

## **“Power for Witness”**

**Acts 1:1-11**

**April 20, 2008**

---

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Some time ago, I recall being asked a Bible trivia question that I want to ask you now. The question was “What New Testament author wrote the largest percentage of the New Testament?” The obvious answer is the Apostle Paul, right? Wrong! Even though Paul wrote the largest number of New Testament books—13 out of the 27 (if we assume he is not the author of Hebrews)—when measured by pure volume of words, he comes in second place behind Luke, the author of the gospel that carries his name and of Acts. As a matter of fact, according to my computer Bible, Luke wrote 7% more of the New Testament than Paul.

Luke is the historian of the New Testament, writing the very significant books of Luke and Acts. It would be more accurate to call Luke and Acts two volumes of one work, instead of two different works. That’s how Luke himself regarded them. Writing out of a concern for an unbelieving friend of his named Theophilus, Luke tells in verse 1 why he wrote. **“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”** The gospel of Luke records the words and deeds of Jesus, and Luke wanted his friend to know about Jesus. But notice the important word “began.” The book of Acts talks about what Jesus continued to do and teach. It is a sequel to the gospel of Luke. It contains the continuing work of Jesus, which according to verse 2 he would do by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the agency of the apostles. John Stott suggests that an accurate, though cumbersome title for the book would be “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles.”

Today we are beginning a study of this book of Acts. It is an exciting book as it chronicles the rapid growth of the church from a small band of 120 disciples to a great movement that shook the Roman world. It is still growing and expanding, and we are part of what began 2000 years ago in the city of Jerusalem. Verse 8 tells us how such growth could happen. It is the promise of Jesus contained in verse 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.”** Notice three things about the power Jesus promised to his apostles and to us.

### **I. The Need of Power**

There are always three characters involved in the expansion of the church. The first character is Jesus, spoken of in verse 1. Even from heaven, he

continues to be active in growing his church. Secondly, there is the Holy Spirit, spoken of in verse 2. Finally, there are the apostles and the rest of the church. The weak link in that chain is clearly the apostles, and by extension the rest of the church. Power from God is needed for witness because of our inevitable weakness. Such weakness is evident in the question the apostles ask Jesus during the fifty-day period of time between his resurrection and ascension. **“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”** (v. 6). John Calvin says that there are about as many errors in this question as there are words. Let me point out a few of them.

One of their errors is indicated by the word *restore*. They were thinking of a kingdom like the one described in the Old Testament, where Israel would have a great king and such unparalleled might that they would bow to no other nation. They wanted a restoration of the Davidic kingdom, with Jesus, the son of David, sitting on the throne. And it didn't escape their attention that Jesus had promised them that when he sat on his throne, there would be 12 other thrones beside him for his disciples to occupy (Matt. 19:28). During the last period of Jesus' earthly life, this promise had led repeatedly to fighting among the disciples about which of them would have the throne closest to Jesus. Those hopes had all been dashed when Jesus was crucified, but now that he has been raised from the dead, their hopes for earthly, political power had revived. But that is not the kind of kingdom Jesus has in mind, at least not now. He would indeed come again with a display of power, and those promises that his people would reign with him in power will be fulfilled. But not yet. In this age, including the book of Acts, the kingdom will grow quietly, like yeast spreading through a lump of dough. But at this point, the disciples failed to understand what Jesus had in mind with his kingdom.

Their second error is indicated by the word *Israel*. They failed to envision the worldwide, Gentile-inclusive kingdom that we see developing throughout this book. Again, they imagined and longed for the triumph of Jewish life and culture. In short, the disciples had an agenda for Jesus, an agenda that would feel like power and victory for them. One of the reasons that we need power from God is that we too come to Jesus with an agenda. We want him to get on board with helping us to achieve our agenda, rather than submitting ourselves to his agenda. We're just like the disciples. We want Jesus to exercise his power to make us great. We may bring a different agenda to Jesus than the nationalistic pride of the apostles, but we still bring an agenda. For many Americans, it's the agenda of self-fulfillment. We want Jesus to make us happy and fulfilled, or to make us financially prosperous. But that's not what Jesus promises. We must drop our agendas and get on board with his agenda, which we are going to consider in our third point.

One of the clear themes of the book of Acts is the weakness of Jesus' followers, and the persistence of God in the missionary work of the church. We see the obstacle posed by God's people for the first time in Acts in verse 6, the very first time someone other than God speaks in the book. The apostles are

carrying on in the well-known tradition of Peter, who almost every time he opened his mouth, said something that exposed how far his heart was from God's purposes. The greatest missionary of the church is not one of the apostles—not even the apostle Paul—but God himself.

It has always been this way. The missionary expansion of the church has often come not through the church's intentional plans, but through God's engineering of circumstances. Consider the case of St. Patrick of Ireland. He was the person God used to bring the gospel to that land in the fifth century. Ireland at this time was probably the place of greatest spiritual darkness in all of Europe. The people there worshiped spirits and practiced human sacrifice. About a century after Patrick went there to evangelize, it had been transformed to an island of saints and scholars. What many don't realize about Patrick is that he wasn't Irish. He was part of the Romanized British element of England, born of Christian parents in what we now call the Lake District of England. Like so many significant Christian missionaries through the ages, he did not set out to become a missionary to Ireland. As a young man, he was captured by Irish raiders who would come over from time to time and steal and take slaves. Patrick became a shepherd and spent six years in Ireland working for his master. In his desperate situation, he said that he learned to pray for the first time. God delivered him from his misery, and he was eventually able to escape and return home to Britain, hoping never to see Ireland again. But one night he had a dream in which an Irish man handed him some letters. In his dream he began to read the letters, one of which began like this: "The voice of the Irish—we beg you to come and walk with us once more." He eventually understood that voice to be God's voice calling him to be a missionary to Ireland. He went and established monasteries, from which monks went out and evangelized Ireland. They would later go back to Britain and Europe as Ireland became a missions-sending nation. But it started like so much missions starts, with our powerful God working through a reluctant people.

## II. The Promise of Power

What we need, God promises to supply. We need power, and he gives it in the person of the Holy Spirit. **"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."** What does the Spirit promise to do for us as he helps us in this area of witness? Jesus had spoken of that on several occasions prior to his death and resurrection. One of the things Jesus says the Spirit will do is to **"convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment"** (John 16:8). That is very significant. It is not our job to convict people of sin. We don't need to try to make people feel guilty for their sin. That will only make them not want to be around us. God never intended us to take on that job. He says he will do it in his way and in his time. This takes the pressure off of us and frees us to be with people and love them. We don't need to try to pressure people to do anything in this area of coming to faith in Jesus.

**Illustration:** I appreciated an illustration Randy Pope gave about this. Have you ever noticed that people have different needs in the area of personal space? Where this gets awkward is when you come upon someone whose sense of personal space is quite a bit less than your own. They feel best when separated from someone with whom they are conversing by only 18 inches, but you require more like 36 inches. When that happens and the small space person begins a conversation with you with his face only 18 inches from yours, what do you do? You back up to reestablish a more comfortable 36 inches. If they respond by closing the gap again to their comfort level of 18 inches, you back up again. If the conversation lasts long enough, you can back up all the way to the end of a room. As Christians, we need to understand that non-Christians usually have much larger space needs than we do when it comes to talking about personal sin and faith in Jesus. It's okay to take a step toward another by talking about sin and faith, but if they respond by backing up, we don't take another immediate step toward them. Wait until the power of the Spirit has been working to bring a conviction of sin.

There is one, however, that we are to talk to a great deal, and that's to God in prayer. The apostle Paul relied on the Spirit's power for witness, which can be seen through his prayers. He asked people to pray for him for three things as it relates to witness. These are the same three things we need the Spirit to do for us. First, he asked for opportunities to share the gospel with others. **"At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ"** (Col. 4:3). Second, he needed the same thing I need when God answers the first prayer—courage to speak up. He asked **"that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel"** (Eph. 6:19). Third, when God answers that prayer and gives us sufficient courage to speak boldly, we need to know what to say. So Paul prayed for clarity in his speech, **"that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak"** (Col. 4:4). These last two verses address a common error that is often seen in something attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. "Preach the gospel at all times—if necessary, use words." While there are clearly times to begin our witness with people with actions rather than words, it is impossible to complete our witness without words.

### III. The Use of Power

Notice now what he says about the use of this power. We are to use it to be **"witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** Many have found in these words the categories for the scope of our witness to Jesus. All of us have a Jerusalem. For most of us in this room, that's our own city of Birmingham. God calls us to serve him faithfully in this city, seeking its welfare as we do what Jesus did in loving deeds and loving gospel words. And then we are to do the same in our nation, our Judea. Our witness is not to be only local, restricted to our own city, but to spread to other

parts of our nation where needs exist. There are many places in our nation where churches need to be planted and people need to be rescued from the power of sin. We are to labor in those areas. And then, thirdly, we are to be witnesses in Samaria. As you may know, the Samaritans lived within the borders of Israel, but were viewed as those of a different race. So for us, the Samaritans would be those who live alongside us who are different from us. It may include the growing Hispanic population of our area, or the inner-city African-American areas. Finally, our witness is to extend to the end of the earth as we take this gospel to the nations and people groups outside of America. The missions program of this church seeks to lead us in all four of these areas. There are works focused in Birmingham, things like our commitment to the Alabama Church Planting Network. There are national works like Reformed University Ministries. And there are local efforts focused on those with very different cultures and backgrounds than us, like Restoration Academy and Shepherd's Fold. There are international efforts, including many missionaries who labor on all the major continents of our world.

We must notice one more word before we end. We are given power to be *witnesses*. We are not given power to be soldiers, spreading the kingdom of God by force of arms. Rather, we conquer with a word of grace. Two things are indicated by the phrase "my witnesses." First, we must focus the attention on Jesus. Jesus says, **"you will be my witnesses."** I am afraid that much of the gospel message today has been reduced to nothing more than tips for successful living. This gospel says that Jesus has come so that all of your dreams might be realized. Do you see how that kind of gospel keeps the attention on us? It makes our success the central part of God's concern. That's our whole problem in the first place—that we center things on ourselves. A gospel that helps us do that is no gospel at all. The true gospel centers on Jesus as the only one able to deliver us from this toxic self-centered approach to life.

The second thing indicated by the phrase "my witnesses" is the obvious truth that a witness must be one who has an experience of that to which he testifies. My ability to be used of God to point others to Jesus is largely dependent on my feeding on Jesus. Let's do that right now in closing.

### **CONCLUSION:**

We said earlier that the apostles' question to Jesus indicated that they had come to him with their own agenda. We do the same thing. Let's repent of elevating our agenda to the center of the universe. Further, let's recognize that as a result of our self-centered agenda, we ignore God's agenda. Join me in repenting of this, experiencing Jesus' cleansing, and looking to God for power to be his witness.