handle this situation. By the way, it's worth noting that Peter here quotes from the Septuagint (which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and the word here for "office" is *episkopayn*. That's the same Greek word used to describe the office of "overseer," in 1 Timothy 3 (where we derive our qualifications for elders) and it's also the same word from which we derive the English words "bishop" and "episcopapal."

I'm tempted to go a tangent here, but instead I'll simply note in passing how the apostles often seem to read the Old Testament with a much fuller and more Christocentric hermeneutic than we do.

So put these three observations together: Jesus intentionally chose Judas for to be one of The Twelve. The Holy Spirit foretold Judas' defection. Psalm 69 and 109 are fulfilled in Christ's sufferings. In a roundabout way, Peter is telling us that **Jesus himself was sovereign over Judas' betrayal**.

If this seems mind-numbingly obvious to you, then, once again, try to put yourself in the shoes of a first century Jew, Greek, or Roman. Remember as well that the church did not yet have a single page of the New Testament. The first generation of Christians derived their Christology and their soteriology from the Old Testament and the revelation given directly to the apostles. I wonder...if we had only the first 39 books of the Bible, would we have done as well as they did?

So, how could this have happened? It was necessary to fulfill Scripture.

Notice what Peter is doing by answering the objection this way. He is turning the tables on the skeptic. This is spiritual Jiu-Jitsu. This is what wrestlers call a reversal. Peter is telling us that the betrayal of Judas does not discredit Jesus; it validates Him. It demonstrates the depths of His sovereignty. At the very moment when it seemed that Jesus was at His weakest, His most ignorant, and His most vulnerable, He was, in fact, making His final moves to set up checkmate against sin and death. Little did he know, but in betraying the Lord Jesus, Judas set off the trip wire that Jesus had set up in ages past, which would result in His crucifixion, death, and resurrection, the source of our salvation.

What Peter is saying here is essentially the same thing that he will say in chapter 2 to the Jews who called for Jesus' death, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

Peter's answer ought to give us the highest confidence in our foundation. Ultimately, our foundation, our cornerstone, is the Lord Jesus Christ, whose sovereignty is invincible, whose plans are unstoppable, whose wisdom is unsearchable. If Jesus Christ can judo the betrayal of Judas into our redemption, then what do we have to fear? The weapons of Islamic Terrorism? The strategies of the secular left? The propaganda of the Communist party of China? The malice of Satan? Can any of those compare with the ability to bring good out of evil, life out of death, victory out of apparent defeat, and redemption out of betrayal?

Church, whatever we must suffer in this time before Jesus' return, we can certain that we will endure and that we will prevail. Not because of the righteousness or uprightness of our hearts, as Pastor Steven reminded us this morning. Not because of our might or strength as we were reminded a few weeks ago. But because Jesus is the King of Kings and He is our defender. Because He has chosen us to be His holy nation, His bride, a people for His possession.

Like many of the early apostles, we may individually suffer opposition, or even persecution and death. But the church can no more be extinguished by these forces than the Hydra of Greek mythology could be killed by chopping off its heads. Cut down a Christian, and watch two more spring up out of his blood.

It must be so, for we are the body of Christ. Just as our bulletin this evening so elegantly reminds us that Jesus Christ conquers by his cross, so he commands us, to take our cross and follow him.

Church, be confident. You are built upon the cross of Christ.

So how could this have happened? It was necessary to fulfill the Scripture. That's Peter's answer in verses 15-17 and 20. But look again at verses 18-19 and notice that Luke implies a second, complementary answer to that question: Judas was judged.

Look again at these verses and notice the language of judgment: The word translated "reward" in verse 18 can also be translated as "wages." The Greek word appears 28 times in the New Testament, often associated with Judgement Day and the Second Coming of Christ. It's the same word that we find in the Beatitudes, "Rejoice and be glad, for your

**reward** in heaven is great.” It’s the same word that we find in Revelation 22:12, where Jesus says, “Behold I am coming quickly, and my **reward** is with Me, to render to each man according to what he has done.” Judas got the “reward,” or the “wage” which his betrayal deserved: a Field of Blood, a cemetery for strangers...fitting for one who had estranged himself from Christ.

Remember that the Field of Blood was so named because it was purchased with blood money. Matthew 27 tells us that Judas returned the money he had earned by betraying Jesus in a fit of despair, saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” The priests then used that tainted money to purchase the field which they turned into a cemetery.

Notice the language of judgment in the description of Judas’ death. Judas not only fell literally...he fell morally and spiritually. He fell to his death...but he also fell into apostasy, judgment, and hell. Consider as well the gloomy imagery of hanging. Matthew 27 tells us that, before he fell, he hung himself. Think of the others who were hung in Scripture: Absalom, Hamaan, the King of Ai, and, in a sense, Jesus upon the cross. Paul says in Galatians 3, “**Cursed** is everyone who is hung on a tree.”

You don’t need me to tell you that bursting open and gushing bowels are also a picture of judgment. Instead let me simply point out that the Greek word there is the same word that is usually translated as “heart” or “affection” or “compassion.” In Hebrew anthropology, the “bowels” or “kidneys” were considered the seat of the emotions. The gut. Ponder the significance of that detail as you imagine this gruesome scene.

Luke did not include these gory details for shock value, to sensationalize, or to sell more copies of his book. He included them to highlight the judgment of Judas, and thus to answer this potential objection. This gruesome judgment makes it crystal clear that Judas did not get the upper hand over Jesus. Judas did not evade the sovereignty of Jesus for a single moment. The judgment of Judas vindicates Jesus.

However, this gruesome scene serves a secondary purpose: a warning to us. This is a miniature cautionary tale for every disciple of Christ. This is a haunted basement in the foundation of the church, and we would do well to peek into it once in a blue moon.

Let the gory details sink into your imagination. Let the tragedy of this scene leave a lasting impression. Here is a man who walked and talked with Jesus. Here is a man who watched Jesus heal the blind and raise the dead. Here is a man who saw the sincerity of Jesus’ character up close and personal. Here is a man who was intimately known and loved by Jesus. And here is a man who ended up cursed.

The judgement of Judas reminds us that it is not enough merely to be in the vicinity of Jesus, or to be part of His crowd. We must be united to Him by a living faith. We must nurture our love for Him. We must be on guard against bitterness, cynicism, greed, pragmatism, the wiles of Satan, the love of the world, or any other force that would cause our hearts to grow cold towards Him.

Of course, from the perspective of God’s eternal decrees, we know that Judas didn’t lose salvation or election. From **God’s** perspective, Judas was predestined to fall away and to betray the Lord Jesus.

But that is no excuse for Judas’ **treachery**. No one put a gun to Judas’ head. Judas fell through his own volition, through his own sinful desires, through his own unbelief.

So, as the Hebrews writer exhorts us, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

The judgement of Judas and the prophetic foreknowledge of Scripture vindicate the sovereignty of Jesus and so answer the unsettling question: How could this crack in the apostolic foundation have happened? Let’s turn now and consider the third question: How can the crack be repaired?

Look again at verses 20-26 and notice that the apostles use a four-step process for selecting a replacement for Judas: they search the Scriptures; they consult among themselves using wisdom and common sense; they pray for guidance; and they cast lots once the decision has been narrowed down to two equal alternatives.

The burden of our text is not to provide us with a matrix for godly decision making. This is not meant to be taken as a decision tree paradigm. This was a unique situation which the church will not face again since the office of apostle has now ceased.

However, that said, we could note in passing that the passage does illustrate some principles of wise and godly decision-making. Certainly it is good and right for us to consult Scripture, pray for guidance, seek wise counsel from others, and use common sense when we are faced with an important decision. Certainly it is good and right to trust, that as the Lord Jesus was with the apostles in their deliberations over foundational decisions, so He is also with us in the smaller, personal decisions of our lives.

But, the burden of our text is not to give us advice about decision making; it is to show us the sturdy foundation of the church.

If you think carefully about this whole decision-making process, you'll see that it defines the office of apostle with three criteria. The first two are seen in their consultation in verses 21-22, "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us- one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." An apostle must have personally witnessed the resurrected Jesus, and the man must have a personal knowledge of Jesus' teaching and earthly ministry. Without those two experiences, a man could not be a credible, compelling witness to a skeptical world. How can one bear witness to what he has not seen?

The third criterion is seen in verses 24-26. Look again at those verses and notice that an apostle is not only an eye-witness, but also a commissioned representative...someone who carries official authority, granted by Christ. "And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles." An apostle must be hand-picked by the Lord Jesus Himself, just as the 12 disciples were specially chosen by Him in the gospels.

This explains the use of lots in verse 26; it was a way of allowing the Lord to make the choice.

Think about three criteria. They encourage our confidence in the apostolic foundation of the church in two ways.

First, they remind us that our faith is based in real history. These are rigorous standards, and they emphasize how important credibility and historical accuracy were to the apostles.

Compare these standards with what Peter says about his apostolic ministry, "for we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" 2 Peter 1:16. Compare these standards with what John writes at the beginning of his first epistle, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have **seen with our eyes**, which we **looked** upon and have **touched with our hands**, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have **seen** it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" 1 John 1:1-3

These standards remind us that our faith is not simply a set of morals, or a set of ideas, or an ideology. It's not just a sentimental tradition or a mythology. It's Truth with a capital T, grounded in real history.

Luke here is implicitly inviting us to put it to the test.

That ought not to surprise us. Remember the purpose statement of Luke's gospel at the beginning, "to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Do you have questions and doubts about the Bible, about Jesus, about the historical credibility of Christianity, and the Old Testament? Then start digging for the answers. They are out there. More than one intelligent skeptic has been converted to the faith when he set out to disprove it! Check out *Cold Case Christianity* by J Werner Wallace or *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel.

Church, the apostle Luke wanted you have **confidence** about the historical grounding of your faith. Don't cede the ground of history to the liberals, the skeptics, or the Gnostics. Through and through, the Bible and our faith are historical.

Secondly, these three apostolic criteria encourage our confidence in the apostolic foundation of the church by reminding us of Jesus' sovereign oversight. This four-part decision making process allowed Jesus to work through his nascent church to select the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle and to repair the crack in the apostolic foundation.

Our text makes it clear, that though Jesus has ascended to heaven, he is still with his church. He continues to guide us by His word, His spirit, and His providence. Therefore, we can be confident,

The church shall never perish, her dear lord to defend,  
to guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end;  
though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale,  
against or foe or traitor, she ever shall prevail.

Amen?

Sing in response- the Church's one foundation