



Be My Witnesses

Acts

1. The Theme
2. The Spread
3. The Power

This morning, we begin our exposition of the book of Acts. I have been reading and re-reading and studying this book for a long time. I have memorized large chunks of this book. I'm super-excited to get started. This morning, my message will be an overview of the entire book, presenting its themes and core lessons for us today. Next week we will be in a position to begin working through chapter 1 verse by verse, beginning with verse 1. But this week, we need first to grasp what the book is about as a whole.

My message is entitled, "Be My Witnesses." This is will be our working theme of the book of Acts, because, this is the great application of the book. The book of Acts tells the story of those who knew Jesus on earth, saw him resurrected, alive from the dead, talked with him, ate with him, and even touched him. The book of Acts is about these people, then, going forth and being witnesses to others about what they saw and heard. As a result, the church exploded!

The book of Acts tells how the apostles spoke of Jesus. Even when the religious authorities told them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus, they said, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). This is the essence of being a witness: "speaking of what you have seen and heard."

When we hear the word, "witnesses," we are often drawn into the courtroom, where those who were witnesses to a crime are called in. The bailiff approaches them, asks them to raise their right hand, and asked them, "Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" When the witness says, "I do," then he (or she) is under oath, and obliged by law to tell the truth. And the witness is then is seated asked questions by lawyers to prompt them to explain what they saw and heard.

And this is the great application to us about the book of Acts. Jesus tells us, "Be My Witnesses." The Lord is calling all of us, who have come to know the Lord and have trusted in Jesus, to speak up and tell others of what we have experienced of Jesus.

The experience of the courtroom may be the experience of your life. You may be asked questions by unbelievers about your faith as though a witness on the stand. Peter said, "always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). A great illustration of this is the blind man that Jesus healed. The Pharisees brought this man before them and asked him how he received his sight. He said, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see" (John 9:15). A little while later, they brought the (formerly) blind man in again for questioning. They said, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner" (John 9:24). And the man said, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25). All this man was doing was being a witness. He simply opened his mouth and told those questioning him of his experiences with his encounter with Jesus. "I was blind. He put mud on my eyes. When I washed away the mud, I could see."

The witness of the blind man to the healing he experience is what the book of Acts will call us to do. It calls us to tell others of what we have experienced through Jesus. When someone inquires of us, we might reply with something to this effect:

"I was lost. I was walking in sin. Then, I heard about Jesus. I believed in his work on the cross to cancel my sin. And things changed in my life. I had new desires that I had never had before. I started hating my sin. I was reading the Bible and loving it! I found church to be my favorite place to be. Jesus did it all. I'm thankful to God for doing this work in my life. Are you interested to hear more?"

This is what Jesus is calling us to do through the book of Acts: "Be My Witnesses." We see this over and over again in the book of Acts. This is what I call, ...

1. The Theme

... because this is what the book of Acts is all about! It's about his followers telling others of what they have seen and heard.

At this point, I just want to walk us through the book of Acts to see how often this happens. I encourage you to take your Bibles and turn the pages as we work through the chapters.

In Acts, chapter 2, we read about the day of Pentecost, when Jews had come from all around the world to worship in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit descended them, and many were given the gift of speaking languages that they had never spoken before. The people were amazed and asked, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12). And so, Peter stands up and answers the question: "This is the power of Jesus, who was crucified, raised from the dead, and now seated at the right hand of God! Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit that you see and hear. So 'Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:36).'"

When those hearing were "cut to the heart," they asked Peter, "What shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The result was 3,000 people believed and were baptized. This all took place because Peter was a witness for Jesus.

A little later, (in Acts 4), after Peter and John had healed a lame man, the religious leaders called them into their counsel and asked them, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, bore witness to what happened, saying, "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by him this man is standing before you well. ... And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:10, 12). By this time, the numbers of those who were in Jerusalem and had believed were 5,000.

the events of Acts 2 and Acts 4 all happened because of Peter simply was being a witness to what he had seen and heard and learned from Jesus. The book of Acts calls us to do the same. When situations arise and we can talk about Jesus, we simply need to open our mouths and speak up. You need to tell others of what you have experienced, how you have believed in his sacrifice upon the cross for your sins, how you have turned from your sins, how you have been forgiven, and what you have learned from walking with him day by day. And there are times when this may be costly to you, especially when you have to confront someone in their sin.

Nobody likes to be told that what they are doing is wrong. This is what Stephen did when he bore witness of Jesus. His story is told in Acts, chapter 7. He was accused of speaking against the temple and the law, the high priest asked him, "Are these things so?" (Acts 7:1). So, Stephen stood up and spoke about how rebellious Israel has been down through its history, saying that now, the current generation is no different. "You have now betrayed and murdered [the Righteous One]" (Acts 7:52). These words cost Stephen his life, as those who heard Stephen speak, stoned him to death. Your witnessing activity to others may not cost your life, but it may cost you other things, like reputation or friendship.

At any rate, because of Stephen's death, the church was scattered throughout the world. And wherever people went, they were being a witness for Jesus,

In Acts, chapter 8, we read of a Eunuch from Ethiopia, who "had come to Jerusalem to worship" (Acts 8:27). On his way home, he was reading from Isaiah 53, the passage that prophesies of the sufferings of Jesus.

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7).

Philip, who was on the same road heading south to Gaza, saw this eunuch in the chariot. Philip came up to him and saw him reading the Scriptures, and asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30). And the Eunuch said, "How can I, unless someone guides me? ... "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (Acts 8:31, 34). What an opening! So Philip, "beginning with this Scripture ... told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). The Eunuch believed and was baptized and continued on his journey home to Ethiopia, bringing the gospel with him.

These are the sorts of opportunities that we will see throughout the book of Acts. The apostles will go out and find themselves in situations where people are interested in spiritual matters. And they stir up conversation. And they bear witness about Jesus.

And really, my hope and prayer as we work our way through the book of Acts is that we might do the same. That we would be alert to the circumstances surrounding us. And be quick to bear witness of what we have seen and heard and learned of Jesus. So that if an opportunity arises, will you be ready? That's my hope and prayer for us in the book of Acts, because, we are going to see this happen over and over and over again.

In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the church on their first missionary journey. They found themselves in a synagogue on the Sabbath in Antioch in Pisidia. "After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue [asked them], "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it" (Acts 13:15). So Paul stood up and bore witness of how Jesus lived in Jerusalem, was condemned to death by the rulers in Jerusalem, and was crucified at the order of Pontius Pilate. But God raised him from the dead, exactly like the Old Testament had promised. Paul then announced, "through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" (Acts 13:38). This was Paul bearing witness of Jesus.

Later (in Acts 16), when Paul was in Philippi, his preaching had landed him in prison. While there, Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, were praying and singing hymns to God late into the night. Then there was an earthquake. "And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened" (Acts 16:26). When the prisoners didn't run for freedom, the jailer "called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas" (Acts 16:29), saying, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). And Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). This jailer and all his household believed, and a church was planted in Philippi. It all started with Paul bearing witness of Jesus.

Later (in Acts 17), when Paul was in Athens, the intellectual elite of the city heard that Paul was out preaching about something. So, they called him in to the Areopagus, and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" (Acts 17:19). And so, Paul gave witness to God's creative power and self-sufficiency. Finally he ended with a word about Jesus and his resurrection. This didn't sit well with the intellectuals of the day, but some others who were there were persuaded by Paul's testimony, and believed. Again, people came to believe because of Paul's testimony.

Eventually, Paul arrested in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21). In the process of being arrested and taken away, he pleaded with the officer who was arresting him, saying, "I beg you, permit me to speak to the people" (Acts 21:39). Chapter 22 tells us what he said. Paul simply gives his testimony of salvation. He tells of how he was blinded by a great light from heaven (Acts 22:6). He heard Jesus speak with him, telling him to go to Damascus, where he would be told what was appointed for him to do (Acts 22:10). Paul told the crowd of how a man

named Ananias came and told him, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:14, 15). This was the life of Paul. He gave witness for Jesus wherever he went. And the Lord used him mightily.

He was imprisoned in Jerusalem. For his own safety, he was transferred to Caesarea. While he was in Caesarea, he had the opportunity to testify of Jesus to three different governors. Chapter 24 tells of his witnessing to Felix. Chapter 25 tells of his witnessing to Festus. Chapter 26 tells of his witnessing to Agrippa. In fact, chapter 26 is much of a repeat of chapter 22, where Paul tells of his story of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. And all Paul did was tell Agrippa of what he had seen and heard. Paul was a witness for Jesus. And this is what the book of Acts calls us to do as well.

By the way, this is yet another instance in the Bible where we see the theme of "Enjoying His Grace and Extending His Glory," which is the purpose statement of our church. Those who have known and experienced the grace of God, are called upon to extend the glory of God. And you do this by being a witness. Or, as Jesus calls us to do: "Be My Witness." I get these exact words from Acts 1:8:

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will **be my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

I trust that you can see this phrase right in the middle of the verse: "Be My Witnesses." Now, it must be noted here in verse 8, that this isn't a command. Jesus isn't commanding his disciples here to be his witnesses. Rather, he is telling them that they will be his witnesses. He is sort of stating a fact of what will happen. Jesus says to those in Jerusalem, that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and that they will be empowered to be a witness for Jesus. And, as we have seen, the book of Acts, shows the theme very clearly. They were his witnesses. And so also should we be his witnesses.

Now, many people have taken used Acts 1:8 to be an outline of the book of Acts. And I think it's really good to do so. That's why I took the wording for the theme of Acts from this verse, because it's so crucial to the book of Acts. I commend Acts 1:8 for your memorization. You should draw a box around this verse in your Bible. You should put an asterisk in the margin, anything to bring your attention to this verse.

One of the main reasons why people have pointed to Acts 1:8 as a good outline of the book is because of the geographical markers in the verse. Look again.

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem** and in **Judea** and **Samaria**, and to the **end of the earth**.

First of all is Jerusalem. And then, there is Judea. And then, there is Samaria. And then, there is "the end of the earth." If you aren't sure of where these locations are, find a map of Israel during the days of Jesus and locate these places on the map. It will help you see the plan of Jesus in the evangelization of the world.

Jesus first mentions Jerusalem. This is the religious center of the world. This is where the temple was. This is where Jesus visited and taught on many occasions. This is where Jesus was crucified. This is where the book of Acts begins, with the disciples there in Jerusalem.

Next, Jesus mentions Judea. This is the region surrounding Jerusalem, somewhat to the south. This is where the Jewish culture of Jesus' day was most prominent. It's where the Jews had most influence. The good kings ruled in Judah.

Then, Jesus mentions Samaria. This is the region to the north of Judea. This is where the Samaritans lived. They were hated by the Jews because they had intermarried with the Assyrians when they were conquered. And so, they were viewed as outsiders to the covenant.

Finally, Jesus mentions "the end of the earth." That's everything beyond Judea and Samaria. That's Asia and Europe and Australia and Rockford! This is what I call, ...

2. The Spread

This is the spread of the gospel. When Jesus told his disciples that they will "be my witnesses," this is where he told them they would go. They would begin their witnessing activity in Jerusalem. And then, it would spread out. It would continue south and north (Judea and Samaria). Further, it would spread far beyond (the end of the earth).

And this, by the way is what we see in the book of Acts. The first seven chapters of Acts takes place in Jerusalem. For over three years, the apostles were busy in Jerusalem, dealing with the thousands of people who came to faith in Jesus. But when Stephen was martyred, it was not safe to be in Jerusalem. So many scattered from the city. They scattered into Judea and Samaria.

Philip was one of those who scattered. In Acts, chapter 8, we read of how he brought the gospel to Samaria in the north and many people were believing in Jesus. "They believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. They were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). The apostles at Jerusalem came down and prayed for the Samaritans (Acts 8:15). Later in chapter 8, Philip went south, just beyond Judea. This is where he met the Ethiopian Eunuch, who believed.

From there, the gospel slowly spread. In Acts 10, we see Peter bringing the gospel to Cornelius on the coast in Caesarea, not far from Jerusalem, toward the west. In Acts 11, we see the gospel spreading to Antioch in the north, a bit further yet. In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas are sent out on the first missionary journey, which takes them into Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), where they preached the gospel and established churches. In Acts 14, you see them returning home to Antioch.

After a bit of time, they returned again to visit those who had believed to strengthen them. Then, they went beyond Asia Minor to Macedonia and Greece. Paul's adventures are told in chapters 16 and 17, and 18. And then, Paul heads out a third time, bringing the gospel further and further, "to the end of the earth." This all took place because those who believed in Jesus were witnessing to all that they saw and heard.

Acts is really quite a thrilling book, as you see the gospel spread throughout the world, making its impact. Those in Thessalonica described the rapid growth of the church as "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). That is, the effect upon people was having its way in the culture. Many were believing in Jesus. They were turning away from their idols. They were establishing churches. This is the power of the gospel. This is the work that God did in the early days of the church. This is the power of bearing witness for Jesus.

By the end of the book of Acts, you have churches established all over the world, so much so that Paul wrote to those in Rome, "your faith is proclaimed in all the world" (Romans 1:8). By the end of the book of Acts, we see over 30 churches mentioned in the Bible. The church did expand. However, the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome in the far west, continuing the theme, being a witness of Jesus.

Acts 28:30-31

[Paul] lived [in Rome] two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

And the book of Acts just sort of stops there. Luke leaves us hanging. There is no nice resolution to the book. We don't know what happened after this. We know that Paul wanted to continue further west to Spain (Romans 15:24). And yet, we have reason to believe that he died there in Rome, as a political prisoner. But the fact that the book ends without a conclusion is a call to all of us. It's a call for us to continue the work. We do this by "Being Witnesses of Jesus."

And after a few hundred years, the church greatly expanded. Today, the church is all over the world! It's all a continuation of what Jesus said would happen. Believers in him would spread throughout the world as a witness to him!

There's a church-planting organization that picks up this idea called, "Acts 29." It is a network of churches that is focused continuing on where Acts left off (i.e. Acts, chapter 29). Their main aim is to plant churches as a way of spreading the gospel. I know several pastors in this network. I love their heart. My daughter attends an Acts 29 church where she lives. One of the pastors who preached in my absence this summer is involved in an Acts 29 church in St. Charles. A few years ago, when Yvonne and I visited my daughter, who was student teaching in London, we visited an Acts 29 church! They are literally all over the world, doing the work of spreading the gospel and planting churches!

And Acts 29 is where we live! The whole story of the Christian church hasn't yet been written. We are living the story! We are writing Acts 29 today.

Now, as we think about our own activity of being a witness, it is helpful to think about these geographical categories. It is of importance here to note the various characteristics of these locations.

Jerusalem was a city, filled with people, all nearby. Jerusalem was also filled with homogenous people. For the most part, they were all culturally the same. And as you move out to Judea, the people were more spread out, living in little towns and villages. So, it would take a bit more of an effort to reach these people. Yet, they too, were predominately Jews, of the same culture. Now, as you move out to Samaria, the people also were spread out in little towns and villages, not too far away. But these people were of a different culture than the Jews. So, to reach the Samaritans, it required some cross-cultural ministry. And as you move out to the end of the earth, these people are far away and of a different culture. It required more effort to reach them. It required great travel. It required great cultural sensitivity.

These are some great categories to think through our witnessing activity. There are people in your Jerusalem that are close to you. Perhaps they are neighbors. Perhaps they are co-workers. Perhaps they work out at the same gym as you do, or their kids attend the same school that your kids attend, or they are involved in the same activities that you do. They are within your culture and you see them often. Jesus calls you to "Be His Witnesses" to these people. Jesus calls you to "speak up" to these people.

Then, there are people in your Judea. These are those sort of people who aren't so far away, but you don't see very often. Yet, they are part of your culture. These might be your relatives that you visit at Christmas and Easter. These might be friends you visit a few times a year. These might be those who went to school with you, who you connect with on social media. In general, these are the people who come from your same culture. As you mix with them, the book of Acts calls us to be a witness for Jesus.

There are people in your Samaria. These are those who aren't so far away, and are not a part of your culture. These are those on the other side of town who are on the other side of the racial divide in our nation. These are the foreign folks who have immigrated to the United States, who live in your neighborhood. Though they are near physically, there is a bit more of a gap between you and them, as you are not from the same culture. As you mix with these people, the book of Acts calls us to be a witness for Jesus.

Finally, there are people in your "ends of the earth." They are far away, in foreign lands, and in different cultures. It's hard to get to them. It requires much effort. This is what missions is about. Certainly, each of us cannot go to all of the places around the world to reach everyone. Yet, there are some who do go. And you read the book of Acts, a few went to the "end of the earth." New Testament missionaries include Paul and Barnabas and Timothy and Silas and Luke. They are few in number. But the church supported them strongly. We can either go or send. If we aren't going, we must be sending, supporting the effort of bringing the gospel to far distant lands.

That's the heart behind the teaching slide for the book of Acts. You have the resurrection up close. A little beyond that in the landscape along the road, you come to some small villages. And beyond that you come to today with some cities. Beyond that are faint cities. Beyond that, there is an unknown, wherever the gospel is spreading. And I love the way that this landscape sort of dissolves into the horizon, as if you never quite reach the end.

This is our task: world-wide evangelism. It is a huge task. In fact, the task is impossible, apart from the power of God. And this is my third point. We have seen (1) The Theme; and (2) The Spread. And now, we see ...

3. The Power

... that is, the power we need to accomplish this task. The power comes in Acts 1:8.

Acts 1:8

But you will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

I trust that you see where the power lies. It lies with the Holy Spirit. It's not with us.

Now, when you look at your Bibles, you will see the title of this book written as "The Acts of the Apostles." It's really sort of a misleading title. As many of the apostles are only mentioned as being in Jerusalem in chapter 1, nowhere else. And only two of the apostles are really prominent in the book, Peter and Paul. Peter is prominent in the first half of the book. Paul is prominent in the second half of the book. So, Acts might better be titled, "The Acts of Peter and Paul."

But even that title misses it. Because, Acts records the work that God did in establishing his church after Jesus rose from the dead. And it's a great work. And it was only accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. Many theologians and pastors have talked about how this book really ought to be entitled, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." Some 50 times, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the book of Acts.

In future weeks and months, as you have opportunity to read through the book of Acts, I would encourage you to look for the prominence of the Spirit in this book. We see his promised coming in Act 1:8. We see the Holy Spirit descending upon those in Jerusalem on Pentecost (in Acts 2) and upon those in Caesarea (Acts 10) and Ephesus (19), giving ability to speak other languages. We see Stephen and Peter and Paul empowered by the Holy Spirit in preaching boldly (Acts 4:8; 7:55; 9:17). We see the Holy Spirit as guiding the church, having spoken through the Scriptures (Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25). The Holy Spirit is seen speaking to people and telling them where to go and what to do (Acts 8:29; 13:2). The Holy Spirit prophesies of future events (Acts 20:23; 21:11). The Holy Spirit comforts the whole church (Acts 9:31).

So, as we think about Acts and it's call upon our lives to be witnesses of all that we have seen and heard, let's not think that we are doing this on our own. It is the Spirit who empowers us to accomplish this task. And so, the application for us is simple. If we want to be a witness of Jesus, we need to plead and pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to do so. I would encourage you to pray so right now.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 27, 2014 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.
