

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ACTS 1:8

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Abstract – *The analyzed biblical text – Acts 1:8 clearly sets out what the Church must continually do until Jesus returns. Through a command-promise, Jesus tells his disciples of the resources, content, and scope of their primary task. The essential resource is God the Holy Spirit, through whom supernatural ability to witness effectively is received. The dynamic power of the Holy Spirit will be given in constant flow if believers are engaged in communicating the Gospel. The bold witness produces great inner conviction leading to positive responses. The role of the Holy Spirit in witnessing process should not be trivialized by contemporary Christians. Acts 1:8 reveals that not only does the church obediently carry out this mandate; it also shows how God intervenes at strategic points to give impetus and direction for taking the mission across another geographical region and cultural threshold. The effectiveness of witnessing is hung on the life which has experienced the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit.*

Keywords – Acts, Christians, Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, Witness

INTRODUCTION

In the first sentence of Acts, Luke makes it abundantly clear that he is the author of the third Gospel. He dedicates both his Gospel and Acts to Theophilus, a Gentile convert to Christianity. Although Luke refrains from mentioning his own name in either the Gospel or Acts, the style, vocabulary, and choice of words point to the same author for both books.¹ The first two verses of Acts serve as a bridge between the Gospel account of Jesus' life and ministry and the historical account of the developing church.² In effect, Luke's Gospel and Acts form one book in two parts; Acts is the continuation of the Gospel.³

Jesus continued teaching of the kingdom and His return in the power of the Holy Spirit brings a strange reaction with what has been promised. Actually, it exposed the disciples' inner agenda; when the disciples blurted out their long suppressed question, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" This exposed where the disciples were.⁴ They were looking back hoping for the reestablishment of a previous glory, while Jesus was looking forward to an even more glorious future.⁵ Jesus' statement is a clear response to the disciple's question, but also puts the purpose for the establishment of the Church in clear terms. On this note, this article engages the biblical text (Acts 1:8) with the aim of exploring its relevance for contemporary Christians.

¹ Holtzmann H. J. and Moo, Douglas J. (2005). *An Introduction to the Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 78.

² Carson D.A. and Moo, D.J. (2005). *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Company, 207.

³ Kistemaker, Simon J. William Hendriksen, (2001). *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 456.

⁴ Larkin, William J. Briscoe, D. Stuart, Haddon W. Robinson, (1995). *Acts*. Downers, Ill., USA: Inter Varsity Press, 34.

⁵ Ogilvie, Lloyd J. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, (1983). *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 28: Acts*. Nashville, Tennessee:

Background of the Text

The atmosphere was tense because of the total departure of the Master, Jesus Christ. While He was with the disciples, He taught them and even practiced what He taught them in their presence (1:3). Amidst these, the disciples ask questions and Jesus often respond to them in words and even in deeds. The account of the book of Acts reveals that at that time in history, the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ has come to an end and the disciples are aware of this. Unlike the community people, the disciples have come to terms with the fact that Christ possesses great restoring power. The issue of time raised by the disciples obviously catches one's attention; meanwhile, the true person of Christ they have experienced and believed puts this question in perspective.

The environment was saturated with hostility and contempt towards Jesus. The survival of the disciples is abreast with their lives, properties, families and many more things belonging to them being in danger. Even when their master was with them, they were never safe! Now, they could imagine the worst. Jesus and His disciples are found discussing. This is significant because it was this last word before he was taken to heaven (vs. 9). The disciples were attentive as possible, plausibly drawing their chairs very close or even themselves to get a clear grasp of Jesus' words. This event took place in Jerusalem. No one would take chances being debarred from the first-hand information Jesus was ready to dish. The channel of saving grace and power becomes explicit, when Jesus said; it is not for you to know the time or the seasons which the father has put in His own power (1:7). Abreast with the disciple's faith in Him; He then completed the faith route, which is the Father. This means that the Father in His own power has given Jesus Christ the restoring power in which the disciples believed. This permeates the entire book of Acts. The whole book is a pure demonstration of power. The saving grace of God becomes bold with extraordinary

experience occurring in human world as a result of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Analysis of the Text

“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 Samaria and to the end of the earth” RSV-Acts 1:8.

The appearance of the word ‘but’ in this text suggests the need for examining the immediate context. This comprises of the preceding verses; Acts 1:1-7. The first verse reveals Luke as the author of this book in question as well as Acts as sequel to the gospel of Luke. This verse also gives the characteristic figure that makes Luke and Acts a two-volume set: “all that Jesus began both to do and teach.” Not only do Acts and Luke have the same subject they are addressed to the same reader Theophilus (although referred to as most excellent Theophilus in Luke 1:3). This plausibly answers Acts 1:1-8 parallels Luke 24:44-49.

Verse 2-7 reveals that atmosphere as that which is enshrined with dialogue between Jesus Christ and his disciples. After Jesus’ ascension took place (vs. 9-11). Jesus’ answer to the disciples question here could be regarded as a marching order, since these are his last words to His followers. So, verse 8 is a part of dialogue I while the disciples are asking question and as the Lord is answering them.⁶ To the disciple’s question, Jesus simply responded with a clear affirmation of God’s almightiness. Although Jesus’ respond would be viewed as harsh here; He simply reinstated the finite nature of man which includes the disciples. However. He proceeded in verse 8 and started with the usage of the word ‘but’. This word

⁶ Kolawole , Paul O. (2020). “The Central Theme of John’s Gospel and the Christian Community”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Academic Research in Social Sciences*, Vol. 5; May, No. 1. Batangas City, Philippines: Lyceum of the Philippines University, 5.

indicates a contrast. By implication, the statement in verse 8 builds on verse 7. The word 'You' is - key to the text. It is repeatedly emphasized; 'But you will receive...come upon you...you shall be my witness...' The 'you' here are the Apostles (vs. 2) in plural form.

The apostles are men who have walked with Jesus Christ for about three years during His earthly ministry. Christ has chosen them, and they were all Jews. Many of them have been fishermen. This biography makes it clear that the 'You' are men who have heard the teaching, seen the miracles and spent a lot of time with Jesus. No wonder, they have the chance to ask Jesus the most crucial questions of their lives. The addition of 'shall' to the subject of the text connotes a futuristic event – "you shall" looks ahead to something that is to happen later. What are they going to receive? – "power". This is more like a promise; since it is not happening now, this disciple could neither feel nor see it at the present stare. They are meant to receive because they are given. Contemporarily, Jesus' statement could be paraphrased as "but don't worry, you will receive power..."

As at the time Jesus was talking to the disciples, the Jews were under the rule of the Roman Empire. The involvement of Jews in the political leadership sphere is of great advantage and benefit of the Romans. Everything in the Jewish community is dictated and oversees by the Roman officials. An average Jew already had a foretaste of what power entails; having dominion or ability to be in charge of something, He also possibly hope to be in control some day. Jesus is not talking about physical power, but the ability to accomplish what He wants them to do. The fact that 'power' here is not in view of physical ability is of immense effect on the community the disciples belong to. What they possess signifies where they belong. Though they are Jews, they are not citizens of national Israel but of God's kingdom.

“When the Holy Spirit comes upon you” – indicates that the power won’t come until the Holy Spirit comes. Jesus has been seen as a character, likewise the ‘you’ – which is interpreted to mean the Apostles; now, the Holy Spirit is mentioned. Who is He? He is not a power, force or thing. The Holy Spirit is the person linked with power. Do the disciples need supernatural power? The last thing they had done was to let their Lord down at crucifixion, so they needed the ability – the power – that only the Holy Spirit could give. This conserves a lot about the task to which Jesus is calling them.

The Holy Spirit is also called the ‘Spirit’, ‘the Spirit of God’, and ‘the Spirit of the Lord’. This is a clear pointer to His role in the Old Testament. In those days, the duration of the Holy Spirit is very limited. It comes upon men for specific purposes and returns as soon as the task is completed. This can be seen in the life of men like David, Saul, Samson, among others.⁷ Obviously, the assignment of the Apostles contrasts the Old Testament characters; in the sense that, witnessing is a continuous task. And for the apostles to carry out this task, they need power – of which the giver is the Holy Spirit. This implies that the Holy Spirit must continually reside in them. The job description of the Jesus’ disciples is suggestive of the permanent duration of the Holy Spirit unlike the days of old where they cast lots.⁸

The purpose for which the power is given and to be received is to become witness. There is a cause-effect relationship here. The Apostles are going to receive power; that’s the cause; the effect is that they will be something – “witnesses”. These two phrases are in the same futuristic state. Therefore, what the Apostles are to become is in terms of identity – this is what forms their new personality. The disciples therefore become

⁷ Kolawole , Paul O. (2020). *“The Relevance of the Life of Samson in the Book of Judges for Leadership in Nigeria”*, International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies, 7:11, 14.

⁸ Ronald F. Youngblood, (1995). *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Dallas: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 754.

representatives of Jesus Christ. Until Acts 1:8, the performance of the Apostles has not been impressive. They mess up often and often again, particularly at the critical moments of Jesus' crucifixion. But, the Spirit is going to give them power and they will become the savior's witnesses – living testimony. This is life and death task.

The location of the task ahead of the disciples is worthy of note; "...in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth". Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria are places that the disciples are familiar with. They do not need an atlas to trace the location of their assignment. The connective word used reveals that these locations cannot and should not be discarded. This is because they are integral to the mission. Jesus' mention of these locations was intentional. Why Jerusalem and not Sodom? Why Judea and not Tyre? Why Samaria and not Rome? The last location unlocks this puzzle "...to the end of the earth". The task of the Apostles transcends every cultural and ethical barrier; thus it must be carried to wherever humans are located.

Implication for Contemporary Christians

Acts 1:1-8 shows the beginning of the Church and also establishes that man can only receive the power of God when the Holy Spirit is upon Him. There were many challenges ahead of the disciples; they needed some sort of help that could carry them through. The hurting revenge of the Pharisees and Sadducees (among other sects) that the words and deeds of Christ had bruised were waiting seriously. The task that was ahead of the disciples could only be carried out through the power of God. In view of this, Jesus' statement in Acts 1:8 revealed the channel of God's power as absolutely through the Holy Spirit. This suggests that any other means or source of power other than the Holy Spirit is an indication that such power is not from God.

The Holy Spirit is essential to man's enlightenment and empowerment. Jesus knew that man cannot be witnesses outside the Holy Spirit. Also, the power of God cannot be experienced without the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is an important character in Jesus' statement of promise to the disciples. In fact, the power to be received and the witness the disciples would become is all centered on one significant person: the Holy Spirit. It is a fallacy to say that the Holy Spirit is power. The text clearly states; "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you..." By implication, the Holy Spirit is a cardinal means through which the disciples (and in extension contemporary Christians) receive the power of God. The Holy Spirit is not a thing. Meanwhile many contemporary Christians are guilty of this, relegating the person of the Holy Spirit to an inanimate object, such as handkerchief, oil, bell, among others.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of Trinity who empowers men for witnessing. Someone who witnesses is a person who has seen and can tell others about an event, person, or situation. Three and half years, the disciples lived and walked with the savior. Coupled with their contact with the Holy Spirit and the provision of His power, they become totally distinct personalities. Have many contemporary Christians actually seen Christ? Do they actually have an encounter with Him? Are they on a walking track with Him at all? A positive response to these questions engineers the zeal and enthusiasm for witnessing and continuous maintenance of the witnessing identity. When the Holy Spirit is at work in a man's life, such man becomes a living witness. Even without uttering words, the life and lifestyle of such person witness Christ. This is what made people first refer to the disciples as Christians in Acts 11:26 – they behaved like Christ!

The work of witnessing is achievable when a man is empowered by the Spirit. This places Peter's preaching in Acts chapter two in perspective. How did it happen that after the words of Peter, about three thousand men gave their lives to

Christ? Meanwhile, adding the women and children to the population, it is logical to say that the number of people who gave their lives to Christ will be more than that. This is a pure demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit! Such that man, upon hearing God's word by the power of the Holy Spirit submits totally to the lordship and saving grace of Jesus Christ.

In Africa, witnessing when mentioned is often conceived as men in twos holding Bible and tracks distributing from house to house. Although plausible, evangelism has been preconditioned and stigmatized by certain patterns. Also, the African socio-political and economic environment has created a platform for men to see the need for Jesus Christ. In other words, the condition of an average African man makes the presentation of God's word a way-out or bail-out from the helpless situation. In such a setting, the power of the Holy Spirit might not be adequately seen as been at work. But in an environment where men are financially settled, economically balanced, educated, socially and politically developed and yet, an atmosphere that commands the saving grace and lordship of Christ in the heart of men is experienced; then, the power of the Spirit is at work.

Following the sequence of Jesus' statement; the power to become witness will not come until the Holy Spirit comes. The power received by people who believe in Christ through is for witnessing.⁹ The primary purpose of the Church is spelt out in this text. It is unfortunate that a lot of frivolities have taken the attention of the contemporary Church. The Church pulpit have become platforms for comedians, the pew also do not fare better.¹⁰ The power of the Church is now a channel for

⁹ Kolawole , Paul O. (2020). "Mirroring Corruption Epidemic in Nigeria via Biblical Lens: The Role of the Church", *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* Vol. 22. Hwarangro, Nowon-gu, Seoul: Mission and Society Research Institute, Sahmyook University, Aug 31; 26-42.

¹⁰ Jeremiah, Adelodun and Kolawole Oladotun P. "The Error Of Belshazzar in the Book of Daniel: a Warning to Nigerian Political Leadership"

building cathedrals instead of raising men for kingdom pursuit. Inadequate effectiveness of contemporary Christians is simply a result of capitalization on human knowledge, skills, and strength; meanwhile, all these remain futile without the power of the Holy Spirit. One receives the power of the Holy Spirit, and then becomes a “witness”.

The disciples are witnesses first because they have walked with Jesus and have seen his wondrous might – they partook in teaching sessions, preaching, and even miracles. Secondly, they are witnesses, not only because they have seen the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Christ’s ministry; but because they are also experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their own lives too. While they speak to people about how the Holy Spirit walked with Christ;¹¹ they alongside share their own experiences about the saving power of Jesus Christ and their continual walk-encounter. Unfortunately today, contemporary Christians are urged often and often again to witness their faith. Meanwhile, nothing inside of them whatsoever would warrant them to do that. Many so-called Christians do not really have anything to share; and if at all they do, they would merely be putting up an act. Over the Christmas break in December 2020, one of my male students at ECWA Theological College, Kpada got married. After resumption in January 2021, he walked into my class waving his finger in front of my face. Obviously, there is something inside him that compels the initiative. He is in love with someone, and he’s got to share it no matter what. In fact, he can’t keep it to himself. I observed that whenever class discussion crosses the marriage threshold, he gladly contributes and encourages his colleagues who are still bachelors to be quick about marital decisions. This is the type of dynamic Acts 1:8 wants contemporary Christians to see.

¹¹ Hendricks, Howard G. and Hendricks, Williams D. (1991). *Living by the Book*. Illinois: Oasis International Limited, 56.

The mentioned locations are significant in the witnessing process. Jerusalem is first mentioned as the starting point. As at the time Jesus spoke to the disciples, Jerusalem was their location and home. Also, the crucifixion of Jesus took place there. This suggests a serious hostile environment, Jesus and His disciples are known very well in Jerusalem. The mention of Judea alongside Jerusalem connotes a geographical movement. The proclamation of the gospel must not be stagnated, limited, or withheld. The happiness should be in the fact that the gospel spreads across and beyond borders. Just like the observed hatred towards Christians which saturated the Jerusalem environment, Samaria is another context of similar experience. Samaritans have no dealings with Jews (John 4:9). If the location was yielded to the disciples for deliberation; they would not have loved to begin their witnessing odyssey in Jerusalem, let alone engaging the Samaritans. Jesus is seen as saying that very area one would naturally want to avoid; that should be the starting point.

The disciples were to begin their witnessing in Jerusalem – which can also be seen as their home. This is hardly an easy place to start. Sharing the Christian faith with one’s kids, parents, neighbors, and people who knows someone to well is really not easy at all. This is absolutely different from going down the street and talk to some strangers about Jesus Christ. For Christians who resides in south-western part of Nigeria where Christians and Muslims cohabit, even in the same family, this is the Jerusalem Jesus was talking about.¹² For Christians in the northern part of Nigeria, the hostile atmosphere of the then Jerusalem is concurrent to the place of work or even shopping mall where the proclamation of the gospel is synonymous to signing a death sentence. Witnessing at one’s place of work could also be difficult; meanwhile, this

¹² Kolawole , Paul O. (2020). “The Great Commission Mandate of the Church in Matthew 28:18-20”, *Holiness and Discipleship; Word and World*, Vol. 40:4 Fall. St. Paul, Minnesota: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 419-426.

is the Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria for Christians in the contemporary time.

While Jesus mentioned the expected witnessing location; He did mention that the disciples must witness to the uttermost part of the earth. Had it been that Jesus stopped in Jerusalem, Judea or Samaria, it would have implied that witnessing should be within a territory, but it is not. This last location talks about the populated earth. Thus, the Apostles are not to stop until they go to the very last part of the inhabited earth. This is contrary to the arrogant hegemony of the Jewish sects who continually discriminate against other nations and praise themselves as the sole recipient of God's promise. Witnessing is a continuous activity which takes place wherever a Christian is. Jesus recapitulated His statement with the fact that the Gospel must be witnessed to all men, regardless of their geographical location, tribe, age, status, color, height, among others. And through this, there will be more witnesses.

Conclusion

The analyzed text explicitly reveals the identity of the Church. Although Jesus is taken up, he does not lack ambassadors who will walk in His stead. The contemporary Christians are also cut up in this big picture. The focus of the Church is, and should be, witnessing. This is what Christ commands. Witnessing is neither a physical exercise nor an activity that can be carried out by mere knowledge or well constructed utterance; therefore, the enabling power of the Holy Spirit is not debatable. Any other vision or goal aside from this is secondary. Therefore, contemporary Christians must maintain the witnessing life-style and status-quo.