

THE BOOK OF ACTS
Acts 1

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The Main Ingredients of Effective Witnessing (1:1-2)

Luke wastes no time in getting to the heart of what much of this book is about, which is Christian witnessing. In the first two verses we encounter the main ingredients of effective witnessing: the seeker, the servant, and the Savior. Because they are so important, we will look carefully at each of them right at the beginning. These three elements appear repeatedly throughout the book, and an examination of them will help us gain insights into our own witnessing today.

The Seeker

Theophilus, the person to whom Luke addressed both his Gospel and the book of Acts, is the seeker. The only clue we get about his relationship to Christianity is found in Luke 1:4, where he is said to have been “instructed” in the faith. This may mean he was a recent convert who was receiving initial training, or it may simply mean that Theophilus had been told some things about the faith and was still trying to make up his mind. Either way, he was interested enough to receive two lengthy communications from Luke.

His name may provide a clue. It means “one who loves God.” One of the important messages of the book of Acts is that God puts “Theophilus’s” (God lovers) in our pathway. They may be outside or inside the church. Our challenge and opportunity is to be sensitive to them and to be willing to give them the time and attention they need to become developed and whole in the Christian faith.

Even today there are many people outside the church who are searching for God. They are sending loud signals by their involvement in cults and the supernatural, by their growing despair over the world’s problems and our inability to solve them, by their feelings of anxiety and loneliness, and by their deep desires for genuine relationships in a depersonalized world full of “one-night stands.” These are all signs that people are open to a relationship with God through Christ, and it is important for us to be sensitive to the “signals” that people around us today are sending.

Then there are the Theophilus’s within the church fellowship who have little understanding of and commitment to the Christian faith. These people need to be introduc-

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ed to the power of personal faith made real by the Holy Spirit. We all know people who just might come alive if they were given special instruction, care, and attention by other believers.

The Servant

That's where the servants come into the picture. For every Theophilus, there must be at least one Luke. People are won by people. God reached us by becoming human in Jesus Christ. And we reach others by offering them our faith wrapped in our humanity. Christian witnessing is always "incarnational" (embodied in flesh). It continues in Christ, who lives out His life through those who serve Him.

Who are the servants? The book of Acts supplies the answer. They are the "quiet" people—the servant Christians—most of whose names are not even recorded in Scripture. To be sure there are some major figures and leaders in the drama of Acts, but these are outnumbered a thousand to one by ordinary followers. The word "celebrity" doesn't exist in God's dictionary, but the word "saint" does. We must forever erase from our minds the notion that only the famous people, the champions, and beauty contest winners are useful to God. This is often the wrong impression we get from the media and television.

The Savior

This brings us to the third ingredient, the Savior. The only reason we even dare to believe we can influence someone else's life for Christ is because Jesus is real and alive! He continued His ministry through the Holy Spirit after His ascension. Luke's first writing was only what "Jesus began to do and teach." That's why a second volume was needed. But we must also remember that Christ's ministry did not end with the last page of Acts. It continues today.

There are more Theophilus's in the world right now than there were when Christ lived on the earth. And there are more Christians alive now than there were when Luke wrote Acts. When we connect this with the knowledge that Christ is just alive as He ever was, we can know beyond a doubt that our Christian witnessing is meant to be effective. The first two verses of Acts not only remind us of the main ingredients needed then, but they also place you and me in the picture of Christian expansion today.

The Master Teacher (1:3-11)

The ultimate purpose of teaching is not just to convey information, but to change people. We have already said that the disciples needed to be changed, to be better prepared for the ministry that would soon be theirs. In Chapter 1:3-11, Luke shows us Jesus' teaching method for accomplishing that change. And it is clear from the rest of Acts that the method was successful. The days between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost was a time when the Master Teacher got His followers ready for the greatest challenge of their lives. Let's see how He did it.

Jesus Teaches by Revelation

He concentrated first on *revelation*. Luke says: “. . . **He shewed Himself alive ... by many infallible proofs**” (1:3). The Greek language used here is quite strong, If we were saying it today, we might put it this way: “**Jesus showed Himself alive in ways that left no doubt about it.**” This was exactly what the disciples needed. They had to *know* that death had not defeated Jesus. It would never have been enough to be told this. They had to see and experience it.

The old saying is correct: “Seeing is believing.” Jesus knew that, so He showed Himself alive (1:3) in ways that couldn't be questioned. And the exclamation “**We have seen Him!**” became the foundation on which Christianity was built. Even today we must continue to “see Christ” through the witness of Scripture and 2,000 years of testimony by those who have been changed by Him. And we continue to “see Him” through our own inner witness and personal experience—saying along with the saints of the ages, “He touched me!” Revelation and our experience of (and witness to it) are still central in the Christian faith.

Jesus Teaches by Providing Instruction

But Jesus did not stop there. Luke next tells us that He provided *instruction*. During those forty-days, Jesus was “**speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God**” (1:3). Confidence needed to be linked with content. Experience needed to be enriched with information. This is at least one reason why Luke was inspired to record the content of five sermons delivered by early Christian leaders (chapters 7, 10, 13, and 25). Christianity not only warms the heart, but it also enlightens the mind. It has substance as well as emotion. And the two work together to create reality.

Luke does not go into detail about the instructions. He simply says that the focal point was “the Kingdom.” Linking this with what we know of the Kingdom from biblical teaching, this seems to mean that Jesus wanted to drive home the point that in His coming a new order or fellowship had begun. This was easier to know and ex-

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perience as long as He was physically present, but the disciples had to know it as truth even in His physical absence. They had to understand that in Christ, God had split history down the middle. From now on everything was to be interpreted in light of Christ's coming. Now, the mission of the disciples was to be that of proclaiming, interpreting, and expanding the Kingdom—that is, helping others come to the place of seeing, experiencing, and living life from that perspective, too. As the events in the book of Acts unfold, we see this perspective working itself out in the disciples' witnessing and preaching.

One important point to remember is that the Christian message is not something we invent. It is something Christ gives. At the end of this forty-day period, the disciples knew what they were to share. They didn't have to devise or invent a message; they had only to report it. And the rest of the book of Acts confirms that they did this conscientiously and vigorously. As the early Church began to grow, instruction was an all-important function.

Unfortunately, this same spirit does not prevail today. There is a widespread neglect of serious Bible study, so, it is not surprising that many in the church are still “infants” in their knowledge and ability to share the Christian faith. Far too many people claim to have had some kind of “experience” with Christ, but they are walking proof that experience alone is insufficient. Experience without instruction is shallow passion and not to be trusted. Instruction without experience is dead intellect at the expense of the emotions. Instruction and experience must go together, otherwise there can be no vitality and life.

Jesus Teaches on Sharing the Good News

But still, there is more to Jesus' method. There is impartation/communication: “***Ye shall be witnesses,***” He said (1:8). Early on, the disciples knew they were to be commissioned to carry on Christ's work. Jesus was appealing to that part of the human personality that responds positively to being involved and needed. As people are actively involved in witnessing and working for the Lord in ministering to the physical and spiritual needs, the church has vitality and comes alive. There is no such thing as a spectator Christian. We are all called to be participants—team players—in living and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' Teaching and Acting the Good News

Behind Jesus' method is the idea that every Christian is intended to be a functioning member of the Body of Christ. The category of “inactive member” is really a contradiction/misleading term. It's an official attempt to help some “save face.” As a matter

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of fact, there is only one kind of genuine church member: active and involved. To be a disciple of Christ is to hear the call and respond with action.

But surely this feeling of anticipation and excitement did not last long before the disciples asked themselves, “How in the world are we ever going to be able to do it”? They knew they couldn’t duplicate Jesus’ work under their own power. But in response, Jesus promised that His method of impartation also included the Holy Spirit: “. . . *ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you*” (1:8). In promising them the Spirit, Jesus was offering them the same Presence and power that enabled Him to do His work.

We must not get the idea that Jesus accomplished His mission on earth in the flesh. Earlier, Luke had made it clear that Jesus did His work “*in the power of the Spirit*” (Luke 4:14, 18). And in Jesus’ final instructions to His disciples, He made it clear that they would succeed only by the power of the Spirit: “. . . *tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high*” (Luke 24:49) and “. . . *wait for the promise of the Father*” (Acts 1:4).

It is important that we understand what Jesus meant here in relation to our own discipleship. So often the words *tarry*, and *wait* have been misinterpreted as a call to do nothing. Well-meaning people have sometimes said, “We must not do anything unless we have received the Spirit.” But we are living on this side of Pentecost. The Spirit has been given! We don’t have to wait for Him to come. He has come and is here.

At the same time, though, we must not be deluded into thinking that all of the pronouncements and actions of Christians and the Church are automatically done “in the Spirit.” The pages of history are dotted with tragic stories of people who at times even perpetrating vicious cruelties and claimed to be even doing it “in the Spirit.” We cannot maintain and expand the ministry of Christ and the Church by operating on a blank check principle that assumes God automatically agrees with decisions simply because a group of Christians made them.

How, then, shall we steer the proper course between these two errors? I believe it comes in recognizing that on the day of Pentecost God dug the well of the Spirit for Christians and the Church in all time. We do not have to wait for a replay of Pentecost. But like the first disciples, we must drink from the well. That is, we must act after we have interacted with the Spirit in meditation and prayer. This is the kind of impartation Jesus gave His disciples: happiness linked with humility; participation infused with power.

Jesus' Teaching on Correction

Another of Jesus' methods: correction. Verses 6 and 7 show that Jesus had to correct a misunderstanding about the Kingdom. Despite the fact that the disciples had been receiving regular and deep instruction about the Kingdom of God, they were still filtering Jesus' words through a Jewish mind-set. For over 400 years the Jews had longed for the coming of the Messiah. But they were convinced that His coming would mean the national and political restoration of the Davidic kingdom to Israel. So, their question in verse 6— “. . . *Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*”

From our perspective we find it hard to understand that after being with Jesus for over three years, after witnessing His death and resurrection, they would still be so blind as to ask such a question. But with infinite patience Jesus tries to help them see that the Kingdom of God takes priority over the kingdom of Israel. They had to understand that building the earthly kingdom is not the same as building the heavenly one. But above all, they had to know that the Kingdom of God is always bigger than our “lesser kingdoms.” God work is always bigger than our understanding of it.

I suspect the apostles continued to pray, as their fathers had, for the deliverance of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. But what changed was that they no longer saw the lesser kingdom as the ultimate priority, or the only way God could work to accomplish His purposes. We learn from this that it is alright to hold to our perspective and priorities, but we must not be so arrogant as to limit the Kingdom of God to our view of it.

Jesus' Teaching on Assurance

Our lesson gives us one more element in Jesus' method: *assurance*. Assurance that they would never labor alone in their task (1:9-11). Even as Jesus' ascension was running its course, angels appeared to assure the disciples that He would “*come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven*” (1:11). And we have the complete picture when we combine this with His last promise: “*... lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*” (Matt. 28:20).

Why was this assurance so important to the disciples? Simply because they had to “lose Jesus” again. They had lost Him that first time when He died on the cross. Now they were losing Him as He ascended into heaven and returned to His Father. But there is a difference. They walked down the hill of Calvary alone and lonely. But this time, when they walked down the hill called Olivet, the disciples were alone but not lonely! Even though they would never again walk with Christ in the flesh, they would never again be without the presence of His Spirit.

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Those forty-days with Jesus between His resurrection and ascension must have been a glorious time of fellowship and learning for the disciples. In a way it was their “senior year” of training before they were sent out on their own. But as with any graduation, it was only the commencement. They would be learners for the rest of their lives. And that learning process was to take on special significance as they left the mount of ascension and returned to their vigil in the upper room in Jerusalem.

Attending to Business (1:12-26)

For forty days the disciples had been with Jesus in some of the most important, intensive, and intimate times they had ever known. It would have been easy, even understandable, for them to have returned to Jerusalem to just wallow in the memories that their time with the Lord had produced. But they didn't. Instead, they attended to several deliberate activities that made possible their readiness for the coming of the Spirit.

First, they “... *continued with one accord in prayer and supplication*” (1:14). This implies that the days between the ascension and Pentecost were lived in the atmosphere of prayer. Or to put it another way, the disciples continued (on another level) the communion with Christ that they had experienced during the preceding forty days. This was especially important, for not to have done so would have easily produced the feeling that they were living in a vacuum.

Doubts could have begun to creep in. But, through prayer, they stayed connected with the vision and the promise that Jesus had given them. Had the disciples turned their gaze from Christ to themselves during those days of waiting, they could have easily fallen victim to discouragement or impatience. By focusing all their attention on Jesus, they were content to wait for the promise they knew was coming.

The Fellowship Restored to Full Strength

But we notice that they didn't limit themselves to prayer. They also attended to a very practical matter (1:15-26). Here we see how the disciples dealt with the “gap” in their fellowship that resulted with the death of Judas. No doubt, the disciples felt the need to be at full strength in terms of leadership when the Spirit came.

First, the 120 or so who were gathered together in the upper room were not “so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good.” Even though they were devoted to prayer, they were not “lost in prayer”—they didn't have their heads in the clouds. This is important because true discipleship is not measured by how “other worldly”

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we are. Not paying attention to practical matters is no mark of spirituality. Even the task of choosing leaders is part of faithful discipleship.

In this act of selecting Judas's successor, we also see their concern for excellence of leadership. The only individuals considered were those who had demonstrated their faithfulness from the beginning (1:22). With these qualifications set forth only two candidates appeared. And notice now, they were two "quiet people." Neither Joseph, called Barsabas, nor Matthias are mentioned before or after this event. Although they were both considered appointable to this great task, by a casting of lots Matthias was selected (1:26).

We learn from this story that the best leaders may not be among those who are most prominent or among those who campaign hardest for the job. True leadership is something we rise to by demonstrating faithfulness and obedience; it isn't something we are given because of charisma or clout.

A United Fellowship

In reflecting on this part of our lesson it is important to note that the disciples did all these things near each other (1:13 and 2:1). I don't think this means they were never separated from one another during these ten days. This was not the world's first Christian commune. It does mean, though, that they recognized their need for each other, and it is likely they were together much of the time. But their unity was not simply one of physical location; it was also of spiritual oneness.

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