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## The Faith of the First Christians

*Acts 1*

A famous Hollywood producer once said that for a movie to be successful, it must start with an earthquake and work up to a climax. Luke certainly didn't follow that formula when he wrote the Book of Acts. Except for the ascension of Jesus Christ, events recorded in Acts 1 are anything but dramatic. After all, what is exciting about a business meeting?

Then why record these events? Why didn't Luke just start with the story of Pentecost? For several reasons.

To begin with, Luke was writing volume two of a work that started with what *we* call the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 1:1-4); and he had to begin with the proper salutation and introduction. We don't know who Theophilus was or even if he was a believer; but Luke's salutation suggests that he may have been an important Roman official (see Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Likely Theophilus was a Christian or at least a seeker who was carefully studying the Christian faith. His name means "friend of God," and we hope he lived up to his name.

But even more important, Luke had to build a bridge between his Gospel and the Book of Acts (Luke 24:50-53). At the

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close of his Gospel, he had left the believers in the temple, praising God. Now he had to pick up the story and explain *what* happened next. Imagine how confused you would be if, in reading your New Testament, you turned the last page of the Gospel of John and discovered—Romans! "How did the church get to Rome?" you would ask yourself; and the answer is found in the Book of Acts.

The Book of Acts is also the account of the work of the Holy Spirit *in* and *through* the church. The Gospel of Luke records what Jesus "began both to do and teach" in His human body, and the Book of Acts tells us what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through His spiritual body, the church. Even today, congregations can learn much about church life and ministry from this book, and this even includes the business meetings!

In this chapter, we see the believers taking care of "unfinished business" and getting ready for Pentecost. What they said and did reveals to us the faith of the church. In what did they really believe?

### **1. They Believed in the Risen Christ (Acts 1:1-11)**

After His resurrection, Jesus remained on earth for forty days and ministered to His disciples. He had already opened their minds to understand the Old Testament message about Himself (Luke 24:44-48), but there were other lessons they needed to learn before they could launch out in their new ministry. Jesus appeared and disappeared during those forty days, and the believers never knew when He might show up. It was excellent preparation for the church because the days were soon coming when He would no longer be on earth to instruct them personally. We believers today never know when our Lord may return, so our situation is somewhat similar to theirs.

The Lord taught them several important lessons during that time of special ministry.

*The reality of His resurrection* (1:3a). Some of the believers may have had their doubts forty days before (Mark 16:9-14), but there could be no question now that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. To strengthen their faith, He gave them "many infallible proofs" which Luke did not explain. We know that when Jesus met His disciples, He invited them to touch His body, and He even ate before them (Luke 24:38-43). Whatever proofs He gave, they were convincing.

Faith in His resurrection was important to the church because their own spiritual power depended on it. Also, the message of the Gospel involves the truth of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-8; Rom. 10:9-10); and, if Jesus were dead, the church would be speechless. Finally, the official Jewish position was that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body from the tomb (Matt. 28:11-15), and the believers had to be able to refute this as they witnessed to the nation.

These believers were chosen to be special witnesses of Christ's resurrection, and that was the emphasis in their ministry (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:30-32). Most of the people in Jerusalem knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, but they did not know that He had been raised from the dead. By their words, their walk, and their mighty works, the believers told the world that Jesus was alive. This was "the sign of Jonah" that Jesus had promised to the nation (Matt. 12:38-41)—His death, burial, and resurrection.

*The coming of His kingdom* (1:3b). This refers to the reign of God over the hearts and lives of those who have trusted Him (see Matt. 6:33; 1 John 3:1-9; Rom. 14:17). When you read the four Gospels, you discover that the apostles had a strongly political view of the kingdom and were especially concerned about their own positions and privileges. Being loyal Jews, they longed for the defeat of their enemies and the final establishment of the glorious kingdom under the rule of King Messiah. They did not realize that there must first be a spiritu-

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al change in the hearts of the people (see Luke 1:67-79).

Jesus did not rebuke them when they "kept asking" about the future Jewish kingdom (1:7). After all, He had opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44), so they knew what they were asking. But God has not revealed His timetable to us and it is futile for us to speculate. The important thing is not to be curious about the future but to be busy in the present, sharing the message of God's *spiritual* kingdom. This is another emphasis in the Book of Acts (see 8:12; 14:22; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

*The power of His Holy Spirit* (1:4-8). John the Baptist had announced a future baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; and see Acts 11:16), and now that prophecy would be fulfilled. Jesus had also promised the coming of the Spirit (John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). It would be an endowment of power for the disciples so that they would be able to serve the Lord and accomplish His will (Luke 24:49). John had spoken about "the Holy Spirit and fire," but Jesus said nothing about fire. Why? Because the "baptism of fire" has to do with future judgment, when the nation of Israel will go through tribulation (Matt. 3:11-12). The appearing of "tongues of fire" at Pentecost (Acts 2:3) could not be termed a "baptism."

Acts 1:8 is a key verse. To begin with, it explains that the power of the church comes from the Holy Spirit and not from man (see Zech. 4:6). God's people experienced repeated fillings of the Spirit as they faced new opportunities and obstacles (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9). Ordinary people were able to do extraordinary things because the Spirit of God was at work in their lives. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity.

"Witness" is a key word in the Book of Acts and is used twenty-nine times as either a verb or a noun. A witness is somebody who tells what he has seen and heard (4:19-20).

When you are on the witness stand in court, the judge is not interested in your ideas or opinions; he only wants to hear what you know. Our English word *martyr* comes from the Greek word translated "witness," and many of God's people have sealed their witness by laying down their lives.

We hear a great deal these days about "soul winning," and the emphasis is a good one. However, while *some* of God's people have a calling to evangelism (Eph. 4:11), *all* of God's people are expected to be witnesses and tell the lost about the Saviour. Not every Christian can bring a sinner to the place of faith and decision (although most of us could do better), but every Christian can bear faithful witness to the Saviour. "A true witness delivereth souls" (Prov. 14:25).

Acts 1:8 also gives us a general outline of the Book of Acts as it describes the geographical spread of the Gospel: from Jerusalem (chaps. 1-7) to Judea and Samaria (8-9), and then to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth (10-28). No matter where we live, as Christians we should begin our witness at home and then extend it "into all the world." As Dr. Oswald J. Smith used to say, "The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home."

*The assurance of His coming again* (1:9-11). Our Lord's ascension into heaven was an important part of His ministry, for if He had not returned to the Father, He could not have sent the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (John 16:5-15). Also, in heaven today, the Saviour is our interceding High Priest, giving us the grace that we need for life and service (Heb. 4:14-16). He is also our Advocate before the Father, forgiving us when we confess our sins (1 John 1:9-2:2). The exalted and glorified Head of the Church is now working with His people on earth and helping them accomplish His purposes (Mark 16:19-20).

As the believers watched Jesus being taken up to glory, two angels appeared and gently rebuked them. Angels play an important role in the ministry described in Acts, just as they do

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today, even though we cannot see them (see Acts 5:19-20; 8:26; 10:3-7; 12:7-10, 23; 27:23). The angels are the servants of the saints (Heb. 1:14).

The two messengers gave the believers assurance that Jesus Christ would come again, just as He had been taken from them. This seems to refer to His public "coming in clouds" (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rev. 1:7) rather than to His coming for His church "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thes. 4:13-18). Regardless of what views different people may take of God's prophetic program, Christians agree that Jesus is coming again and that He can come at any time. This in itself is a great motivation for faithful Christian service (Luke 12:34-48).

### **2. They Believed in Each Other (Acts 1:12-14)**

They obeyed their Lord's commandment and returned to Jerusalem "with great joy" (Luke 24:52). It is likely that the group met in the Upper Room where the last Passover had been celebrated, but they were also found at worship in the temple (Luke 24:53).

What a variety of people made up that first assembly of believers! There were men and women, apostles and "ordinary" people, and even members of the Lord's earthly family (see Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). His "brethren" had not believed in Him during His ministry (John 7:5), but they did come to trust Him after the Resurrection (Acts 1:14). Mary was there as a member of the assembly, participating in worship and prayer along with the others. The center of their fellowship was the risen Christ, and all of them adored and magnified Him.

How easy it would have been for someone to bring division into this beautiful assembly of humble people! The members of the Lord's family might have claimed special recognition, or Peter could have been criticized for his cowardly denial of the

Saviour. Or perhaps Peter might have blamed John, because it was John who brought him into the high priest's house (John 18:15-16). John might well have reminded the others that *he* had faithfully stood at the cross, and had even been chosen by the Saviour to care for His mother. But there was none of this. In fact, nobody was even arguing over who among them was the greatest!

The key phrase is "with one accord," a phrase that is found six times in Acts (1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25; and note also 2:44). There was among these believers a wonderful unity that bound them together in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Ps. 133), the kind of unity that Christians need today. "I do not want the walls of separation between different orders of Christians to be destroyed," said the godly British preacher Rowland Hill, "but only lowered, that we may shake hands a little easier over them!"

It is not enough for Christians to have faith in the Lord; they must also have faith in one another. To these 120 people (Acts 1:15) the Lord had given the solemn responsibility of bearing witness to a lost world, and none of them could do the job alone. They would experience severe persecution in the days ahead, and one of them, James, would lay down his life for Christ. It was not a time for asking, "Who is the greatest?" or "Who committed the greatest sin?" It was a time for praying together and standing together in the Lord. As they waited and worshiped together, they were being better prepared for the work that lay before them.

### **3. They Believed in Prayer (Acts 1:15, 24-25)**

Prayer plays a significant role in the story of the church as recorded in the Book of Acts. The believers prayed for guidance in making decisions (1:15-26) and for courage to witness for Christ (4:23-31). In fact, prayer was a normal part of their daily ministry (2:42-47; 3:1; 6:4). Stephen prayed as he was

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being stoned (7:55-60). Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans (8:14-17), and Saul of Tarsus prayed after his conversion (9:11). Peter prayed before he raised Dorcas from the dead (9:36-43). Cornelius prayed that God would show him how to be saved (10:1-4), and Peter was on the housetop praying when God told him how to be the answer to Cornelius' prayers (10:9).

The believers in John Mark's house prayed for Peter when he was in prison, and the Lord delivered him both from prison and from death (12:1-11). The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Barnabas and Paul (13:1-3; and note 14:23). It was at a prayer meeting in Philippi that God opened Lydia's heart (16:13), and another prayer meeting in Philippi opened the prison doors (16:25ff). Paul prayed for his friends before leaving them (20:36; 21:5). In the midst of a storm, he prayed for God's blessing (27:35), and after a storm, he prayed that God would heal a sick man (28:8). In almost every chapter in Acts you find a reference to prayer, and the book makes it very clear that something happens when God's people pray.

This is certainly a good lesson for the church today. Prayer is both the thermometer and the thermostat of the local church; for the "spiritual temperature" either goes up or down, depending on how God's people pray. John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, said, "Prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan." In the Book of Acts, you see prayer accomplishing all of these things.

### **4. They Believed in God's Leading (Acts 1:16-23)**

The Lord Jesus was no longer with them to give them personal directions, but they were not without the leading of the Lord, for they had the Word of God and prayer. In fact, the Word of God and prayer formed the foundation for the ministry of the church as recorded in the Book of Acts (6:4).

Peter has been criticized for taking charge, but I believe he was doing the will of God. Jesus had made it clear that Peter was to be their leader (Matt. 16:19; Luke 22:31-32; John 21:15-17). Peter was "first among equals," but he was their recognized leader. His name is mentioned first in each listing of the apostles, including Acts 1:13.

But should Peter and the others have waited until the Spirit had been given? We must not forget that the Lord had previously "breathed" upon them and imparted the Spirit to them (John 20:22). When the Spirit came at Pentecost, it was for the purpose of filling them with power and baptizing them into one body in Christ.

We must also remember that the Lord had opened up their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). When Peter referred to Psalms 69:25 and 109:8, he was not doing this on his own, but was being led by the Spirit of God. These people definitely believed in the divine inspiration of the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 1:16, and see 3:18, 4:25), and they also believed that these Scriptures had a practical application to their situation.

A radio listener once wrote to ask me, "Why do you teach from the Old Testament? After all, it's ancient history and it's all been fulfilled by Jesus!" I explained that the only "Bible" the early church had was the Old Testament, and yet they were able to use it to discover the will of God. We need both the Old and the New; in fact, the New Testament writers often quote from the Old Testament to prove their point. St. Augustine said, "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed."

Certainly we must interpret the Old by the New, but we must not think that God no longer speaks to His people through the Old Testament Scriptures. "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable*" (2 Tim. 3:16, italics mine). "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every* word

that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4, italics mine). We must use the whole Bible and balance Scripture with Scripture as we seek to discover the mind of God.

"But it was wrong for them to select a new apostle," some claim, "because Paul was the one who was chosen by God to fill up the ranks. They chose Matthias and he was never heard of again!"

Except for Peter and John, *none of the original Twelve* are mentioned by name in the Book of Acts after 1:13! Paul could not have "filled up the ranks" because he could never have met the divine qualifications laid down in vv. 21-22. Paul was not baptized by John the Baptist; he did not travel with the apostles when Jesus was with them on earth; and, though he saw the glorified Christ, Paul was not a witness of the resurrection as were the original apostles.

Paul made it clear that he was *not* to be classified with the Twelve (Gal. 1:15-24; 1 Cor. 15:8), and the Twelve knew it. If the Twelve thought that Paul was supposed to be one of them, they certainly did not show it! In fact, they refused to admit Paul into the Jerusalem fellowship until Barnabas came to his rescue! (Acts 9:26-27) The twelve apostles ministered primarily to the twelve tribes of Israel, while Paul was sent to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:1-10).

No, Paul was not meant to be the twelfth apostle. Peter and the other believers were in the will of God when they selected Matthias, and God gave His endorsement to Matthias by empowering him with the same Spirit that was given to the other men whom Jesus had personally selected (Acts 2:1-4, 14).

It was necessary that twelve men witness at Pentecost to the twelve tribes of Israel, and also that twelve men be prepared to sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes (Luke 22:28-30). From Acts 2—7, the witness was primarily to Israel, "to the Jew first" (see Rom. 1:16 and Acts 3:26 and 13:46). Once the message had gone to the Gentiles (Acts 10-11), this Jewish

emphasis began to decline. When the Apostle James was martyred, he *was* not replaced (Acts 12). Why? Because the official witness to Israel was now completed and the message was going out to Jews and Gentiles alike. There was no more need for twelve apostles to give witness to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Peter's account of the purchase of the land and the death of Judas appears to contradict the record in Matthew 27:3-10; but actually it complements it. Judas did not buy the field personally, but since it was his money that paid for it, in that sense, he was the buyer. And, since the thirty pieces of silver were considered "blood money," the field was called "the field of blood" (Matt. 27:8). It was not Judas' blood that gave the field its name, for the Jews would not use as a sacred cemetery a place that had been defiled by a suicide. Judas hanged himself, and apparently the rope broke and his body (possibly already distended) burst open when it hit the ground.

The believers prayed for God's guidance before they "voted," because they wanted to select the man that God had already chosen (Prov. 16:33). Their exalted Lord was working in them and through them from heaven. This is the last instance in the Bible of the casting of lots, and there is no reason why believers today should use this approach in determining God's will. While it is not always easy to discover what God wants us to do, if we are willing to obey Him, He will reveal His will to us (John 7:17). What is important is that we follow the example of the early church by emphasizing the Word of God and prayer.

Not all our Lord's followers were in the Upper Room, for there were only 120 present and 1 Corinthians 15:6 states that at least 500 persons saw the risen Christ at one time. Bible scholars do not agree on the size of the population of Palestine at that time, and their estimates run from 600,000 to 4 million. But regardless of what figure you select, the 120 believers were

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still a minority; yet they turned their world upside down for Christ!

What was their secret? The power of the Holy Spirit!  
Dr. Luke explains this in chapter 2.