

Implications of Acts 1:8 for Missions, Making Disciples, and Church Growth

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Abstract

The book of Acts is an important book that focuses on the historical development of the Christian church via the activities of the Disciples of Jesus after His ascension. This book is often referred to by many Pentecostals preachers especially when discussing the works of the Holy Spirit and Christian missions. Although Acts 1:8 is seen by many as the centrality of the book, it seems that very little critical or exegetical study is done on the text by Pentecostal/Charismatic preachers in relation to missions, making disciples and church growth. According to the Gospel of Matthew, making disciples is the signature mark of authentic church growth (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). The purpose of this study was to critically analyze the text under study in order to discover how it applies to making disciples and church growth. Since the study is qualitative one, it adopted an exegetical approach to holistically investigate the text under study and other related literature resources for the study. The findings showed that the text under study, Acts 1:8 explicitly sets out the mandate which represents the motif for the entire book of Acts. In addition, the study discovered that there is a missiological implication for the book of Acts with Acts 1:8 as a central text. The study concluded by underscoring that since Acts 1:8 has given Christians a road map for Christian missions, they are to explore every avenue to fulfill missions in order to meet the challenges of the recent changing African Christian religious landscape.

Keywords: Acts 1:8, Missions, Making disciples, Church growth

Introduction

The book of Acts is often believed to be a continuation of the Gospel of Luke since it records Jesus' post resurrection deeds and encounters and then the activities of the early disciples after the Ascension (Bruce, 1951). The book has two major divisions: most of the first half records the story of the beginnings of the Jerusalem church in its early stage and its relationships, while the second half focuses on the missionary exploits/expeditions of Paul. Luke's purpose was to awaken the faith of the early Christians by showing the triumphal spread of the church/gospel from Jerusalem to Samaria (8:5), the seacoast (8:40), Damascus (9:10), to Antioch and Cyprus (11:19), to Asia Minor (13:13), Europe (16:11), and finally to Rome (28:16), as the[ir] Lord had promised (1:8). Thus, Acts is, as noted by Dibolo and Blewusi (2021), "often referred to by many scholars and preachers when discussing Christian missions with emphasis on Acts 1:8 as the centrality of the book". Acts is an important text as it gives the reader the background, historical development, missionary campaigns, experiences and teachings of the early church. In fact, no other New Testament book has records of early Christian missions in the Bible other than the Acts of the Apostles (p. 191). Moreover, over the years, the book has continued to play an influential role in the beliefs and teachings of many Christian organizations. According to Machingura (2011), Acts has influenced the theology, missiology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology of Christian churches, especially the Pentecostals and Charismatics, over the years.

Although Acts 1:8 is seen by many as the centrality of the book, it seems that very little critical or exegetical study is done on the text by Pentecostal/Charismatic preachers in relation to missions, making disciples and church growth. Over the years, these researchers have watched and listened

to many Pentecostal/Charismatic sermons and engaged in personal discussions, read articles and materials in the literary media discussing the text under study and its surrounding passages. This is especially true in revival/prayers meetings where the power demonstration aspect of text is often highlighted. Hence, for many Pentecostals, the above passage is a proof-text to show that they have been promised “power” to perform miracles and signs. In consequence, it is often interpreted in the context of power manifestations rather than missions and making disciples. Many emphasize the promise of the “power” rather than its essence, which is, missions and making disciples. Besides, from all indications, Jesus did not promise the disciples the “power” for them to show off or to make them feel good; but for them to carry the gospel to all nations and make disciples wherever they go.

The purpose of this study was to critically analyze Acts 1:8 in order to discover how the text applies to missions, making disciples and church growth. Since the study is qualitative one, it adopted an exegetical approach to holistically investigate the text under study and other related literature resources for the study.

Understanding the Concept of Missions

Missions is the global enterprise of reaching the unreached, and making disciples of the nations that are yet to come under the lordship of Christ. It is often taken to be the heart-beat of God. Hence, God is often said to be the “missionary” God, who from the beginning, after the Fall of humanity, initiated the process of redemption. According to Tennent (2010) quoted in White (2015), “The word mission is, first and foremost, about God and his historical redemptive initiative on behalf of creation. It also refers to all the specific and varied ways in which the church crosses cultural boundaries in order to reflect the life/identity of the Triune God in the world and, through that identity, to participate in his mission.” Mission

thus, is more than mere human activity - i.e. it is not reliant on the emotion, volition, and action of finite beings, it rightly belongs to God (p. 242).

The primary goal of missions is to make disciples. This is in line with McGavran's thought as quoted in Davidmays.org. According to McGavran, Missions is "an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and to persuading men to become His disciples and dependable, reproductive members of His Church". For McGavran, Missions entails "Disciplining the nations, reconciling people of all races to God in Christ, bringing all nations to faith and obedience, and preaching the gospel to the whole creation" (p. xvi). Missions is "the intentional, sacrificial penetration of major human barriers...to plant communities of responsible disciples of Jesus Christ among groups of people where none have existed before."¹

Understanding the Concept of Making disciples

To understand the concept of making disciples, it is important to first clarify what a disciple is. The basic meaning of the word, "disciple" is a "learner". According to Cheesman (1994), the word, "Disciple" is translated *Mathetes* in Greek, which means, a "learner" and refers to someone who follows another person. In addition, according to Louw and Nida (1988), the verb 'to make disciples' (*mathyeteusate*) refers to disciple: ... in the sense of adhering to the teachings or instructions of a leader and promoting the cause of such a leader ... In many languages the equivalent of 'to follow' (in the sense of 'to be a disciple' is literally 'to accompany' or 'to go along with' or 'to be in the group of'. (p. 470). Hence, being a disciple means more than being a student. A discipleship relationship entails observing, learning, modeling and practicality. A disciple of Jesus thus, is one who learns and lives from the teachings of Jesus himself and those whom Jesus taught, the apostles.

¹ (<https://davidmays.org/Strategy/Bible&Definitions/Missions%20Definitions>).

Making disciples has to do with the process of multiplying Christ in others especially new converts, young and growing Believers. The goal of making disciples is for the Believer to grow in and become like Christ. The process, as stated above, involves teaching, role-modeling and mentoring.

Making disciples goes beyond attending certain church programs. It is unfortunate that today many churches have tried to make disciples through events/programs rather than through Christ-centered relationships. According to Ogden (2003), “Unless disciples receive personal attention so that their growth needs are addressed in a way that calls them to die to self and live fully to Christ, a disciple will not be made (p. 42).

From personal experiences, these authors have witnessed situations whereby some young believers and prospective pastors go to stay and serve their “papas (fathers) in the Lord” in the name of mentorship or discipleship. As good as that maybe, the challenge is that most times, the essence of such relationships is misunderstood and even abused. Discipleship is not apprenticeship. The goal of discipleship is not to reproduce oneself in others but to reproduce Christ in others. Consequently, every discipleship relationship should be Christ-centered not ministry or human-centered. Making disciples takes time and individual investment; and that's why many have put programs in place of it.

Furthermore, these researchers have over the years discovered that for many Pentecostals, salvation is often limited to believing and confessing verbally that Jesus is one's Lord and personal Savior (that is, salvation is being limited to decision-making), rather than disciple-making. Hence, during crusades and church services/programs, people are often called out at the end of the sermon to make confessions and then would be “led to Christ” and in most cases, that ends it as such people go back without the church putting any good mechanism or

avenue to help them know more about the Christ they had confessed and grow in Him.

Commenting on this, Nel (2015b) wrote:

My conviction after the many years in youth ministry and in youth ministry research and training is that we have missed this Kingdom-like perspective on salvation and life as such. For some or other reason (some quite understandably so) our understanding of salvation as decision-making rather than disciple-making has not done the job. It is misfiring and backfiring into our faces. Faith communities are paying the price. Shallow, even superficial, connections to the Christ and his body are falling apart in front of our eyes. So much so that, in spite of the many exceptions, the 'church' is in trouble around the world. (p. 1)

Nel's above observations, though from the western context, are germane. The point is this, if ¼ of people who regularly come out to confess their faith in Christ and to give their lives to Him during church services/programs, are helped to grow in Him, we will not have so many "shallow" Christians (who are not deeply rooted in the faith) like we have today.

Rengstorf (1967) add that two things constitute biblical discipleship include: "... acceptance into a personal relationship with Him who calls you to belong to Him; and a vocation, which means that you have to be a follower and pupil of the Christ who has called you. (p. 446). In other words, according to Rengstorf (1967): Jesus' concern is not to impart information, nor to deepen an existing attitude, but to awaken unconditional commitment to Himself. That *mathytys*, as *akolouthein*, is also *manthanein*, is self evident (Mt 11:29). In contrast to both Rabbi Akiba and the philosopher Socrates 'Jesus binds exclusively to Himself' (pp. 406, 447).

From the above definitions and thoughts on discipleship, it is therefore impossible to participate in evangelism and church planting without discipleship (White, 259). They both move together. Bosch (1991) refers to mission as the making disciples assignment of the Church

Understanding the Concept of Church Growth

Numerous volumes have been written on the concept “church growth” which cannot be outlined or discussed here. Many have defined and explained the concept from different perspectives: physical, spiritual, sociological and theological among others. However, we would want to emphasize that church growth should not be limited to “addition” in church attendance. Addition should not be the end but a means to an end. The goal of church growth should be “multiplication”: that is, multiplying Christ in others. The assurance that the church will grow and expand is clear in the text under study: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Based on the above text, it is evident that right from the onset, Christ clearly states that the disciples are to expect the church to increase numerically, expand and grow. And of course, the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise can be seen early in Acts. The first preaching of the Gospel by the Spirit-filled disciples witnessed an amazing result: 3,000 people received Christ in one day (v. 6-41). So, from the very foundation of the church, there was preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus, and because this was done under the influence of the Holy Spirit, new converts came to have faith in Jesus, and the new converts, in turn, spread the message of the Gospel to all people far and near.

Background of Acts 1:8

The text under study is important and instructive to the interpretation of the book of Acts as a whole. Acts 1:8 falls in the context of the post-resurrection encounters and discourses Jesus had with the Disciples for forty days (Acts 1:1-11). At this point, the Disciples were inquisitive and curious to know what their fate was having known that the earthly ministry of their Master had come to an end. The Resurrection had made them come to terms with the fact that Jesus was the Christ and Savior of the world; however, they seemed to have been confused as to what next step to take. Based on their question in Vs. 6, it seems the disciples still perceived the kingdom that Christ preached about as a physical/political realm that the Christ would restore to Israel. Many scholars believe that the above question by the disciples was not totally out of place since some of the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel had tied the outpouring of the Spirit (in the latter days) with the restoration of Israel (Isa. 32:15, 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-28, 37:14, 39: 29, and Joel 2:28-3:1) (Keener, 2012). Larkin et' al (1995) corroborates that central to Old Testament faith was the conviction that God would in the end time fully restore the Israelites to their inheritance in the land, where they would live securely without foreign domination (cf. Jer 16:15; 23:8; 50:19; Hos 11:11; Joel 3:17). Jesus' reply shows that He did not deny the fact about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel; but His emphasis was on the timing and more especially, the role of the Holy Spirit in advancing the kingdom of God. Jesus' response according to Lewis (2020) reformulates what the kingdom of God looks like in this age" (p. 4).

Acts 1:1-11 follows an interesting pattern as shown in the table below:

Verses	Contents
Vss. 2-3	Jesus gives His disciples “many convincing proofs” to substantiate His resurrection from the dead.
Vs. 4	He commands the Disciples “not to leave Jerusalem” but to wait for the “Promise of the Father”.
Vs. 5	Jesus promises the disciples, “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”
Vs. 6	The disciples ask, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?”
Vs. 7	Jesus replies “It is not for you to know times or seasons”
Vs. 8a	Jesus answered that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them to and that they would be His witnesses
Vs. 8b	The Spirit-filled disciples will be witnesses in “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth”
Vss. 9-11	Jesus ascension before the disciples and the Angels’ witness

The Text

Greek (Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament)	Transliteration	Translation (RSV)
Αλλα λημψεοθε δυναμιν επελθοντος του αγιου πνευματος εφ υμας και εσεοθε μου μαρτυρες εν τε ιερουσαλημ και [εν] παση τη ιουδαια και σαμαρεια και εως εσχατου της γης	<i>alla lempsesthe dunamin epelthontos tou hagiou pneumatos eph humas kai esesthe mou martures en te Yerousalem kai [en] pase te Youdaia kai Samareia kai eos eschatou tes ges</i>	But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samar'ia and to the end of the earth.

Lexical Analysis and Exegetical Comments

alla lempsesthe dunamin epelthontos tou hagiou pneumatos eph humas: you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”

The conjunction, *alla* can be translated as: but, and, yet, certainly, nevertheless, howbeit, etc. This Greek word is the neuter plural of *allos*. The appearance of the above adversative conjunction indicating contrast or difference is significant because it calls the attention of Jesus’ audience to the importance of the next statement which is antithetical or different from what the disciples were asking Him. Instead of Jesus answering their questions about “when” the kingdom would be established and/or restored, He promises them something different and more spiritual than political or physical: *lempsesthe* (you will receive) *dunamin* (power). The

verb, *lempsesthe* is an indicative, future middle 2nd person plural derived from *lambano*. This verb can be translated “take hold of”, “acquire”, “receive”, or “collect”. The feminine singular noun, *dunamin* is in the accusative case and which implies that something would be done on the disciples that would produce a strong effect. *Dumanis* can be translated as power or strength. The disciples were expecting physical powers; but here Jesus promised them “Spirit-ual power that would make them both spiritually and physically relevant. Thus, Jesus dissuades them with the possibility of an establishment of a physical/political kingdom at that time. The power that Christ promised the disciples is “a power provided and defined by the Holy Spirit.” This power is not limited to the ability to cast out demons, heal the sick and perform signs; it also includes moral power: the ability to live right (Lewis 2020, p. 5). Many Pentecostals/Charismatics often would emphasize the gifts/manifestations of the power than the moral aspect of the empowerment. According to Lewis (2020),

While it is clear that a believer’s abilities and role cannot be equated with the Spirit’s, yet certainly contained within Acts 1:8, empowerment includes the creative, salvific, charismatic, and moral aspects derived from the Spirit. Thus, the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of the believing recipient should include the Spirit’s creative, salvific, charismatic, and moral enablement (p. 6).

Based on the above assertion, it is obvious that the Spirit also embeds within the Believer the moral power to lead a holy and exemplary life and when this is done, the Believer becomes a “witness” of Christ.

“*epelthontos eph*: when comes upon”

The verb, *epelthontos* is a participle aorist active singular neuter in the genitive case derived from *eperchomai*. It is used 10x in the New Testament, 8x in Luke and Acts. According to

Mills (1997), this word often always connotes the idea of a superior force coming upon someone subject to that force and who is unable to control it.

“*esesthe mou martures: and you shall be My witnesses*”

This phrase serves as one of the key components of this verse. And from all indications, this phrase tells us the essence of receiving the power: “to be witnesses”. According to Dorman (1985) and Chan (2000), the disciples (and later Believers) were to “be witnesses” not to “do witnessing. Thus, “Their proclamation and witnessing activity was to flow from their “being,” from their character formed, informed and transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ” (Quoted in Lewis 2020, p. 7).

The Greek word *martus* can be translated martyr or witness. According to Friberg et’ al (2000), The word, *martus: witness* connotes witnessing or testifying to ascertainable facts. Hence, a witness is one who testifies to something directly known to himself, especially from firsthand knowledge (Acts 1: 22). It could also be interpreted to mean one who tells what he believes, even though it results in his being killed for it (*martyr*) (Acts 1:8; RV 17: 6). And as Barclay (2000) notes, a witness had to be ready to become a martyr. To be a witness means to be loyal no matter the cost. This presupposes that Jesus knew that the disciples would die in the course of witnessing the Gospel even as He also died because of the same course.

As stated above, the essence of receiving the power is not to show off or feel good; but to be witnesses. Corroborating the above fact, Platt (2017) underscores:

This is pure Acts 1:8. You will receive power from the Holy Spirit and the direct result is you will be a witness. You will proclaim the gospel. You have the power of God’s Spirit dwelling in you which leads to

the question, why? Why do we have the power of God's Spirit? Jesus tells us He has given us the power of His Spirit for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel. That is the primary purpose of God's Spirit in us that we might proclaim the gospel (p. 5).

Faw (1993) acknowledges that the power the disciples are to receive will be primarily for witnessing the content and effectiveness of which will be demonstrated again and again throughout the book of Acts. This ministry is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, who spoke of Israel being called to be God's witnesses to the world (Isa. 43:10; 44:8). The goal of the "witnessing" is making disciples.

Findings

Based on the outcome of this study, the researcher was able to make the following discoveries as summarized below:

1. The Spirit's empowerment as promised by Jesus included the Spirit's creative, salvific, charismatic, and moral enablement. Hence, charisma should not be more important than the lifestyle of the Believer.
2. This phrase, "...and you shall be My witnesses..." serves as one of the key components of Acts 1:8. The Believers were to "be witnesses" and not just to "do witnessing".
3. The mandate, expressed with a future-tense verb (*will be*), can be taken as both a command and a prophetic promise.
4. The essence of receiving the "power" is not to show off or feel good; but to do missions.
5. A witness is one who is ready to die for what he is testifying of.
6. The goal of the Spirit's empowerment and the "witnessing" is making disciples.

Implications of the Study

In the recent times, it is becoming increasingly obvious that many Pentecostal church organizations do not concern themselves much about the personal salvation and transformation of non-Christians especially in relation to discipleship as they are concerned with the numerical growth of their churches. What many seem to be interested in is the numerical growth (church attendance) and more importantly, the financial gains they make from each church service/programs. Hence, what often seems to be the atmosphere and focus of many of such Pentecostal activities such as prayer, revival meetings and other programmes often well patronized, are miracles, signs and wonders but minimal emphasis is given on missions and discipleship. However, Stoppels (2013) underscores that Jesus' purposes for empowering the disciples is for them to make disciples via training. According to him, Jesus called learners, not church people. The main duty of the church thus, is missions and "making disciples" (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). For many, "making disciples" is the goal and signature mark of authentic church growth. "Go," "baptizing," and "teaching" are all subordinate verbs to this one verb of "make disciples." Malphurs (1998) acknowledges that the central core to the Great Commission is making disciples. According to Barna (2001),

Every local church must have a philosophy of ministry that emphasizes the significance of discipleship and promotes a process for facilitating such maturity. The church must provide relational opportunities for congregants, matching those who need to grow with individuals and ministries that facilitate growth. Because serving people is such a crucial dimension of spiritual maturity, churches help people grow by giving them opportunities to meet the needs of others (p.31).

Acts 1:8 sets out clearly what the church is to be doing until Jesus returns. Believers must take up this mission. Every church are to emphasize this: that all who receive Jesus' teachings become His witnesses. Longenecker (1981) quoted in Larkin (1995) rightly concludes that Acts 1:8 lays an obligation on all Christians. Hence, the Christian church, according to Acts, is a missionary church that responds obediently to Jesus' commission. According to Walls and Ross (2008), it is impossible to participate in evangelism and church planting without discipleship. They both move together. Bosch (1991) refers to mission as the discipleship assignment of the Church.

Step Needed in Making disciples

The first and most important step is evangelism and conversion. Before anyone can be discipled, he or she must have to hear the Gospel and accept it. According to Platt (2017), literally evangel means to make the gospel known. In consequence, "Evangelism is the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit with the aim of persuading people to repent and believe in Christ (p. 3). Platt believes that the word proclamation is based on the Greek word *martus* (witnesses) that we see here in Acts 1:8. Evangelism is never successful until people are converted. Conversion thus has to do with someone been divinely enabled to respond to the gospel in which he or she repents, turns from his or her sin and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. It is until conversion takes place that discipleship can be effective.

The second step needed is teaching and mentoring for spiritual growth. The essence of this process is to help the new convert know Christ and develop his or her spiritual capacity. At this stage, ready/studying the word of God, prayer, and fellowshiping with other Believers are important.

The third step needed is helping the Believer discover his or her spiritual gifts and the ministry where this gift can be

expressed for the greatest benefit of the Body of Christ. This stage is important because, “The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given in a rough form and therefore need to be developed” (White 2015, p. 260).

The last but not the least step is to equip the disciple to use this gift. Affirming the above steps, Lawless (2002) notes, ‘Equipping is much more than simply helping members determine their spiritual gifts ... A healthy church guides members to use their gifts in ways that are edifying to the church’ (p. 113).

Conclusion

This study focused on Acts 1:8 as it relates to missions, making disciples and church growth. Rediscovering that church growth is not just all about church attendance but about gathering people to learn how to live in a Christlike way via sound teachings and mentoring is important in such a time as this.

Based on the findings of this article, we are of the view that the Spirit’s empowerment is for missions and making disciples. And according to White (2015) the present day need to see beyond just preaching of the gospel (evangelism) and constructing church buildings. “Our gospel must embody a proper strategy of prayer, discipleship, and missional leadership formation” (p. 269).

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