

Acts

Acts 1:1-8 - What does it mean to be “church”?

The book of Acts is really Luke Part 2, because it's the second message Luke sent to his “most excellent” friend Theophilus (Luke 1:3). His first message in the gospel of Luke was a detailed account of “all that Jesus **began** to do and to teach,” but in Acts he fills in what Jesus did and taught “**until** the day he was taken up to heaven,” **Acts 1:1-2**. Acts, in other words, begins with Luke continuing from where he left off in his first book, to complete the story of what Jesus did and taught up 'til the time he ascended to heaven.

And being a physician our good Doctor Luke, with clinical precision, boils it all down very nicely for us in **verses 4 and 5** to just one statement Jesus made: “On one occasion, while Jesus was eating with his apostles, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days **you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**’”

Of all the stories Luke could have told about what Jesus said and did after his resurrection he focuses on just this one. But there's no surprise in that, because it's exactly what Jesus focused on in **Luke 24:49**, when he told his disciples, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised, but stay in the city **until you have been clothed with power from on high.**”

Jesus did not say, “Well, now that you know I'm alive again, get out there and tell everybody the astounding news of my resurrection asap.” Instead he says, “Wait until the power the Father promised comes.” In other words, don't go steaming out there on your own power and enthusiasm; wait instead on the lead and direction of the Holy Spirit, because the power to do what comes next is now his, not yours.

So, what does come next for the apostles? It's in **Acts 1:8** - “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

But “witnesses” to Jesus HOW, exactly? It's in four things: witnesses to Jesus' “instructions” (verse 2), witnesses to the “convincing proofs Jesus was alive” (verse 3), witnesses to “the kingdom of God” being real (verse 3), and witnesses to them being “baptized” with the power of the Holy Spirit (verse 5).

So what we've got summarized in these eight verses in Acts is the direction and reason for the church. Simply put, the church is continuing what Jesus started. Jesus' ministry didn't stop when he died. It continues now through the church, but in a whole new era powered by the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts, then, is our first real insight into **“what it means to be church.”**

It's also about what church isn't. It isn't about “restoring the kingdom to Israel” (verse 6), or coming up with dates for the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come (verse 7). There's no deadline either, for getting the witness out, or any indication when the church's work is finished. That's entirely the Father's business, not ours (verse 7).

So what we're left with in these eight verses is a boxful of jigsaw pieces, that individually may not mean much, but put them together and an amazing picture emerges. It's actually a map showing Jesus' strategy for **changing the world**. And it's absolutely revolutionary too, because the people he's chosen to change the world through are men like the apostles, who were terribly ordinary and almost invisible people just like you and me.

Jesus is not healing this world's tragic sicknesses and damage through mighty empires or charismatic people with magnetic personalities and great leadership skills, which is so shocking that maybe we find it difficult to believe too. I mean, who are we to change the world? To the world we're irrelevant nothings, which could easily get US thinking we're irrelevant nothings too. But nothing could be further from the truth, because in these eight verses we're being told we are the most important and needed people on the planet.

We are? Yes, because the only means by which Jesus is changing the world is through flesh and blood humans “baptized with the Holy Spirit.” But why is it so important to be baptized with the Spirit? Because, as both Jesus and Doctor Luke are showing us here, it's only by the power of the Spirit that we are able to become witnesses to Jesus being alive, witnesses to the kingdom of God he's setting up on this planet being real, and witnesses to what the kingdom of God actually looks and feels like based on Jesus' life and teachings being relived in the church.

The church, therefore, is God's most convincing proof in this day and age that God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations and change the world through his descendants leading up to Jesus are coming true. It's through Jesus and his church that God is restoring the planet and what he created us humans for in Genesis, because where else in this world do we see that happening?

We don't, because the world just plods along the same old worn out road of unsolvable problems and pointless lives. The world, therefore, offers no proof or hope whatsoever of improving life on the scale predicted by the Old Testament prophets. But, Acts tells us, God is now offering that proof through the church.

Well, if that's hard for us to believe, it took some convincing for those first apostles to believe it too, which is why Jesus spent the time he did with them after he was resurrected providing them with "many convincing proofs" that he was indeed "alive," **Acts 1:3**, and continuing what he'd begun. He "appeared" to them for nearly six weeks, so they could eyeball him face to face in all sorts of situations. He also "spoke" to them and "ate" with them (verse 4). In other words, they were given **bedrock, infallible proof** that Jesus truly had come back from the dead and was now a living, breathing, eating, speaking human being operating on their human wavelength and easy to communicate with.

And Jesus was fine with that, because up to that point his apostles had been hopeless witnesses. Peter had denied even knowing Jesus three times under pressure, and several of the others had gone right back to fishing after Jesus was killed, as if his predictions about suffering, dying and being raised from the dead over the last three years hadn't meant a thing.

It took Jesus having to "breathe" the Holy Spirit on them in John 20:22 for them to even respond at all later on. And how many of us would have shown any interest in God or his purpose if our eyes hadn't been miraculously opened too? But that was all part of God's plan as well, as Paul explains in **Galatians 3:14**, that in "Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that **we might receive the promise of the Spirit** through faith."

It was all back in Genesis, therefore, that one day the Spirit would open the eyes of us Gentiles to God fulfilling his promise to bless all nations through Jesus and the church. Because that was God's only way of changing this world for the better - the first glimpse of which was given when John the Baptist turns up, **Acts 1:5**, who, "filled with the Spirit even from birth" (Luke 1:15), starts baptizing people in water. And suddenly there's a whole new spirit of repentance and desire to change that hadn't been there before.

But even then it was only meant as a shadow. The real and lasting change created by the kingdom of God filling the world could only come through the baptism of the Spirit, the proof of which would come through the church. So what kind of proof would it be?

Just like those apostles we'd surely need convincing proofs too, and especially now it's our turn to be "witnesses" to Jesus being alive, to the kingdom of God he's setting up on this planet being real, and to what the kingdom of God actually looks and feels like based on Jesus' life and teachings being relived in the church.

But this is why we've been baptized with the Spirit, so that all these things can happen in the likes of you and me. But it's not through Jesus "appearing" physically to us as a living, breathing, eating human, like he did for his apostles. Instead, as we learn from Paul later on in 2 Corinthians 3:18, it's by the Spirit transforming us into Christ's likeness, so that we actually become like Jesus himself. And what better witness to Jesus being alive and what he and his kingdom are like than us becoming living, visible evidence of it in ourselves?

It's as if Jesus is now walking the earth again, but this time in and through us. But that, of course, requires a dramatic and obvious transformation in us. And as Luke points out, John's baptism with water wasn't enough; it takes a baptism of the Spirit to do that. Because what the Spirit does is make Jesus real to us, just as the Spirit made Jesus real to the apostles in the book of Acts.

So that's what we can look forward to when baptized with the Spirit. The Spirit already got to us by us believing in Jesus in the first place, but that's the great blessing of the Spirit, because at the moment we believe in Jesus being who he said he was and why God had sent him, we immediately receive the full blast of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' life in full now being lived in us too (Colossians 1:27, 2:9-10).

And that means Jesus is living his life in us all day and every day. It means we have his personal attention all the time. It means that every part of his personality, character and power is available to us. It means that everything he is is ours to experience too. It means that he watches over us, just as his father watched over him, and as his personal friends and students he tells us everything we need to know, nothing hidden. And he fills us with wisdom and discernment that will often shock us.

And there are no programs needed, or outside help, or borrowing ideas from the culture, or any systems, structures, buildings, timetables, premonitions, prophecies or conspiracy theories. All that is needed is the power of the Holy Spirit in us, in whatever form he deems fit in our situation. The Spirit blows where he wills, so there's no telling where he'll take us, but rest assured that no matter how much or how little it is, he's making us into effective witnesses - in whatever situation we're in - to Jesus being alive and why God sent him, because this is what it means to be "church."