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## Exploring God's Promise of Empowerment

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## RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

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Acts 1:4-8

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## Exploring God’s Promise of Empowerment

Some time back, in fact quite awhile back, Hollywood released the movie, *Without a Clue*, a satire on Sherlock Holmes. In the film, Holmes’s sidekick, Dr. Watson, was the brains behind the duo, while Holmes, played by Michael Caine, bumbled through as the front man. As a crowd gathered after solving an important case, Holmes revealed his insight into investigation. Standing on the steps with his back to his three-story townhouse at 221B Baker Street, Holmes told the newspaper reporters not to look around but to look only at him. Then he asked, “How many windows are in the front of this building?” After many incorrect guesses by numerous reporters, Holmes revealed the exact number. The crowd gasped, realizing Holmes’s obviously extraordinary abilities. Then, in his distinctly British accent, he said, “*You* see, but *I* observe!”

I personally have reenacted Holmes’s illustration of this principle in my classroom to encourage students when they study not only to *read* the Bible, but also to *observe* and *understand* the actual words in front of them. Frankly, this principle was driven home to me while I was studying the Book of Acts. Having previously taught this book, I was reading and rereading the seminary classroom notes

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provided a number of years earlier. I would read the biblical text, then read the notes. Read the text, then the notes. This process went on for some time. I realized then that I had merely seen the text, whereas my professor, who had written the notes, had grasped the meaning of the text. I asked myself, “Why didn’t I see (observe) that before?”

### The Promise

Almost every book in a Christian bookstore addressing the Christian life will cover empowerment by the Holy Spirit and the text of choice is usually Acts 1:4–8. Invariably, the writer states that believers in Jesus Christ are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live the “victorious” Christian life. Consider the following examples:

It is divinely purposed that under grace the believers’ life is to be lived in the unbroken *power* of the Spirit....The new... life is to be lived by the *enabling power* of the indwelling Spirit...no help was ever provided under the law...under grace it is provided....This fact that the *enablement* for daily life is provided in one case and is not provided in the other is the... most important distinction between law and grace....Walking by means of the Spirit is simply walking by a definite reliance upon the ability and *power* of the One who indwells.<sup>1</sup>

*Lewis Sperry Chafer*

[T]he Holy Spirit’s role is crucial...in *empowering* us to live our lives in Christ....There is no aspect of Christian living that is not governed and *empowered* by the Holy Spirit....The Christian life begins and continues by the *power* of the Holy Spirit....He [Christ] illustrated their [disciples] need to rely on His *power* for even the most ordinary tasks....The Holy Spirit is already in us (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19) and working on our behalf. Our task is simply to respond and submit mo-

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ment by moment, step by step, day by day according to His *empowering* and *guiding*.<sup>2</sup>

*John MacArthur*

Only as we are *empowered* by the indwelling Holy Spirit will we produce what our lives are supposed to produce... the Holy Spirit is the heart and soul of the Christian faith and the victorious Christian life, and if we don't get plugged in to Him we will continue to experience defeat after defeat... When we are filled with the Spirit, He releases His *power* and influence in our lives...when His *power* is released by your submission and willingness to be filled, He cures your spiritual indigestion and *empowers* you to pull off great things... one of the Spirit's chief roles is to *empower* believers to live supernatural lives.<sup>3</sup>

*Tony Evans*

Just as in physical walking, spiritual walking must have power and direction. We are to walk by means of the Spirit's *power* and direction. The Spirit *enables* our spiritual walk because He makes us alive with the victorious life of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

*Neil Anderson and Robert Saucy*

### The Promise Explored

Contrary to the current thinking expressed in the quotes above, I encourage you to observe, not just read, the book of Acts. To begin our exploration, let's consider several questions prompted by a comment on a Christian radio program. The speaker expressed the view that believers today can live obediently to God's Word, saying, "We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey and live the Christian life. This was not so in Old Testament times!" This speaker had come to the same conclusion embodied in the quotations above. Two obvious questions are warranted. *Question one:* Could people in Old Testament times obey God without the Holy Spirit? If the answer is "No," then God played a cruel joke on His chosen people, the Israelites,

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requiring them to keep numerous commandments in order to please Him, knowing they lacked the Holy Spirit's enabling power. If the answer is "Yes," it begs a *second question*: Do believers today really need the Holy Spirit to obey God? If the answer is "Yes," you must reconsider your answer to the first question. If the answer is "No," the obvious conclusion is that one of the Holy Spirit's works is *not* a "special empowering" to live according to God's Word. The obvious deduction is that all believers are to walk obediently as a

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*choice*, following God's Word or the ways of the world. Old Testament believers had this very same option believers have today.

Having considered these two questions, there is an obligation to revisit the primary passage used in supporting the idea of "special empowerment." I am not saying that believers are not empowered with special giftedness; nor am I saying

that they cannot be empowered for special ministry. I am saying there is no "special empowerment" to live the day-to-day Christian life. New Testament believers have been recreated, regenerated, indwelt, sealed, and baptized in order to be able to make the right choices pertinent to successful Christian living, as they allow the Spirit to voluntarily fill, lead, and teach. The biblical balance is that God has already made every provision for the believer to live according to His Word and making correct choices is each believer's responsibility.

### The Promise Explained

If Acts 1:4–8 is the primary text supporting or denying the claims of "special empowerment," it is imperative we address it.

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There is a progressive development in these five verses. Verses 4-5 reveal 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 believe in Christ as their Savior (John 14:16, 26). Then the Eleven wanted clarification of future events (v. 6). "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Both John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2) and Jesus (Matt. 4:17) had proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom and since the kingdom program was associated with the Spirit being "poured out" on the nation (Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28), the establishment of the kingdom would obviously be on the minds of the Eleven. Jesus responded to their inquiry by saying, "It is not for

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you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (v. 7). Until He returns to establish the eternal kingdom (amillennial view)<sup>5</sup> or earthly kingdom (premillennial view),<sup>6</sup> Jesus told them of their responsibility as witnesses and God’s provision of power to accomplish that task. “But you [the Eleven] will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses” (v. 8).

### Contextual Issues

My daughter once asked, “Why isn’t the Bible simpler to understand?” Obviously part of our problem is that we are not living in the shoes of those to whom it was written. The separation of two thousand years requires that we study to understand the culture, the historical setting, and possibly the nuances of the language. There

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are those pesky figurative aspects of any language that must be sorted out. Even Jesus spoke in parables so that some would not be able to understand the meaning of what He taught, often having to explain those same parables to His own disciples (Matt. 13:11). Understanding is reserved for only those who are spiritually discerning (1 Cor. 2:14-15).

After spending four years in seminary, studying both Greek and Hebrew, I too continue to wish the Bible were easier to understand. Just the other day a pastor friend of mine and I were discussing a particular theological difference between evangelical groups. Both of us have been in ministry for more than thirty years and we came to the conclusion that we now have more questions about the Bible than answers. I often think back to one of my seminary professors saying, “Gentlemen, the cookies are on the upper shelf. It takes ef-

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fort to get one.” Understanding the Bible is not simple. Continually studying to search and grasp its meaning seems to be God’s intent for each believer.

You are saying to yourself, “What is the point here?” My contention is that Acts 1:4-8 is not as simple as it seems. In fact, the next two chapters are dedicated to address a number of thorny issues. My *major thesis* is this:

While the first promise, baptism of the Spirit, is for all believers in Christ, the second promise, the promise of power, was for a particular group and for a particular task. That particular group was the Eleven and the particular task was to be witnesses of Christ in the establishment of the infant church. The promise of power in this text, therefore, was not for living the Christian life; rather it was for the ministry and service of the Eleven as Christ’s witnesses.

You might not agree with my assessment of Acts 1, but you must be able to explain two major concerns, which in turn have secondary problems that must be considered. Those issues are these:

### *First Major Issue*

#### Question:

To whom in this text did Jesus promise (1) the Spirit and (2) power?

#### Observations:

1. Of the twenty-five times “they,” “these,” “them,” or “you” are used in Acts 1:1-16, the reference is always to “the Eleven” apostles. The only exception is “they” in verse 10, which refers to the two angels.
2. The Eleven apostles are distinguished from the 120 “brethren” (vv. 15-16).

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3. While all believers receive the baptism of the Spirit at salvation, Acts 1:8 refers specifically to the Eleven who will also receive power for ministry.

### Conclusion:

The two promises of this text were given to “the Eleven” for service.

### *Second Major Issue*

### Question:

Why are there two gatherings—“Gathering them together” (v. 4) and “when they had come together” (v. 6)?

### Observations:

1. The “gathering them together” (v. 4) is a different word from “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.<sup>7</sup>
2. One commentator asks a revealing 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?”<sup>8</sup> Either Luke was clumsy in his communicating skills or he was purposeful, indicating a change in the discussion as well as occasion.
3. The intervening questioning about the kingdom’s restoration separates the promise of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4-5) from the promise of power (v. 8) even if they occurred during the same extended occasion.

### Conclusion:

Two distinct and separate topics, if not occasions, concern the two different promises and their purposes. The purpose of the

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Spirit's baptism is the indwelling of all believers, including the Eleven, while the purpose of power was the empowering of the Eleven for ministry.

### Reaching the Cookies

The viewpoint that the promise of power in Acts 1:8 is restricted to the Eleven, rather than to all believers, and restricted to service, rather than the believer's walk, is completely different from the view of most commentators. Properly *observing the text* is the critical factor. The next two chapters in this book address the particular issues that have just been raised about the promises in Acts 1:4-8. To adequately investigate the text, four sets of contrasting biblical concepts are distinguished and then explained:

#### *Chapter 7: The Promises and the Beneficiaries*

- Receiving the Promised Gift  
differs from  
Receiving the Promised Power
- Witnessing by the Apostles  
differs from  
Witnessing by the Disciples

#### *Chapter 8: Baptism Compared to Fillings*

- Baptizing with the Spirit  
differs from  
Fillings with the Spirit
- Involuntary Fillings with the Spirit  
differ from  
Voluntary Fillings with the Spirit

Clarifying these contrasting concepts is critical for the student of Scripture to properly understand his walk in the Christian life.

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### *Chapter 6, NOTES*

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1. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1964), 28, 74–75, 120 (italics added).
2. John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Silent Shepherd* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1996), 6, 9, 80, 107–8 (italics added).
3. Tony Evans, *The Promise* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 10–11, 84, 156 (italics added).
4. Neil T. Anderson and Robert L. Saucy, *God's Power at Work in You* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 225 (italics added).
5. Amillennialists (a–no; millennium–1,000 years) believe there will be no literal thousand-year reign of Christ following His second coming (see chapter 9, *Prophecy and Power*).
6. Millennialist believe the millennium refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:4–6) on earth following His second coming (see chapter 9, *Prophecy and Power*).
7. 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.
8. Lenski, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 28.