



INSIGHT

to biblical TEXTS

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Acts 1:4-8

INSIGHT to ACTS 1:4-8

(Source: Ch 6 & 7 in *Rethinking Empowerment*; Ch 9 in *Escape*)

The primary verse used to validate the teaching on power necessary for living the Christian life is Acts 1:8: “You *will receive power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you *shall be My witnesses* both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (italics added). In fact, Acts 1:8 usually tips the scales toward assuming that believers possess a special empowerment for the Christian life.

In determining if, in fact, this is so, textual considerations of the immediate context must be addressed. Providing needed insight, a study of Act 1:4-8 is critical (see slide 1).

1 ACTS 1:4-8
GRAMMATICAL LAYOUT

4	Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”	<i>Who</i>
6	So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?”	<i>Question & Answer</i>
7	He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;	
8	but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”	<i>Promise of Power</i>

4 Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; 5 for 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 were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

Acts 1:4-5

Notice the progressive development in these five verses. Verses 4-5 state the first promise given by Jesus to the Eleven: “Gathering them together, He commanded them...to wait for what the Father had promised...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” He repeated the promise of the Father to send the Holy Spirit in order to baptize all who believed in Christ for eternal life (John 14:16, 26). This promise, however, would not become a reality until Christ’s departure to the Father (John 16:7). In Acts 1, as Christ prepared to leave the earth and go to the Father, He again reminded the Eleven of the coming promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:6-7

Coming to Acts 1:6, we are faced with a rather curious development. Verse 4 begins with Jesus “gathering them [the Eleven] together” and then two verses later the text indicates “when they [the Eleven] had come together” (v 6) with Jesus. Some clarity is provided when we understand that the “gathering them together” (v 4) is a different Greek word from that used in “when they had come together” (v 6). Many commentators suggest that “gathering them together” (v 4) should be rendered “eating with them,” indicating a different occasion from that in verse 6.¹ One commentator asks an insightful question when he writes, “If Jesus is eating with the apostles in v. 4, why must Luke in v. 6 remind us that they had come together?”² Either Luke was clumsy in his communicating skills or he was purposeful, indicating a change in the discussion, if not occurrences as well. Rather than understanding that the whole group finally got together in Acts 1:6, following the initial gathering by some in verse 4, it is better to understand the events as separate occurrences. If not, some of the Eleven would not have heard Christ’s teaching on the promise of the Spirit (vv 4-5) and would be wondering what stimulated the question about the kingdom in verse 6. Even so, the intervening question about the kingdom’s restoration (v 6) separates the promise of the Holy Spirit (v 5) from the promise of power (v 8) even if they occurred during the same extended event.

Continuing in Acts 1:6, the Eleven brought up the subject of the coming kingdom. They wanted clarification of future events. They had seen the reaction of the crowds when Christ entered Jerusalem (Luke 19:37-38), and they expected the kingdom to be established immediately (Luke 19:11). Consequently, there had been controversy, even in the upper room, about who would be greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24; Matt 19:27-29; 20:20-28). Since both John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) and Jesus (Matt 4:17) had proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom and the kingdom program was associated with the Spirit being “poured out” on the nation (Isa 32:15; Ezek 39:29; Joel 2:28), was this promise of the Spirit’s coming the sign that the kingdom would be established? That would obviously be on the minds of the Eleven. They naturally asked the question, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). In response Christ said, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (v 7).

Acts 1:8

Jesus then moved the conversation to their mission—to be His “witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (v 8). Until returning to establish the earthly kingdom, Christ gave them a task to complete, even providing a geographical layout. When God assigns a task, He also supplies the ability for its accomplishment. Jesus tells them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (v 8). For their mission, the Eleven were promised power, which followed the first promise, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The second promise (power) is tied to the first promise (gift), but the two must be understood as distinct and separate.

Witnesses in Acts

Careful attention must be paid to the various titles Luke used to address Christ's intimate followers in the Book of Acts. These men are designated as "the Twelve," "the Eleven," and "the apostles," two times, one time, and thirty times, respectively. But they are never referred to as His "disciples."³ Also the noun "witness" (*martus*) is used thirteen times in the Book of Acts, ten times in direct reference to the apostles (see slide 2, *Witnesses of Jesus Christ*). The three exceptions concern a false witness at Stephen's trial (6:13), witnesses viewing the stoning of Stephen (7:58), and a reference to Stephen during Paul's defense before the religious leaders in Jerusalem (22:20).

2

WITNESSES OF JESUS CHRIST

Book	Ch	Vs	Context	Apostles	Others
Luke	24	48	Witness of Christ's Life	X	
Acts	1	8	Witness for Christ	X	
		22	Witness of Resurrection	X	
	2	32	Witness of Resurrection	X	
	3	15	Witness of Resurrection	X	
	5	32	Witness of Christ's Life	X	
	6	13	False Witness at a Trial		X
	7	58	Witness at Stephen's Stoning		X
	10	39	Witness of Christ's Life	X	
		41	Witness of Christ's Life	X	
	13	31	Witness of Christ	X	
	22	15	Witness of Christ	X	
		20	Witness of Christ		X
	26	16	Witness of Christ	X	

Remember, Luke wrote the Book of Acts to explain the geographic expansion of the church to the whole world via the apostles, among which Luke included Paul. The apostles were the *witnesses* through whom the claims of Jesus Christ were to be spread (1:8). Even though others also would be filled with the Spirit, the apostles would be filled with the Spirit and with power, to accomplish their mission as His witnesses (1:8).⁴ This power was reflected in "signs," "wonders," and "miracles," which authenticated the apostles and their message. Slide 3, *Power of the Holy Spirit*, shows who demonstrated these three manifestations of the power of the Spirit. While others besides the apostles did manifest supernatural powers in service and ministry, the apostles, whom Jesus called "My witnesses," certainly had these powers. In fact Luke's argument in Acts relates the witnesses of Acts 1:8 only to the apostles. To be an *apostle* was synonymous with being a *witness*.

The assertion that Acts 1:8 was addressed only to the apostles contradicts the majority of books written on evangelism, which turn to Acts 1:8 to motivate all believers to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. Of course all believers are to witness for Jesus. For example, the Samaritan woman bore witness of Jesus (John 4:39), and the believers who were scattered following the persecution in Jerusalem went about evangelizing (Acts 8:4). The problem, however, is the inference to Acts 1:8. Addressing this distinction, one Bible teacher writes that only the apostles "are μαρτυρες [witnesses] (vs. 8) in the technical sense (cf. 1:22) of this term. (In a secondary sense, of course, so are we, but in reference to the Christian martyria the technical use is the only one found in Acts.)"⁵

3

POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (Book of Acts)						
Ch	Vs	Power Manifestations			Individuals	
		Signs	Wonders	Miracles	Apostles	Others
2	22	X	X	X		X
	43	X	X		X	
4	16			X	X*	
	22			X	X*	
5	30	X	X	X	X*	
	12	X	X		X	
6	8	X	X			X
7	36	X	X			X
8	6	X				X
	13	X		X		X
14	13	X	X		X**	
15	12	X	X		X**	
19	11			X	X**	

* Peter & John ** Paul or Paul & Barnabus

First Corinthians 5:20 states that each believer is an ambassador for Christ to an unbelieving world. In fact the Samaritan woman bearing witness (John 4:39) and the scattered believers going about evangelizing (Acts 8:4) are examples of such ministry. Yes, every believer in Christ is to share the claims of Christ with a lost world, but biblical support for that fact does not come from Acts 1:8. Luke wrote the Book of Acts for a particular reason, explaining that Christ’s witnesses (the apostles), after receiving power to perform and authenticate their ministry, were to take the claims of Christ throughout the world to establish the church.

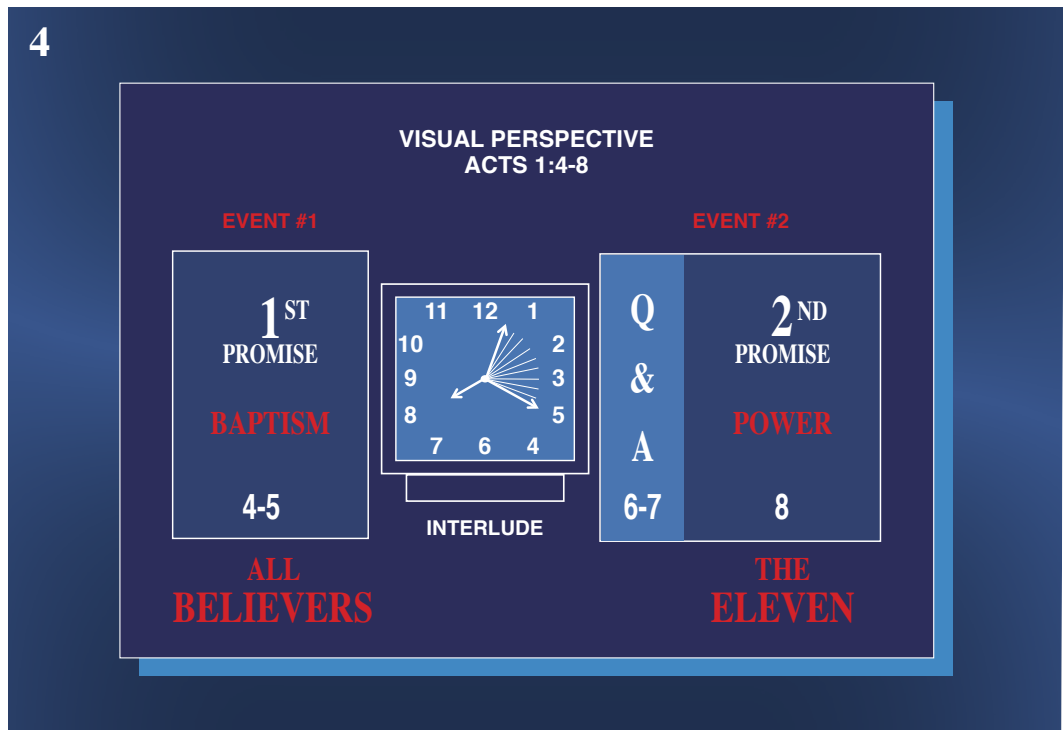
Conclusion

While the *first promise*, baptism of the Spirit, was for all believers in Christ, notice that the *second promise*, the promise of power, was directed toward a particular group, the Eleven, and for a particular task, to be Witnesses of Christ (see slide 4, *Visual Perspective*).⁶ Consequently, the issue of power in Acts 1:8 *does not concern power to live the Christian life but only power for service or ministry*. The promise of power was given to the Eleven as “eye witnesses” (Luke 24:48) of Christ (obviously Paul claimed to also be an “eye witness”) to accomplish their mission of taking the message of Christ to those who had not heard. This power was evidenced in “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles,” which authenticated the apostles and their message (2 Cor 12:12).⁷ Luke consistently uses “witnesses” throughout Acts to indicate that the apostles were Christ’s “eye witnesses.”⁸

[**Note:** While empowerment for service is not exclusively to the Eleven in the New Testament, empowerment is *never* for living the Christian life. Empowerment for the Eleven was purposely given for ministry.]

How you understand Acts 1:8 affects your perception of the Spirit’s work today. Either all believers receive power to live the Christian life (v 8) when they receive the gift of the Spirit (v 5) or all believers receive the gift of the Spirit (v 5), but only the “Witnesses” received power regarding their unique ministry (v 8). If you understand Acts 1 addressed a special ability for Christian living, that would reinforce the teaching that God *works through the believer* to produce good works. On the other hand, if empowerment in Acts 1 only

4



concerned the Apostles' ministry, then each Christian is responsible for choosing to live in obedience to the Word in collaboration with the Spirit's influencing ministries of filling, leading and teaching. The biblical evidence only supports the latter interpretation.



Endnotes:

1. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 36; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934), 26; A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 3: The Acts of the Apostles (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 7; Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 51.
2. Lenski, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 28.
3. Zane C. Hodges, *Notes on Acts* (Class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973), 4.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ken Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2011), 89-93.
7. As with the Apostles, "signs," "wonders," and "miracles" performed through Christ by God authenticated Christ and His message (Acts 2:22).
8. Hodges, 4.