

The Church Has Power and Purpose

June 1, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 1:4-11

Session Outline

1. The Father's Promise (Acts 1:4-5)
2. Witnesses (Acts 1:6-8)
3. The Ascension (Acts 1:9-11)

Theological Theme

The Holy Spirit empowers us as we walk out the Great Commission and act as Jesus's witnesses. This act of sharing the good news is an essential function of a healthy and growing church. We have purpose, and we have power. Let's start living like it.

Call to Action

Are you living daily with purpose and power or just going through the motions? Share the gospel this week and then journal about your experience. Where did you see the Holy Spirit at work?



Leader Guide

The Church Has Power and Purpose

Introduction

In 1918, a boy was born to a devoted Christian family on a North Carolina dairy farm. When this farmer's son was sixteen, he gave his life to Jesus at a revival held by a traveling evangelist. In May 1934, a group of Christian businessmen from Charlotte, North Carolina, held an all-day prayer meeting at his family farm. One of the prayers of the day was that God would raise up someone from Charlotte to live out the Great Commission, preaching the good news to the ends of the earth.

Little did this group of Christian businessmen know, God had a boy in mind for this task from the very farm where they were praying, and his name was Billy Graham. Billy started small, enrolling at what is now Trinity College, leading local prayer meetings, and preaching at a local Southern Baptist church, but God's purpose for Billy didn't stop there. Dr. Graham's ministry career would go on to span 55 years, during which he would preach the gospel to nearly 215 million people in over 185 countries. Today, we know Dr. Graham as one of the most influential American evangelists in history, but he began simply with a Spirit-fueled purpose and a willingness to go.

We may mistakenly believe the work of sharing the good news of Jesus is reserved for people like Dr. Graham, those with particular gifts or callings, but when Jesus issued the Great Commission, it was a command for all His followers. While we aren't all called to a ministry like Dr. Graham, proclaiming the good news before the masses, we are all called to act as Jesus's witnesses.

Today, we will kick off our study of what makes up a healthy and growing church by looking at purpose and power. We'll look at the Great Commission and Jesus's command in Acts 1:8 for us to be His witnesses.¹

- ❓ How would you define a witness?
- ❓ What does it mean to be a witness for Jesus?



Session Summary

Our text today opens with Jesus affirming that the Father's promise of sending a helper, the Holy Spirit, would soon be fulfilled. In Acts chapter 2, this happened initially to Jesus's followers collectively in Jerusalem, and now the Holy Spirit indwells all believers upon conversion, empowering them to act as Jesus's witnesses.

Acts 1:8 contains a critical command given by Jesus: With the power and help of the Holy Spirit, we are to stand up as Jesus's witnesses, sharing the truth about Him to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8 and the Great Commission frame the call in the life of every believer to share the good news of Jesus with everyone.

Our text today ends with Jesus's ascension, an important event which enabled the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus's enthronement at the right-hand of God (Mark 16:19), where He acts as our empathetic High Priest, extending mercy and grace "to help us in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16; see also vv. 14-15), and serves as our Advocate before the Father, offering forgiveness when we sin (1 John 1:9–2:2).

1. The Father's Promise (Acts 1:4-5)

-  What was the command Jesus gave His followers in these verses?
-  Why is it necessary that we have the power of the Holy Spirit to obey this command?

The book of Acts was written by Luke, who also wrote the gospel of Luke. Luke, a doctor by trade, was not one of the twelve initial disciples chosen by Jesus. He opened the book of Luke by sharing that he composed his Gospel from eyewitness accounts of Jesus's ministry (Luke 1:1-4).


Luke's "first narrative" (the Gospel of Luke) focused on Jesus's earthly ministry, and the book of Acts focused on what happened next, chronicling important events in the early church. Luke was a traveling companion of Paul, and Acts contains his own first-hand accounts of the journey and ministry of the apostle Paul.

The events in our text today took place during the forty-day period between Jesus's resurrection and his ascension into heaven (Acts 1:3). Our passage begins with a command to the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and a mention of the coming fulfillment of "the Father's promise" (v. 4), the arrival of the Holy Spirit, an event we know as Pentecost.

Remember, up until this point in the history of God’s people, Scripture records the Holy Spirit being with specific people for specific reasons and timeframes based on God’s will. An example of this from the Old Testament is King Saul. After being chosen by God to serve as the first king of the Israelites, Saul was anointed by Samuel, and “the Spirit of God came powerfully on him” (1 Samuel 10:10). Later, after King Saul sinned and failed to show a repentant heart, the Holy Spirit left him (1 Samuel 16:14). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit was specifically bestowed on John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus and His ministry (Luke 1:15).

In Acts, the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual believers would radically change. The Holy Spirit would no longer be bestowed only on select people of God. Soon all believers would receive the powerful gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.


Jesus taught His followers about the Holy Spirit before His death. In John 14:16-20, Jesus told His disciples they would receive a “helper” (v.16, ESV), or “advocate” (v.16, NIV), to help and be with them forever. In verses 4 and 5, Jesus affirmed that this promised helper would arrive and instructed them to wait for the Holy Spirit’s arrival in Jerusalem. The coming baptism of the Holy Spirit would empower and strengthen the disciples and kickstart the ministry of the early church.


 Application: What role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives today? In what ways is the Holy Spirit a “helper” or “advocate” in your life?

What Not When

The disciples wondered if Jesus’s resurrection heralded the immediate coming of God’s kingdom. They asked Him in rather narrow nationalistic terms if God was getting ready to “restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus rejected both their concern for determining the date and their Jewish exclusivism. He replaced both concerns with a worldwide mission. When the kingdom comes is not our concern. What we do until it comes is: We are to be His witnesses to all the world.

2. Witnesses (Acts 1:6-8)

 Jesus said that the disciples would “receive power” in verse 8. What was the stated purpose of this power? How does this apply to our lives today?

 Compare Acts 1:8 and the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. What is similar or different?

In verse 6, Luke recorded a question the disciples asked: Would Jesus restore Israel now? The people were under Roman occupation at this time, and many Jews hoped the Messiah would come to bring victory over and relief from this oppression. Now that their minds had been opened to the prophetic truth of the Old Testament, they believed further that God’s restoration was coming, and they hoped to find out when.

But the disciples didn't get the answer they longed for. Jesus responded by saying it wasn't for them to know. This is a reality believers still must grapple with on many topics. The answers aren't always ours to know or understand this side of heaven.

In verse 8, Jesus told the disciples they would "receive power" when they received Holy Spirit. Note the source of this power: Our power doesn't come from ourselves or our gifts and abilities. Our power comes from the Lord, and with the Holy Spirit working actively in our lives, we can do things we couldn't do otherwise. This was important for the early church as they pursued the Great Commission and is equally important for us as we do the same.

Think about the role of a witness called to the stand in a court case. They don't share their opinion, but rather the truth about what they saw and/or experienced. When we act as witnesses for Jesus, we do the same—we share the truth about God's grace and mercy, which we have experienced firsthand. We share the truth about how we've experienced the Lord's goodness in our lives. We share how He's showed up for us, how He's provided, and how our lives are better with Jesus.



In the Great Commission and in Acts 1:8, Jesus gave geographical markers for His followers. In the Great Commission, Jesus instructed them to "go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), and in Acts 1:8, Jesus instructed them to be witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). The locations Jesus mentioned in Acts 1:8 spanned greater geographical areas as He continued, encompassing first their town, then their region, then the whole of the known world. The early church disciples were destined to bear witness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, and we are called to be witnesses too: in middle Tennessee, the United States, and the rest of the world.

What this looks like in our individual lives looks different. While God calls some of us to be missionaries internationally, traveling globally like Billy Graham did, some of us are simply purposed to be witnesses in the Nashville area or to the ends of the world virtually by sharing the good news online. Living out this command doesn't always require a change in address, but when we begin to take it seriously, it does require a change in how we approach our daily lives.



Application: Think about how you have witnessed the Lord's goodness in your life. What experiences have you had that you could share with as a witness to others?


3. The Ascension (Acts 1:9-11)

-  How did the events of this passage further fulfill God's promises about Jesus?
-  In verse 11, the disciples were called to action. How have we been called to action by God today?

Our final passage today records Jesus's ascension, also recorded in Mark 16:19 and Luke 24:50-51. At the end of the forty days Luke mentioned in verse 3, while standing on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem (Acts 1:12), Jesus gave instruction regarding how His followers would receive the Holy Spirit, and then He ascended to heaven.

Jesus's ascension was necessary for us to receive the Holy Spirit (John 16:5-15), and His departure was necessary to fulfill God's plan. The "Counselor" Jesus mentioned in John 16:7 is the Holy Spirit. Remember, the Holy Spirit empowers and helps us as we live out Jesus's command to act as His witnesses (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is vital in our lives as we walk out the purpose God created us for, and Jesus knew it!

As the disciples stared expectantly after Jesus was carried up into heaven in a cloud, two angels in white clothes suddenly appeared with a message: Jesus is coming back the same way He left (v. 11, see also Revelation 1:7). This assurance aligns with other promises we see in Scripture prophesying Jesus's triumphant return to establish His eternal kingdom. Jesus's return has not yet taken place, and not all scholars interpret the prophecy relating to this future event the same way, but all Christians agree with the great news that Jesus is coming back. Praise God!

-  Application: How does the reality of Jesus's return give hope for the future and motivation to act as His witnesses now?




Conclusion

In the book of Acts, we see the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual believers radically change from being bestowed on certain believers for specific purposes, to dwelling in all believers. Receiving the Holy Spirit in this way kickstarted the ministry of the early church, and the Holy Spirit is just as essential to believers today.

The Holy Spirit leads us through the life-long process of sanctification, molding our character and lives to better reflect Jesus, and acts as a helper in our pursuit of the Great Commission, empowering us to act as Jesus's witnesses. As we are actively pursuing relationship with the Lord, practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible reading, the Holy Spirit cultivates His fruit in us (Galatians 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit also

bestows spiritual gifts upon all believers (1 Corinthians 12). We use these gifts in many ways, but they are primarily meant to be used within the body of believers (1 Corinthians 12:7).

In Matthew 28, Jesus issued the Great Commission, commanding all believers to go and make disciples, and in Acts 1:8, Jesus called His followers to act as His witnesses, sharing His truth. The gospel message is meant for everyone. It is meant for all nations and to be spread to the ends of the earth. Jesus's command to share is meant just as much for those living in 2025 as it was for the first-century believers hearing it proclaimed for the first time.

-  How has God shown His power in your life through the presence of the Holy Spirit?
-  Why is it important that we follow the guiding of the Holy Spirit together as Christ's body and not as isolated followers?
-  Who can you act as a witness of Jesus to this week? What steps will you take toward this?

Prayer of Response

Praise God for the truth and goodness in His Word. Thank Him for having a plan for you and your life. Pray for those God has called you to take His message before, that they would be open and willing to hear the good news of Jesus. Pray that God would plant a seed in their hearts as you begin to share with them. Ask God to give you courage and strength through the Holy Spirit as you act as Jesus's witnesses in your community.

Memory Verse

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." —Acts 1:8

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Acts* by Tony Merida
- *Acts* by R. C. Sproul
- *The Acts of the Apostles* by David Peterson

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 1:4-11

1:4 The Father's promise refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which would soon come (chap. 2).

1:5 John's baptism was a symbolic washing to purify and to indicate repentance of sin. Jesus's baptism of believers would be of greater impact and involved the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

1:6–7 Restoration of the kingdom of Israel was something for which all first-century Jews longed. It was commonly believed that Messiah, son of David and heir to his throne, would accomplish this restoration. Jesus deflected the disciples' misguided question and repeated his command that they were to be his witnesses near and far (cp. Mt 28:19).

1:8 The major focus of the book of Acts is stated in this verse. Jesus said believers would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, empowering them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem first and then spreading to the end of the earth. Note three things about how this unfolds. First, the empowering presence is to be the Holy Spirit, not Jesus himself. Jesus prepared his disciples for the transition when the Holy Spirit would come to be a constant presence in his bodily absence (see Jn 14:16–17). Second, the growth of the church would come about through the witness of the disciples. From the beginning, the church is depicted as a community that actively witnesses to their faith in Jesus Christ. Third, the result of this witness will be measurable, geographical growth. This growth will begin in Jerusalem and then spread through ever-widening concentric circles to other Jewish areas (e.g., Judea), to areas on the edges of Judaism (e.g., Samaria), and eventually to “the end of the earth,” which may refer to the known world of that time, likely coextensive with the reach of the Roman Empire. As new lands and peoples were discovered in coming centuries, the church understood that it must keep expanding its witness to reach the newfound “end of the earth.”

1:9–11 Luke briefly told about Jesus's ascension in his Gospel (Lk 24:51), and now he provides a somewhat fuller account. A cloud took him out recalls the presence of God depicted as a cloud elsewhere (e.g., Ex 13:21–22). Thus Jesus was received by the Father in fulfillment of his words in Jn 7:33–34. Jesus's final instructions and ascension to heaven provide overlap and transition between Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts. The ascension took place on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem (Ac 1:12). Jesus's return will be in the same way as he departed—bodily and visibly.³

References

1. “The Story of How God Called Billy Graham,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association UK, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://billygraham.org.uk/billy-grahams-story/>; “The Amazing Story of God's Ambassador,” The Billy Graham Library, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://billygrahamlibrary.org/billy-graham/>.
2. Stanley E. Porter, “Acts,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1716.