

Spirit-Empowered Witness

Acts 1:1-26

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I praise God for First Free. You know why? One of the reasons is that we are having Missions Month. We are a church so devoted to God's mission to the world, that we will dedicate a whole month to emphasizing it. And it wasn't even my ideal!

You know why else I praise God for First Free?—our commitment to teaching and preaching the Word of God. For Missions Month, we're not going to walk away from expositional preaching. Our goal in this pulpit is always to *expose* what God's Word says. God's Word says so much about missions, that it will be easy for us to do four sermons about it this month.

Today, we will be studying Acts chapter 1 together. Next week our special guest speaker, Mack Stiles, will be here to preach on Luke 5. Then on the final two Sundays of June, the pastors of two of our sister churches, Genesis and The Bridge Church, will be preaching Acts chapter 2.

Chapter 1 of Acts is the introduction to the book, and it tells us a lot of the background that we'll need to understand the whole book. Let's go ahead and read the chapter together, and then we'll dive in to the meaning.

Acts 1:1-26¹

¹*In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He 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; ⁵for 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?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But 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." ⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and 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."*

¹²*Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.*

¹⁵*In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said,*

¹⁶*"Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language *Akeldama*, that is, *Field of Blood*.) ²⁰“For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

“May his camp become desolate,
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;

and

“Let another take his office.’

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning 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.” ²³And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Let’s start by making sure we understand the historical context of Acts. You can see right there in verse one that this is a second book written to a man named Theophilus. We know that the first book is the gospel of Luke, and that Luke is the one who wrote Acts. Luke wrote his gospel to tell Theophilus what Jesus did and taught, and now he is writing Acts, around the year AD 62 or 64, to tell Theophilus what happened after Jesus left.

There’s one story that gets repeated in both of the books. Do you have a person in your life that’s a story-repeater? I do. He’s our beloved worship pastor, Jeff Warren. If I had a nickel for every time Jeff tells me a story that I’ve already heard, I’d probably have a whole 50 cents.

At the end of Luke, and here in Acts 1, Luke tells the story of the ascension of Jesus. Why? This tells us that the ministry of Jesus didn’t end when Jesus left. He went up to heaven, but it’s still his ministry. Luke includes the ascension here in Acts to make sure that Theophilus understands, and that we understand, that even though Jesus isn’t walking the earth anymore, this is still his ministry. Acts is the story of the eyewitnesses of Jesus spreading the gospel and starting the church. And it’s amazing to see how God works in Acts through these eyewitnesses.

For the rest of the sermon this morning, I’ve organized our time around three questions that are answered here in chapter 1. These three questions not only draw out the main points of chapter 1, but also the main points of the whole book of Acts. So let’s dive in.

WHO ARE THE WITNESSES?

The first question we will ask is this—who are the witnesses? The good news for us Christians is that Luke tells us there are a lot of witnesses. We are not a religion that depends on one individual testimony, like some others. That’s a good thing, because our memories can become foggy as the years pass, right?

It was thirteen years ago that my best friend and I spent a year in the Amazon Jungle for missions. It’s always fun for us to get together and talk about that year now. Together, as we talk, our

memories become clear. There are things I have forgotten, that he remembers. There are things that are vague, but as we talk about them, they become clear. Our memories are not perfect. It's helpful when there are a lot of witnesses.

Isn't it great in Acts that there were so many witnesses? You have the twelve apostles that witnessed everything in Jesus' ministry. In verse 14, you also have Mary and Jesus' brothers there. Then you have the fact that Jesus appeared for forty days. This wasn't a one-time deal. Then, you have Paul tell us in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus appeared to 500 brothers. And then you have the fact that these guys were so confident as witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, that they were willing to die for it. They didn't gain political power or fame or money from starting the Christian church. They gained suffering and death in most cases. Friends, we have a strong case to believe that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection really happened! If I were on the jury for this case, I'd say it is beyond a reasonable doubt.

Luke is like a jury member; he probably wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, but he believed the apostles, and he's spreading the witness to Theophilus. The testimony of all these witnesses is credible.

Here in Acts 1, we do see an emphasis on twelve special witnesses—the apostles. At the end of verse 2, it says these were the apostles Jesus had chosen. Jesus gave them commands.

Down in verse 13, their names are listed, and then after that, we have the story of the replacement of Judas. This seems like a strange story to put between the departure of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Why did they need to replace Judas? Why did they need this twelfth apostle?

First, the text tells us it is a fulfillment of prophecy. In verse 20, Peter quotes Psalm 109 to show that this is supposed to happen. There are a lot of Old Testament quotes in Acts, as we see centuries-old prophecies being fulfilled all over the place, and we see Old Testament passages connected to Jesus in really cool ways.

The second reason is that the number twelve is significant. There were twelve tribes in Israel, and God's plan was to send the Messiah through Israel. Now, in Acts, it matches up that there would be twelve apostles to be the witnesses first to Israel. A few chapters later, God raises up a special thirteenth apostle, Paul, who is called to preach to the Gentiles. So the twelve apostles start the advance of the gospel to the Jews, and Paul becomes a unique thirteenth apostle to show that the gospel will go beyond Israel.

What's so special about an apostle? Verses 21 and 22 tell us the special qualifications: it must be a man who was an eyewitness to all of Jesus' ministry, from John's baptism to the resurrection. Sorry friends, but none of you make the cut. None of us can claim the office of apostle. Not only that, but the apostles were to be specifically called by Jesus himself. That's why we see this bizarre casting of lots at the end of the chapter. They wanted this to be a clear divine calling, without human influence into the decision. Jesus called the twelve from the Jews, and Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) to be his authoritative eyewitnesses, to start the church, to start the spread of the gospel, and to write the New Testament.

It's also worth noting that there is nothing in the New Testament that shows a continuation of the position of apostles. After the twelve and Paul, the leaders of churches were never called apostles; they were called elders. Later in Acts 12, one of the apostles, James, is killed. There is no

replacement for him. The office of apostle does not continue. No one else could have such a unique calling and authority.

Problem is...they're all dead. Now that the apostles are dead, who are the witnesses? It's us! It's the church.

We don't need to go home and cast lots or wait for a special divine calling. This casting of lots in Acts 1 is the last decision made before the Spirit fills them up in chapter 2. Now that we have the Holy Spirit and his wisdom, we don't need to cast lots to make decisions.

The Spirit-inspired Bible tells us all that we need for godly living. The Spirit-inspired Bible tells us what our mission is. We don't see any other examples of the apostles or believers casting lots after this. After Acts 2, God speaks through his Spirit to the community of believers. And it's not always in a clear, audible voice. In fact, we don't see the Spirit always giving them 100 percent clear direction on what to do. Sure, sometimes in Acts the Spirit would give someone a vision or dream, and I think he can still do that today. But other times, even in Acts, the community of believers had to make tough decisions, using Spirit-wisdom.

In Acts 15, a council is called together to decide whether or not Gentile Christians needed to follow all of the Jewish law. The council sent a letter to the Gentiles with their answer. The letter says, "It seemed good to us..." and, "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit." Wow! It seemed good?! Not very convincing, right? This is a monumental moment in church history in Acts 15, and all they've got is, "It seemed good to us? It seemed good to the Holy Spirit?"

Friends, the Spirit doesn't exist as a fortune-teller to excuse you from using wisdom to make decisions. No, the Spirit gives us wisdom, in community with each other, to make wise decisions in our lives. This means that you don't have to wait for some special revelation to be a witness. You don't have to wait for a dream to get involved in God's mission. The Spirit already called us, the church, to continue the witnessing ministry that the apostles started. So, are you a witness? Are you telling people about Jesus? When is the last time you've been a witness to someone?

So, to answer the first question, the Spirit-filled apostles are the witnesses. And so are we, the Spirit-filled church, as we continue to spread the witness of the apostles.

WHO EMPOWERED THE WITNESSES?

What's with all this Spirit-filling? That leads to our second main question this morning—who empowered the witnesses? I'll go ahead and give you the answer to this one. The Holy Spirit empowered their witness. In verse 5, Jesus tells them to wait for the promise of the Father, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 8, he says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." And then Jesus leaves!

Can you imagine the anticipation they must have had? They have witnessed all the amazing miracles of Jesus' ministry. He healed people, walked on water, cast out demons, and even raised people from the dead. Then, Jesus' life surprisingly ends with his horrible death on the cross for our sins, but then he rises from the dead on the third day. Now, they see him taken up to heaven, with this promise about the Holy Spirit. What will the Spirit be like? What will happen when he comes? Oh man, talk about waiting for Christmas to come. The Holy Spirit is coming to empower their witness!

This waiting period lasted about ten days. We know this because in verse 3 it says Jesus was with them for forty days, and then Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit, happened on the fiftieth day. What a ten days! What did they do in those ten days?

We've already seen how they took care of some business, by replacing Judas with Matthias. But in verse 14, we also see them doing something else: praying. They were together in one accord, devoting themselves to prayer. Wise move. Church, you really can't go wrong by praying, especially in periods of waiting. We don't know exactly what they prayed, but we see they were together, praying, and waiting for the Spirit.

Now, many people might read this and say, "I'm not going to move forward in ministry until the Spirit comes and gives me power like in Acts." And then we wait for our Pentecost moment. Sounds good, but it's wrong. We sit idly waiting for a "sign." Now why is that wrong? Well, we don't need to wait for special Spirit-power like they did, because we already have it. The Bible is clear that all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We really do have the same power the apostles did, but with one difference. The apostles had unique authority by being eyewitnesses of Jesus. They had the unique task of setting the foundation of the church, and thus they did many signs and wonders to prove that their word was true.

Our power and authority is derived; meaning we only have power and authority to the degree that we are faithful to the apostles' teaching. So where do we get Spirit-power? I do believe signs and wonders still happen, especially when God's Word is breaking into a new people group. But the Spirit more often works through God's Word than a sign or wonder. I think this is why in Paul's letters, especially the ones to Timothy and Titus, he tells them: "Preach the Word" and "maintain sound doctrine" far more often than saying, "Try to do big miracles. It's all about the miracles. You need to go to a school for supernatural ministry to get powered up." God's Spirit works through his Word, in the apostles' eyewitness accounts and authoritative teaching.

This means we better know our Bibles, because that's where the apostles' teaching is! The Bible is the Spirit-empowered witness. We must be careful about trusting in other means for power in ministry. Friends, too many churches in America are trusting in new, cool, pragmatic strategies to reach the lost, rather than trusting in the power of the apostolic teaching. We don't need some new, clever strategy. Please, nothing new! We need a 2,000-year-old strategy, of seeing God's Spirit-empowered Word change lives. Church, let God's Word be your primary method in evangelism. Let God's Word be your primary tool in discipleship. Get people to study the Bible with you, and watch the Spirit-empowered witness of the apostles' work in people's lives.

My goal in evangelism, no matter who I'm talking to, is to get them to read the Bible or hear it preached. What a joy it is when the Spirit opens their eyes to the Word! Have you ever seen the light bulb go off in someone when they are in the Word, or when they are hearing the Word preached? It is such a joy! It's a miracle! It's a wonder! There's a reason that even in Acts, there are a bunch of sermons. Depending on how you count, there are about twenty sermons in Acts. Peter and Paul preach the Word a bunch of times, and often when they do, people get saved.

So friends, we have seen how the Holy Spirit empowered the unique, authoritative witness of the apostles, and how he empowers us to continue their witness by declaring his Word. We have no excuse for being powerless Christians. We have Spirit-power, in our hands! So let's use it.

WHERE DID THE APOSTLES WITNESS?

A natural question, then, and our third question this morning is—where did the apostles witness? The answer to this question frames the whole book of Acts.

Many commentators agree that verse 8 here in chapter 1 is setting the stage for the whole book. Let me show you why.

In verse 8, Jesus said to the apostles, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” So right there we have the answer to the question: where did they witness? They started in Jerusalem, and expanded out to the whole world. The mission, then, is to go from Jerusalem to the end of the earth. In other words, everywhere! In Acts, we see this taking place. In chapters 1-7, the apostles are witnesses in Jerusalem. Then in chapters 8-11, they are witnesses in Judea and Samaria. And in chapters 12-28, the apostle Paul is the primary witness to the end of the earth, symbolized by seeing the gospel go to Rome.

It’s interesting to notice though, that Jesus’ words in verse 8 are actually correcting the apostles. Back in verse 6, the apostles asked Jesus, “will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” For like the billionth time, the disciples think that Jesus is going to take over a political kingdom, and their desire is that it is for Israel. Their ethnocentrism is shining through once again. And Jesus, just like he did repeatedly in the Gospels, points them away from political power and away from Israel. His answer in verse 7 is “It’s not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed.” In other words, quit trying to figure everything out with the timing. It’s not for you to know.

Don’t you wish Christians would quit writing books with secret codes to figure out when Jesus will return? Friends, don’t buy their books! It’s not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed, so quit wasting your time with harbingers and signs and arrangements of constellations and ancient Mayan prophecies and whatever other bogus stuff is out there. It’s bogus! It’s not for us to know. Jesus gave a mission for us to fulfill, not a code for us to crack.

So here in verse 8, Jesus is turning the eyes of the apostles away from themselves, and out into the world, even the world of the Gentiles. It’s go time. And the rest of Acts, and really the last 2,000 years, we’ve seen the gospel spreading to the end of the earth. The apostles symbolically reached the end of the earth in their time by reaching Rome, but they did not literally reach the end of the earth. They didn’t reach Kansas. They didn’t reach Japan. They didn’t reach Madagascar. And so today, as we look at the world and see places that still don’t have the apostolic witness—people groups that still have never heard these eyewitness accounts of the resurrection—we know what our mission is. We know what the Spirit is calling the church to do. Go.

You’re filled with the Spirit. So go. Be a witness. Be a witness where God has placed you, absolutely. But it doesn’t stop there. Jesus said to “the end of the earth.” Jesus said in Matthew that the gospel will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations. Thankfully, the gospel has reached us. Praise God that someone witnessed to you, here at the end of the earth. But there are other ends that have no gospel witness; other people groups who have never heard. About one-third of the world lives where there is no gospel witness around them in their language. So the church must go. And how can they go unless they are sent? So the church must send. John Piper famously said, “There are three types of Christians: goers, senders, and the disobedient.”

By God’s grace, First Free is a church engaged in this mission. We are raising up people to go to the unreached people groups. We are sending teams, dollars, and other resources to help the witness of

the apostles spread. Be encouraged that if you are a part of First Free, then you are a part of Acts 1:8.

But I know many of us individually have very little connection with Acts 1:8 in day-to-day life. Too many of our Christian lives are so empty of mission. When God looks at your life, does he see you on the mission Jesus called you to? Think about your small group and its prayer requests. If your primary prayer requests are for the pain in your shoulder, then you might be distracted from the Acts 1:8 mission. If your primary conversation topics are the Shockers and Wildcats, then you might be distracted from the Acts 1:8 mission. As the apostle Paul says, “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.” In the same way, no Christian should be entangled primarily in temporary worldly pursuits, since the Christian has a mission from God to pursue. Are you in God’s mission?