



## Sermon Transcript

### January 7, 2024

## 2024: Growing Gospel Presence

## Growing . . . Gospel . . . Presence

Acts 1:1-11

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 7, 2024 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com)

**Sermon Text:**

**Acts 1:1-11**

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? 7 He said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

## Introduction

**A Growing Gospel Presence:** that is our theme for this year . . . 2024. It is a theme I want to live out in my own life this coming year and it is a theme I want to see take root in the life of our church this year. When we come to the end of this year, I would like to be able to look back and celebrate some real concrete ways in which we have seen a “growing gospel presence” take root in the life of our church family.

This theme for the year is the fruit of the third and fourth prayer requests we have been praying for the past year. We have been praying that we would see people come to faith in Jesus as we seek to be salt and light wherever God takes us. At the same time, we have been praying that God would give us an increased vision for his global glory and our role in the world-wide mission of God. Both of these requests contribute to our theme for this year . . . a “growing gospel presence.”

This theme is not just aspirational. It is shaping what we are doing this year. We are taking definitive steps to help us live out these two prayer requests. We believe these steps will lead to a “growing gospel presence” in our personal lives and in the ministry of our church family.

To help us become “salt and light” in our community and in our relationships, the elders are working with other churches in our district to bring evangelism training into our discipleship ministry. This training is accessible. It will train you on how to pray for the people in your network, how to share your personal faith story, how to share the gospel and how to help a person get started in their faith journey. We are going to take our first steps into this training this year and we hope that in the coming years lay people from our church will be training other churches to do the same thing. We are praying that a “growing gospel presence” will lead to a real gospel movement.

To help us grow in our vision for the global glory of God and discern our role in the world-wide mission of God, the missions committee is hosting a series of conversations called “Missions Summits.” We had our first Missions Summit in November, where we looked to the past and the missions story that has developed over the years in and through WEFC. There was a real movement of God here in the 1980’s when a wave of people from WEFC went into missions and some of our own people also participated in a church planting movement throughout New England. We had about forty people participate in that first Missions Summit and it was an invigorating conversation.

We would like to invite you to participate in our second Missions Summit on Saturday, January 27 from 5:00 to 7:30 pm. This “Missions Summit” will concentrate on our current missions program. Where do we currently have a “gospel presence” through our missions program? What kinds of ministries do we support? Dale and Ann Little, missionaries we support in Japan, will be with us as well. During this time, we will also consider how we can develop better relationships with our missionaries. We will be serving pizza and salad. It will be family friendly and would love for kids to be part of this interactive evening. Please signup online or on the signup sheet down by the office so we can plan appropriately. We are praying that these “Mission Summits” will help us discern how God is leading us in our missionary efforts in the future.

To get us started on our journey this year, I am going to preach through Acts 1-13. This sermon series will take us up to Palm Sunday and Easter and it will cast vision for our theme for this year. This morning we are going to be in the introduction to the book of Acts, Acts 1:1-11. I want to use the introduction to the book of Acts to introduce our theme for the coming year. So here are my three points this morning: A **GROWING** Gospel Presence . . . A Growing **GOSPEL** Presence . . . A Growing Gospel **PRESENCE**.

### Some FACTS about ACTS

Before we get started, I think it would be good to acknowledge some “facts about Acts.” Right out of the gate, you discover that this is the second book written by Luke. Acts begins with this opening phrase, *“In the first book, O Theophilus . . .”* The “first book” Luke is referring to is the Gospel of Luke. Just a few weeks ago, Dave Baer preached on the opening chapter of the Gospel of Luke. In opening paragraph of the Gospel of Luke we saw that Luke had set out to put together an orderly account of the life of Jesus and he addressed his writing to a man by the name of *“Theophilus.”* And that is who we see Luke addressing in the opening verse of Acts. He writes, *“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”* And so this is more than just a “second book” written by Luke. It is “Volume II” . . . it is the continuation of where Luke left off in his first book.

You can see this deliberate connection between these two books by the way Acts begins and the Gospel of Luke ends. Acts begins with Luke looking back to the first book he wrote by saying, *“I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up.”* That is exactly how the Gospel of Luke ends. It says in Luke 24:51, *“While he [Jesus] blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.”* And so with the book of Acts, it is Luke’s intention to pick up the story from

there. Later in our passage this morning, Acts 1:9, this same scene is repeated. *“And when he [Jesus] had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”* And so the book of Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ends . . . the ascension of Jesus to heaven.

Now notice how Luke describes the first book he wrote to Theophilus. Looking back to the Gospel of Luke, he says in Acts 1:1, *“I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”* In other words, the Gospel of Luke deals with just the beginning of the work and activity of Jesus in this world. The activity of Jesus in this world did not end with the ascension of Jesus to heaven. Clearly, at the end of our passage this morning, there is the promise that Jesus is coming back. The angels said to the apostles in verse 11, *“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”* The implication in all of this is that the book of Acts picks up with the ongoing work (“acts”) Jesus is doing in the world today through the church.

The title that has been given to the book of Acts has often been “The Acts of the Apostles.” This is a title was not original to the book, but became the traditional title for the book. It has some merit to it because it traces the activity of the apostles as they took the gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. Others have said, “No, this is the “Acts of the Holy Spirit” who empowered the apostles to bear witness to Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome. Again, there is an element of truth in that. I would agree with Alan Thompson who takes it one step further and says that that book of Acts is “the Acts of the Lord Jesus, through his people, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the accomplishment of God’s purposes.”<sup>1</sup> So in his first book, Luke tells us what Jesus *“began to do and teach.”* It is “Volume I of the Acts of Jesus.” In this second book, we have “Volume II of the Ongoing Acts of the risen Jesus who reigns over all things.”

It is very curious how Acts ends. It really doesn’t have an ending. It kind of leaves you hanging. Here we find Paul in house arrest in Rome. That is how it ends. It doesn’t leave us with any resolution as to what happens with Paul. All we know is that he was *“proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”* That is the final verse of the book of Acts. I think this ending is intentional because the story of Acts is still being written today. Jesus is yet to return. And so the ongoing acts of the risen Jesus in this world are still . . . ongoing! So when we say we want to see a “growing gospel presence” take root in our lives and in our church, we are saying that we want to be part of what Jesus is doing in the world today! Don’t you want to be part of what Jesus is doing in the world today? So as we look at the

introduction to the Book of Acts, lets take some introductory steps into our theme for the e2024 . . . a “Growing Gospel Presence.”

## **GROWING Gospel Presence**

“**GROWING**” is a good word to describe what we see in the introduction to the book of Acts. It is a word you could use to describe the entire book of Acts. In fact, it is a word you could use to describe the ongoing activity of Jesus in the world from Acts 1 to the present day. From the beginning, there has been a **GROWING** gospel presence.

First of all, we see this **GROWING** gospel presence as it moves from person to person. Dave had mentioned the other week that we really don’t know anything about “*Theophilus*.” Some have even wondered if Luke was using this name—which means “friend of God”—not as a reference to a specific person but to describe the typical seeker on a quest to know for certain whether the claims of Jesus were true. I tend to think he is a real person, most likely a person of means and of rank or influence, referred to in Luke 1:3 as “*most excellent Theophilus*.” And in you recall from the other week, Luke put together an orderly account of the life and the teaching of Jesus that he gathered from eyewitnesses and he was now passing that onto Theophilus so that “*he could have certainty concerning the things*” he had been taught about Jesus.

Do you see the person to person to person movement of the gospel here? From eyewitnesses who had a front row seat to the activity and the teaching of Jesus to Luke, who put it down for us on paper in the Gospel of Luke . . . and now to Theophilus. In fact, I think the Gospel of Luke was written to Theophilus to give him certainty that the claims of Jesus –risen from the dead—were indeed true. The reason Luke is writing to Theophilus in the Book of Acts is to invite Theophilus to participate in the ongoing activity of Jesus in the world. David Peterson suggests that Luke is writing to Theophilus, hoping that “he would act as a patron or sponsor in bringing Luke’s work to a wider audience.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, Luke needed a “publisher” to get his testimony out there. In other words, Theophilus was being invited to consider how he might contribute to this **GROWING** gospel presence. Like we are inviting you to participate in the ongoing acts of Jesus in the world today, Luke was inviting Theophilus to join him in this gospel movement that grows from person to person to person.

I am sure if you were to share your story of coming to faith, there would be a person or several “persons” you would name who were part of your journey to faith. Parents, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, pastors, neighbors, co-workers . . . everyday

“persons” are still be used by Jesus to accomplish his ongoing activity in the world today. That is why we enter this year with a measure of expectation. This is how Jesus is working in the world right now. It is through people like you and me who are pointing people to Jesus.

At the end of every year, Collin Hansen writes an article on what he considers to be the “Top Ten Theology Stories of the Year.”<sup>3</sup> I always look forward to reading that article. In his “top ten” list for 2023 at “number six” he had the story of “high-profile conversions” that took place this past year. In his mind, these conversions suggested that there is a growing disenchantment with secularism and its ability to meet the demands of life. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, had renounced the Islam faith she grew up with and became one of the leading voices for what was known as the “New Atheists.” This past year she created quite a fuss online when she wrote an article with the title: “Why I Am Now A Christian.” At the same time Katherine Von Drachenberg, who came to fame as a tattoo artist on the reality show *LA Ink* and who dabbled in witchcraft and the occult caught people by surprise when she posted an Instagram video of her baptism in a local church in Indiana and in a very public way she discarded all of the books she accumulated on the occult. And then finally, there is Molly Worthen, an intellect who taught history at some of the most prestigious American universities. She was an expert on the history of evangelicalism in America. While teaching at the University of North Carolina, she was intrigued by the Christian students who were eager to share their faith. She connected with their pastor, J. D. Greear, and through that relationship she gave her life to Christ. From Islam to atheism to pop-culture to academia . . . Jesus is still **GROWING** his kingdom from person to person to person.

As we see in this introduction to the book of Acts, the **GROWING** nature of the gospel is not just confined to person to person, but it **GROWS** and moves from region to region. Acts 1:8 is often considered the outline for the book of Acts. “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” Starting in Acts 2, the apostles bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem. In Acts 8 this good news makes its way to Samaria. In Acts 10, it goes to the Gentiles when Peter gives witness to the house of Cornelius. Then we have recorded for us the three missionary journeys of Paul throughout Asia Minor and the book ends with Paul in Rome, bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus in front of King Agrippa. This **GROWING** nature of the gospel goes from person to person, region to region, and generation to generation. It is our turn to participate in this gospel movement.

## Growing GOSPEL Presence

Secondly, we are praying for a “growing **GOSPEL** presence.” The word **GOSPEL** means “good news.” This “good news” we have to share centers on the person of Jesus. You can see that here in our passage this morning. Luke reminds Theophilus in verse 1 that in the first book he wrote, he “*dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.*” The focus of the Gospel of Luke was on Jesus and Luke keeps his focus on Jesus in the book of Acts. In verse 3 he refers to the suffering of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. He writes, “*He [Jesus] presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs.*” And then in the same verse, we are told that the forty days between the resurrection of Jesus and the ascension of Jesus, Jesus taught the apostles about the kingdom of God that was ushered in through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And then, this introduction ends in verses 9-11 by recording for us the ascension of Jesus and the promise of his future return. When we talk about a “growing **GOSPEL** presence” we are talking about making Jesus known.

This is at the heart of what Jesus is referring to when he addresses the apostles in verse 8. He says, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses.*” What does it mean to be a “witness” for Jesus? I can imagine that there are various things that come to mind that encompass what it means to be a “witness” for Christ. Part of being a witness may include sharing your story of how you came to faith in Jesus. There is power in your personal story. Part of our “witness” is how we live our lives in front of others. Our “witness” is not confined to just what we say, but it is also demonstrated in how we live. No doubt, all of this is part of what it means to be a “witness” for Jesus.

But in the book of Acts, there is a narrow focus for what it means to be a “witness” for Jesus. In a very specific way, these first century followers of Jesus Christ were to give “witness” to the fact that this Jesus who was crucified has risen from the dead. They were to give “witness” to what they saw with their own eyes. This is why it says in Acts 1:3, “*He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*” At the heart of their “witness” to Jesus Christ is the fact that they have witnessed his resurrection from the dead. Alan Thompson says it this way, “The term “witness” or “testify” in Acts frequently has to do NOT with what we might describe as personal testimony of what God has done in our lives, but with the actual “witness” or “sight” of the risen Lord Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> They are giving “witness” to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.



We have already seen how the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts contain for us the beginning and the continuing work of Jesus Christ in this world. At the end of Luke, we hear the risen Jesus say to his disciples, *"You are witness of these things."* Well, "witnesses" of what things?" Two verses prior to this, it says *"that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead."* Throughout the book of Acts, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, remains the focus of the witness of the apostles as the **GOSPEL** moves from Jerusalem to Rome. I believe that our personal testimony and our personal lifestyle are important to bearing witness to Jesus. But at the core of bearing witness to Jesus is the testimony that the one who was crucified has indeed risen from the dead.

A few years ago I was speaking with a college professor who was teaching a course on Christianity at a state college. His first assignment to his students was to have them read the Gospel of Luke. And then he told them this, "Before you dismiss the claims of Christianity, you must have a response to the central claim of this faith. Did Jesus rise from the dead? You need to form an intelligent response to the central claim upon which the whole thing rises or falls. If you don't think he rose from the dead, then you can dismiss the whole thing, because without the resurrection of Jesus we have nothing. But, if in examining the evidence, you come to conclude that he did rise from the dead, it is a game changer." Indeed it is. It is this truth that leads to the confession that Jesus is Lord. It is this truth that assures us that the kingdom of God has come and God is restoring this broken world one person at a time.

This is what C. S. Lewis was getting at when he came to embrace Jesus as his Lord. Lewis wrote, "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."<sup>5</sup> This is the message we proclaim as we seek to have a "growing **GOSPEL** presence." We want to equip you and help you give witness to the life changing truth of Jesus Christ.

## Growing Gospel PRESENCE

Finally, we want to have a “growing gospel **PRESENCE**.” This is the mandate for us as followers of Jesus. I was struck by what Luke writes in verse 1. Thinking back to the first book he wrote, the Gospel of Luke, he said, *“I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”* That is “word” and “deed.” Jesus made his presence known through what he did and what he taught.

After Jesus rose from the dead, In the Gospel of Luke, Luke tells us the story of when Jesus encountered the two men on the road to Emmaus. These two men were discouraged followers of Jesus who thought their hopes had been dashed with the death of Jesus on the cross. They didn’t recognize Jesus when he came alongside of them as they were walking home. Jesus asked them why they were discouraged and sad and they told him about Jesus. Listen to how they described Jesus . . . to Jesus. He was *“a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.”* There it is again . . . “word” and “deed.”

When we talk about having a “growing gospel **PRESENCE**,” we are not just talking about “proclaiming the gospel” in word. We are also talking about “demonstrating the gospel” in deed . . . by the way we are present in the lives of people. Are you intentionally “present” to the needs of people far from Jesus?

My dad tells the story of something that happened to him years ago. He was sitting at the counter of a diner. Behind the counter was a mirror where you could see the glass doors to the entrance of the diner. As he sat there eating his food, he noticed a man pacing outside of the diner and stopping at the entrance of the door . . . and you could tell he was trying to get up the nerve to walk into the diner. This went on for several minutes, back and forth he went. Finally the man gets up the nerve to walk into the diner and he walks up to the counter and he says to the woman behind the counter, “I haven’t eaten in days . . . are there any scraps I could have . . . I’ll take anything.” The woman was rather perturbed that this man would come into the diner, and rather dismissively, asked him if he tried the church two blocks down and three blocks over . . . they often have something for people who need food. As my dad was sitting there listening to this, the thought came to his mind . . . “Is the church two blocks down and three blocks over, or is the “the church” sitting right here on this stool?” Like many of you would have done, he gave the waitress some money and told her to give the man whatever he wanted. That is a “growing gospel **PRESENCE**.” It is the recognition that wherever you go, you are the presence of the church . . . the presence of Jesus. His

**PRESENCE** is made known through us being present in “word” and in “deed.” It is the simple stuff! It is the way we treat people.

If I can just add one more introductory thought about our “growing gospel **PRESENCE**.” There is an individual component to this. We have been placed in neighborhoods and in work places and in schools and in everyday situations where we want to be mindful of being present. But there is also a communal presence we have as a church gathered. As you bring people into our fellowship, we partner with you to be that **PRESENCE** of Jesus to them. You are not alone. This is something we are doing together.

## Conclusion

We are just getting started and over the first few months of this year, we will be laying down the foundation for our theme for the 2024: “A Growing Gospel Presence.”

**GROWING:** It is a gospel movement, moving from person to person, from region to region and from generation to generation. Jesus is at work in this world.

**GOSPEL:** It is a message the centers on the good news that Jesus has risen from the dead. He is Lord and the kingdom of God has come.

**PRESENCE:** This is our mandate individually and corporately. We want to be present in “word” and in “deed” wherever God places us.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan J. Thompson *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011) 47

<sup>2</sup>David G. Peterson *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001)

<sup>3</sup>Collin Hansen “My Top Ten Theology Stories of 2023” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org)  
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<sup>4</sup>Thompson, 76-77

<sup>5</sup>C. S. Lewis *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1952) 52