

**POWERED BY THE SPIRIT FOR WITNESS**

**Acts 1**

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The book of Acts is the action book of the New Testament. It is one of the most exciting in the Bible. Acts reveals the power of the church. If we are losing our sense of purpose as a church, losing deep fellowship and desire to witness, this is the book to get into. In the teaching of Acts, we see power and expectancy. If the book of Acts were taken out of the New Testament, we would not understand the rest of it. When you finish reading the gospels you see a handful of Jews in Jerusalem talking about a kingdom of Israel. When you open the letter to the Romans, on the other side of Acts, you discover a man never mentioned in the gospels. He is writing to a group of Christians in Rome, the centre of Gentile culture. He is talking about pushing the gospel to the ends of the earth. What happened in between? What happened to make the gospel burst out of its confines of Jerusalem and the Jews, to reach the limits of the then known world in one generation?

That's the wonder of the book of Acts. The first 14 verses of chapter 1 make up the introduction. What we have here is the essential strategy by which Jesus is changing the world. Here is the secret to the life altering, world changing, character of the church, if it is true to its calling. Don't ever think the church is insignificant. Australian culture is shifting the church to the irrelevant fringe. So? The church was even more so in the Roman Empire. But God's people are so essential in the world. It is the people through whom Jesus will change everything.

The book of Acts was written by Luke. He was the doctor, Paul's constant travelling companion, through persecution, hardship, even shipwreck. Now, the book really has the wrong title. It is called the 'Acts of the Apostles'. Yet only Peter and Paul are referred to in any significant way. But the main characters, really, are Jesus and the Holy Spirit. A better title would be the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'. Or perhaps 'The Continuing Acts of Jesus.' In fact, you find this suggested in the opening verse: (Acts 1:1) *"In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach..."* So, obviously, the 'Gospel of Luke' is 'Volume 1' and Acts is Luke's 'Volume 2'. Acts is the continued story of what Jesus did. Acts gives us the account of the way the Holy Spirit came into the church and continued what Jesus started. In the gospels Jesus did things

and taught by being physically present. In Acts Jesus does his ministry through men and women who are indwelt by his Spirit.

That's the strategy by which God changes the world. It is the strategy of the incarnation. God doesn't just send an announcement to the world. He wants his message dressed up in flesh and blood. Through the church, God is present where the people are at. That is what Acts is all about. Men and women possessed by Jesus and revealing his life through their lives. That is the secret of real Christianity. That is the true power of the church. If we don't really know Jesus, no wonder we find little desire to evangelise. Then we have nothing to talk about. Except what is now considered an irrelevant, old fashioned lifestyle.

Now, do you realise that the book of Acts is an unfinished book. It just ends suddenly with an account of Paul living in Rome in his own hired house. (Acts 28:30,31). *"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ-with all boldness and without hindrance!"* It just ends as though you might turn the next page and begin the next chapter. Do you realise it's unfinished because it is still being written? Did you know there is a global network of new churches called Acts 29? In other words, they are involved in the 'next chapter' of Acts. That's what we are involved in as well. Jesus has not finished yet with his mission. He is still at work now, through us, bringing about conversions and the kingdom. When this book is finally finished in glory, what might be your part in it?

Now, let's spend some time seeing what Luke says about the key elements of this incarnation strategy. Luke with his introduction lays out the broad, brush strokes that will be developed in the book. We can see where it's all going. As a first element we note the historic basis that the strategy rests on. Look at Acts 1:3-4. *"After his suffering, Jesus presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."* Now what's the key thing Luke says here? Jesus is alive! Why did Jesus spend 40 days with the disciples? He did it to prove the unbelievable. Jesus had risen from the dead. He had to give *"...many convincing proofs"* because the disciples found it so difficult to grasp the wonder of it all. Jesus "appeared" to them, he "spoke" to them and he "ate" with them. Why did Jesus resurrection have to be proven? Because it is the bedrock upon which everything else rests. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, *"our faith is useless"* as Paul put it. (1Corinthians 15:17). We serve a risen saviour who not only paid

for all our sin, but who lives in us now by his Spirit. We don't just worship a dead hero. Jesus now rules us and all the world.

The second element in the strategy we see here is the "promise of the father". That promise is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the essential element in what happens in Acts. John Stott in his commentary summed up all of Acts when he wrote 'Christ's church has been overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit who thrust it out to witness.' Just how important the Spirit is, is seen in Jesus' command (:4) "*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my father promised...*" This is a strict instruction. 'Stick around in Jerusalem. Don't do anything till the Spirit comes'. Why? 'Because you will mess it up completely if you try to witness without the Spirit. He is absolutely essential. It is impossible to be an effective Christian, a good witness, if you are not operating under the power of the Holy Spirit'.

Speaking of which, we notice that Jesus points us to the power of the Holy Spirit, here in verse 8, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...*" Notice the "But..." The disciples had asked "*Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" They were thinking in terms of schedules, time frames, programs. Jesus says, in effect, don't you worry about that. God will take care of all that. You just focus on one thing. You just focus on the power God gives you, and the task he assigned you. God will bring about everything in his own good time.

So, what kind of power is it that Jesus is talking about? It is resurrection power. It is the power of the Spirit, the power of the risen Lord. It is the power of Almighty God. It is a very different kind of power to what we often think of. It is a quiet power. Most kinds of power we know about make some kind of sound. They hum or buzz, or throb, or pulsate, or pound or explode. But this power of the Spirit is absolutely quiet. Don't be fooled by that. The power of the Spirit is the power of God. It is irresistible. There is no way to oppose it or overthrow it or stop it. That's why I call this preaching series on Acts as 'Mission Unstoppable'. When the Spirit sets out to make someone spiritually alive and respond to the gospel, it will indeed happen. It is the same power by which Jesus rose from the dead. It is the power you receive when you receive the Holy Spirit.

The point of the disciples receiving this power of the Spirit, Jesus said was "*... you will be my witnesses...*" That's our mandate as well. Now note the word, it is 'witness'. It is not that we will be Jesus' propagandists shoving ideology on people. We are not sales representatives going out to peddle a product. We are not recruiters trying to get people to join our religious club. What Jesus says has a personal note about it. He says in effect, 'You will talk about me, because you will have experienced me. What you will

talk about is what I have done for you.' That is what a witness does. They talk about what they have experienced. This is the key issue we see when Peter and the others look for a replacement for Judas. They wanted someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning and seen it all, especially the resurrection. The task of the apostles was to tell the story of what they had seen and heard from their time with Jesus. It's similar for us. We receive the Spirit when we believe in Jesus, and thus the power to go and witness for him.

Now, how we witness may depend on our gifting. The ordinary electric supply we have in our houses, may light up a 40-watt bedside lamp, or a 2000-watt spotlight. Same input, different output. So it is with us. Some have the gift of evangelism and can draw a crowd with the power of their message. Others have a passion to get into a sports or social club to have plenty of opportunities to relate to people and share the gospel. Others will quietly tell their story to family or friends. The point is that each one of us has a responsibility to witness. That is the main calling of the church. We are to make the message of grace and hope known to all peoples, everywhere. Notice how Jesus puts it *"...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* This verse is like the 'Content Page' of Acts. Reading though Acts, you will see how the witness of the church travels in every widening circle, starting in Jerusalem. You will also see that acceptance of the message and conversion is the work of the Spirit. That is wonderfully reassuring. We are not called on to convert people. That is the Spirit's task. It is something only he can do. But we must witness.

Now the fifth element Luke stresses, and it runs like a thread through all of Acts, is the hope of Christ's return. It must have stunned those disciples to see Jesus rise and disappear from their sight. They would also have desperately watched for him to appear again. What would they do without him? But Jesus had made it clear that it was to their advantage that he left. Otherwise the Holy Spirit would not be sent to them. (John 16:7) Jesus had promised *"I will be with you always..."* (Matthew 28). Jesus is never far away. He is always here with us in our midst. But the angels understood the disciples longing. They assured the disciples that Jesus would come again, in the same way he left. One day Jesus will appear again.

And when he does, he will remove the curse from the creation. God will intervene in all the brokenness, the suffering, the wars, sickness, even death. God will draw back the curtain on the new creation, on the new humanity, and all will be perfect. That is the goal for which we have the power of the Spirit to witness. It is to call people to God, to love him and be his children and be part of the new creation. Jesus will come again when all God's chosen will have been saved. So, in a sense, we can speed up the

coming of the new creation by getting out and witnessing. Do we long for the time we can serve God without sin, for the time we can live free from evil and wrong? C.S Lewis once said we are too easily satisfied with life now, that we would rather play in the mud in a slum than enjoy the wonder on playing on the beach. Is life here all we think and dream about, or are we hankering for the things to come and striving to get there? The apostles, powered by the Spirit, witnessed with the expectation of Christ's return at any moment. It drove them on. Does it drive us?

The last thing we see here in this introduction is that the disciples “...*devoted themselves to prayer...*” What did they do while they waited in Jerusalem? Watch sports and veg out, drink beer and play games? They prayed. They were not passive. They were active. They prayed. Prayer is how we communicate with the risen Lord. It is how we grow in our own experience of Jesus. And it is part of the strategy by which Jesus changes the world. Jesus comes to the world through us. Our witness is how people come to know Jesus. And we through our prayers, influence God to work with his Spirit in those we witness to. As we said it's the Spirit who converts people. You cannot evangelise without prayer.

So here in the introduction of this book of Acts we have all the elements that make up the whole book. We have a risen Lord whose life is made available to his people through the Spirit. And who will come again in power and glory. He is someone with whom we have constant interaction through prayer. And who calls us to act for him in this world with our witness. In the days of Luke, all this made for a revolutionary change as the known world was impacted by the witness of God's people. Now it's our turn to write the next chapter of Acts.