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The Promises and the Beneficiaries



RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Ezekiel 36:27

I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind.

Joel 2:28

He commanded them...to wait for what the Father had promised...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...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 1:4-8

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In life, we are faced with numerous axioms. In the jargon of the financial community, the adage, “Buy low and sell high,” is well known. Obviously, a profound statement, but how is it accomplished? If it was easy, anybody could do it and investing in the stock market would be a piece of cake. So you ask, “Exactly how do you do that?” This is the same question most Christians should be asking when someone says, “The victorious Christian life is experienced when you get plugged into the Spirit’s power!” Is there a spiritual socket? Is there a list of items to check off to ensure you do not block the power surge? Is there a certain technique used to guarantee the connection?

What is the Christian to do? How do we “get plugged into the power?” What does that look like? I submit this saying is as illusive as “Buy low and sell high.”

Receiving the Promised Gift
differs from
Receiving the Promised Power

In his Gospel the apostle John writes that Christ’s teaching

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about the “water springing up to eternal life” (4:14) and the “rivers of living water” (7:38) refers to the future indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, John indicated that this is a future event, following Christ’s glorification. In Luke 11:2-13, Christ pointed out, following the second teaching of the model prayer (vv. 2-4), that a good father gives good gifts (vv. 11-13). Concluding in verse 13, Jesus said that God the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. This future promise was no doubt a central issue in the apostles’ prayers in Acts 1:14 after they are told to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

From the Old Testament we learn that God pledged to give the Spirit to His people when He will establish His earthly kingdom with Israel in the end times. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-28; and Joel 2:28-32 are the principal passages addressing the gift of the Spirit and the institution of a New Covenant with the nation Israel.

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people...I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34

For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you...I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Ezekiel 36:24, 26-27

I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind.

Joel 2:28

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The New Testament develops this theme. Understanding the church's role in the New Covenant, however, has been the root of division in the body of Christ. One interpretation is that the *church actually replaced Israel* (amillennial view), God's promises applying only to the church. Another says the *church enjoys the benefits of the Spirit, while national Israel is set aside* (premillennial view), until God once again brings the nation to Himself in the end times.¹ The latter view understands that Israel currently has been temporarily set aside (Rom. 9–11), because of their rejection of the Messiah, and the church has been given the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:1–9; Gal. 3:10–29; Heb. 8:1–13). Those holding to the amillennial interpretation say that each believer in the church receives both the gift of the Spirit and “special power” from the Spirit to live the Christian life, to ensure the perseverance of a godly life until death or Christ's return.² Those who hold to the premillennial interpretation take one of two views: (1) each believer receives both the gift of the Spirit and “special power” to live the Christian life, or (2) each believer receives the gift of the Spirit but *not* a “special empowerment” for Christian living. The first perspective of the premillennial interpretation is identical to the amillennial point of view. This author, however, embraces to the second perspective of the premillennial interpretation: each believer receives the gift of the Spirit but *not* a “special empowerment” for Christian living.

A careful study of Christ's promises in Acts 1 yields insight into a better way of seeing God's work throughout history. The promise of the Holy Spirit was first given by Christ during or after the meal in the upper room before His arrest. Christ indicated that

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the Spirit would be given to the church, Jews and Gentiles alike, as an indwelling Helper (John 14:16–17). 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 “to wait for what the Father had promised” (Acts 1:4), that is the coming of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Let’s thoughtfully consider the implications of Acts 1:1-8 as observed in the previous chapter. An interlude preceding Acts 1:6 separates the *first promise* of gifting (vv. 4-5) from the *second promise* of empowering (v. 8). Rather than understanding that the group finally got together in Acts 1:6, following the initial beginning to gather in verse 4, it is better to understand the events as separate occurrences. Acts 1:1-8 does not indicate that some heard the first promise concerning the Holy Spirit in verses 4–5 and then others continued to wander in to hear the second promise of empowerment (v. 8). Rather, there are two separate, interrelated promises given on two separate occasions, and they must be understood separately and distinctly.

In Acts 1:6 the disciples brought up the subject of the coming kingdom. There had been controversy, even in the upper room, about who would be greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24; Matt.

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19:27–29; 20:20–28). The Eleven 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). Was this promise of the Spirit’s coming the sign that the kingdom would be established? They naturally asked

the question, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).³ In response Christ told them that this was not for them to know (v. 7). Rather, their concern should relate to

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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). Prior to the expected physical kingdom, God is now establishing a new phase of the kingdom until His Son returns (v. 11). Till then, 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. 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.

In Acts 1:4-8, verse 6 separates the first promise, *the gift of the Spirit*, from the second promise, *the promise of empowerment*, by the inquiry concerning the kingdom. So in the providence of God Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, segmented the whole book into the specified locations indicated in verse 8—“Jerusalem” (Acts 1–7), “Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8–12), and “the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 13–28). These apostolic witnesses geographically expanded the new form of the kingdom, breaking down racial barriers so that all might be included in the church. To accomplish this undertaking, the Eleven, eyewitnesses of Jesus and His ministry, were given power to confirm that their message was from God by means of “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12).

Witnessing by the Apostles differs from Witnessing by the Disciples

Careful attention must be given 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.”⁴ Also the noun “witness” (*martus*) is used thirteen times in the Book of Acts, ten times in direct reference to the apostles (see the chart, *Witnesses of Jesus Christ* on the next

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page). 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).

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 for Christ	X	
	22	15	Witness for Christ	X	
		20	Witness for Christ		X
	26	16	Witness for 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 which 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).⁵ This power was reflected in “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles,” which authenticated the apostles and their message. The chart, *Power of the Holy Spirit*, on the following page shows who demonstrated these three manifestations of the power of the Spirit. As previously noted, others besides the apostles did manifest supernatural powers; however the apostles, whom Jesus

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called “My witnesses,” certainly manifested 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*.

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*	
	30	X	X		X*	
5	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 & Barnabas

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 μαρτυρεῖσ [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.)”⁶

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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

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believers going about evangelizing (Acts 8:4) are examples of such ministry. Yes, every believer in Christ is to share the claims of Christ to 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 progressively throughout the world to establish the infant church.

Conclusion

A study of the logical and chronological flow of thought in Acts 1:1-8 and from the following passages confirms the validity of distinguishing the promises from the beneficiaries.

He [Holy Spirit] will testify [bear witness] of me, and you [apostles] will testify [bear witness] also, because you have been with Me (John 15:26-27).

You [apostles] shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you [apostles], and you [apostles] shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles (Acts 2:43).

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With great power the apostles were giving testimony [witness] to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:33).

God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul (Acts 19:11).

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles (2 Cor. 12:12).

Remember in the Book of Acts, apostles differ from disciples and only the apostles were witnesses in the technical sense. Those witnesses were especially empowered to perform their mission—taking the claims of Christ to the world and establishing the infant church. As a result, witnessing by the apostles differs from witnessing by other disciples.

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Chapter 7, NOTES

1. The distinction between these differing views is addressed in detail in chapters 9-11.
2. Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism, Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 29, 89–90.

Mathison, who holds the Reformed theological position, believes the church is Israel, “The promise made to literal, physical Israelites were fulfilled by a literal, physical Israelite, Jesus the Messiah. He is the seed of Abraham....The covenantal promises do not require a future fulfillment by national Israel in order for God’s Word to be true.”

Mathison also believes the Spirit empowers each believer to live the Christian life. “The same Holy Spirit who writes the law on our hearts also indwells and gives us the power to obey it (Ezek. 36:27). We fulfill the law to the extent that we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4)...The difference is that under the old covenant administration, the law was external and man was unable to keep it. Under the new covenant administration, the law is written on believers’ hearts and the indwelling Holy Spirit empowers them.”

The problem with Mathison’s Reformed theological position is that Ezekiel 36:37 addresses the future establishment of the millennium kingdom. The new covenant was initiated at Pentecost with Peter appealing to Joel 2:28–32 to verify God’s breaking into history in a new way, but the promise of Ezekiel 36 and Joel 2 were only partially fulfilled at Pentecost. Final fulfillment is yet to occur after Christ’s return and the establishment of His kingdom with the Jewish nation at that time. The Spirit will “*cause* you [kingdom Israelites] to walk in My statutes” (Ezek. 36:27). Mathison’s appeal to Ezekiel 36 to verify his position is invalid and there is no present “special” empowering to live the Christian life (*italics added*).

Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 453-54.

Fee writes that “the need of Torah...has come to end with the advent of the Spirit, God’s way of fulfilling his promised new covenant. This is Torah being etched on the heart, so that God’s people will obey him (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:27). Here also is the clear evidence that for Paul the elimination of Torah does not mean the end of righteousness. On the contrary, the Spirit *produces* the real thing, the righteousness of God himself, as his children reflect his likeness in their lives together and in the world” (*italics added*).

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The problem with Fee's position is his contention throughout his book that the Spirit is the energizer and producer of the believer's works.

John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), 147, 252, 301.

Piper maintains that God empowers the obedience of each "true" believer and indicates "the effort we make to obey God is not an effort done in our own strength, but 'in the strength which God supplies.'" Further, Piper writes, "Since it is God's commitment to save, it is also God's commitment to enable all that is necessary for salvation." So "God does not merely command obedience, he gives it." Piper therefore sees God's grace "as a power to obey as well as a pardon for sin."

The problem with Piper's position is that perseverance in faith and in good works by the believer is viewed as inevitable and necessary for salvation—a Reformed theological position. He concludes therefore that salvation is accomplished by God's grace in providing "special empowering" to live the Christian life and thus to produce perseverance in faith and in good works.

3. To substantiate the belief of no future earthly kingdom, amillennialists understand that the Eleven's question was misguided. Bruce K. Waltke sets forth the amillennial position ("Kingdom Promises as Spiritual" in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988], 273-74]. Support of the premillennial position envisioning a future earthly kingdom is given by Darrell L. Bock in "The Reign of the Lord Christ" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, by Craig A. Blasing and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 45-46.
4. Zane C. Hodges, *Notes on Acts* (Class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973), 4.
5. *Ibid.*

Hodges states 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.) The power (δυναμις) which the official witnesses are to receive apparently refers basically to the miraculous manifestations which in this book are mainly, though not exclusively, apostolic. (Stephen who also works miracles is called a martus at 22:20, but Philip is not. Stephen, of course, saw Christ in heaven—cf. 7:55). For the connection of δυναμις with miracles, cf. 3:12 and 4:17, and note 4:33 which in context is formally parallel with 2:43."

6. *Ibid.*

