

Acts 1:1-11 - Power to Become Witnesses

Despite its title, “The Acts of the Apostles,” the book of Acts is a book about Jesus. In his first volume, the Gospel that bears his name, Luke recounted “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (v. 1). What Jesus began in Luke, he continues in Acts, even after his ascension (v. 9). He is the primary character of the book and the focus of all its events. As Jesus himself said in Luke’s Gospel, he is the primary character and focus of *all* of Scripture (Luke 24:27).

Acts depicts the continuing actions and teachings of Jesus in a way that no other book of the Bible does. Luke claims that as the budding Christian movement spreads, Jesus himself is at work (cf. Acts 1:8; 4:10, 30; 5:32; 7:55, 59–60; 9:5, 15–17). The church is Jesus’ vehicle to continue his work in the world. This is true for us today as well: as Paul says, we who are in Christ are his body (1 Cor. 12:27).

There is an awesome responsibility here, but the responsibility rests on Christ. The church is Jesus’ church, and what he began in his earthly ministry, he will finish (Phil. 1:6). The book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Luke “rewinds” a little, and the key event that he reviews is the resurrection. The resurrection is a key topic in the evangelistic speeches in Acts. The word “resurrection” (Greek *anastasis*) occurs more times in the book of Acts than in any other New Testament book (eleven times in Acts; the next highest is Luke with six). The first item on Jesus’ mind, post-resurrection, is that the apostles wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. This power leads to their being a “witness” in four concentric circles, leading out from Jerusalem. The fact that Jesus notes Samaria shows that the gospel will transcend not just geography (Jerusalem and Judea), but ethnicity as well.

The primary task of the people of God is to bear witness to his great deeds. The first disciples were charged to bear witness to the risen Christ, whom they had seen with their eyes. This witness would begin in Jerusalem, but would move outward to “the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In these verses, Jesus did not command his disciples to perform certain rituals, to act according to certain rules, or to refrain from certain activities. He promised them that they would testify to his power when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

This is not a concept unique to Acts or the New Testament. God has always been concerned that his people reflect on what he has done and tell others about it. God’s people have always been primarily witnesses to his greatness. “I have redeemed you,” God says in Isaiah. “You are my witnesses . . . and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he” (Isa. 43:1, 10).

Acts 1:12-26 - Waiting Well

After describing who was present in the upper room, Luke specifically details what the group was doing. We’re told that the group as a whole became joined “with one accord” (Acts 1:14). Again, Luke is affirming that everyone present was committed to the unifying belief that Jesus is the Messiah, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. Faith in Jesus unified them together as one people. Luke also indicates that these men and women were devoted to prayer. This devotion to prayer was an act of obedience to Christ (Luke 18:1). Trusting in the promise of the coming

Holy Spirit, the group relied on asking God in prayer to guide their actions. It was because of the disciples' devotion to prayer that the Lord began to work through them to build his church. gospel to the world around us.

Acts 2:1-13 - The Power Arrives

Since the time of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), the nations of the earth were divided by language, unable to come together as a result of their rebellion against God. In God's Old Testament redemptive acts, he singled out the Jewish nation to mediate his blessing to the world, and therefore the good news of God's grace was communicated only in the Hebrew language. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, however, the curse of Babel begins to unravel. No longer is the gospel confined to Hebrew; it is available directly to all nations and all languages. The restored order of God's kingdom begins to break into the dark and confused world of sin. This gives us hope today. The gospel triumphs in a world still groaning under the curse of sin (Rom. 8:22). One day Christ's reign will be fully realized, and the effects of sin will fall away completely.

The experience of the Spirit at Pentecost fulfills John the Baptist's prophecy of the one (Jesus) who would baptize in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; cf. Acts 1:5). The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost has a specific purpose in redemptive history: to show that God's salvation is now flowing out to people from every nation, tribe, and language. This is repeated in the three outpourings of the Spirit that follow in Acts 8; 10–11; and 19. Luke's focus in Acts 2 is on the fulfillment of prophecy, not on paradigms for personal experience. Luke is introducing the expanding gospel ministry of the Holy Spirit as the gospel is beginning to spread.

Acts 2:14-41 - Peter's Sermon

Peter begins his famous Pentecost sermon with an extensive reference to the Old Testament, a citation from the prophet Joel, who predicted that God's Spirit would be poured out in the last days, before the final judgment (the "day of the Lord"). According to Peter, the last days have begun. This "new religion" is actually the continuation of what God has been doing through Israel all along. Better yet, God made promises years ago that these "last days" would come, and at Pentecost God is demonstrating that he is faithful and powerful to keep his promises. As he promised, God is pouring out his Spirit on *all* flesh—men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile. God is mercifully and joyfully calling all people to salvation.

In Peter's first sermon, the essence of gospel proclamation is clear: Jesus is Lord (v. 36); he is the fulfillment of God's promise for an eternal Davidic kingdom (vv. 29–36). This simple statement of Christ's lordship poses a fundamental challenge both to the Jews (with their strict monotheism) and to the Romans (with their religious-political system founded on the supremacy of Caesar as lord).

The resurrection is also one of the core elements throughout the gospel presentations in Acts. Peter quotes from Psalm 16:8–11 to show that the resurrection was God's intention all along. Thus, the crucifixion of Christ was necessarily part of God's plan, and he followed it by raising Jesus from the dead. Peter shows that this gospel plan is all promised in Scripture. God's grace breaks through the walls of the worst of human rebellion. Just as Jesus promised that the gospel would spread to the end of the earth, Peter proclaims that, "the promise is for you and for your children *and* for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39). The gospel is for immediate hearers and their covenant children but is not confined by ethnic or geographical boundaries. And it is universal in scope: "far off" is not just geographical. By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has

reconciled to himself all of us who were formerly “far off” from God and one another (Eph. 2:17–19). No one is so far removed that God cannot redeem them.

Acts 2:42-47 - The New Community

The Holy Spirit brings forth a devotion to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, community, and prayer. Notice also the unity of mind and heart of these first believers. In what way these first Christians “had all things in common” (v. 44) is difficult to discern, since they retained rights over their property (cf. 5:4). What is clear is that when God is present by his Spirit, there is unity and mutual care. The Holy Spirit desires to work in us both individually and collectively. He brings forth love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in individuals and in the community of believers (Gal. 5:22–23).

The Spirit’s ministry also brings forth conversions and numerical growth, as we see that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). The Spirit produces not only inward spiritual growth but also expansion and growth of the church (though we recognize in later chapters of Acts that these may come in stages and are not always without challenge, persecution, or seeming delay). Gospel-fueled, Spirit-empowered growth is a repeated theme that runs throughout the rest of Acts, as we see that “more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (5:14) and “the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (16:5; see also 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). The Spirit continued to testify through the church to the grace of God in Jesus, bringing about growth in love and in numbers. The grace of God was fruitful and effective, and we see God taking the initiative to spread his grace to ever-expanding numbers of people—even in the face of virulent hostility.

Questions for Group Discussion:

1. How important is Acts 1:8 to the way you look at your own life, purposes, and priorities?
2. Re-read Acts 1:13-14. If we would have unified churches, we need to have praying churches. What characterized the prayer life of the first disciples? (see also Acts 2:42) How does what the disciples are doing guide us when we don’t know what to do next? Why is it hard to do?
3. How does considering the Holy Spirit’s role in the writing of Scripture give us confidence in and excitement about the Bible?
4. How does Judas’ death serve as both a reminder and a warning to you? What things in your life tempt you to betray Christ, just as Judas did? What was the difference between Judas the betrayer and Peter the denier?
5. The apostles waited to begin their ministry until after they had been filled with the Holy Spirit... and then they immediately began it. Are you someone who tends to seek to minister in your own strength rather than the Spirit’s, or tends not to minister at all because you forget you have the Spirit?