

CHAPTER ONE

THE FAITH OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

Acts 1

At the 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.

Luke 24:50–53

In chapter 1 of Acts, 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?

A. 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.

1. The reality of His resurrection (v. 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.
- The message of the Gospel involves the truth of the Resurrection (Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 15:1–8);
- The official Jewish position was that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body from the tomb (Matt. 28:11–15)

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 –

... One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority.” But Jesus replied, “Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. “The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent...”(Matt. 12:38–41)

—His death, burial, and resurrection.

2. The coming of His kingdom (v. 3b).

This refers to the reign of God over the hearts and lives of those who have trusted Him (see Matt. 6:33; Rom. 14:17; 1 John 3:1–9).

The four Gospels show 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 the King and the Messiah. They did not realize that there must first be a spiritual change in the hearts of the people.

67 Then his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this prophecy:
68 “Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has visited and redeemed his people.
69 He has sent us a mighty Savior
from the royal line of his servant David,
70 just as he promised
through his holy prophets long ago.
71 Now we will be saved from our enemies
and from all who hate us.
72 He has been merciful to our ancestors
by remembering his sacred covenant—
73 the covenant he swore with an oath
to our ancestor Abraham.
74 We have been rescued from our enemies
so we can serve God without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness
for as long as we live.
76 “And you, my little son,
will be called the prophet of the Most High,
because you will prepare the way for the Lord.
77 You will tell his people how to find salvation
through forgiveness of their sins.
78 Because of God’s tender mercy,
the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide us to the path of peace.”

-- Luke 1:67–79 (NLT)

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 Acts 8:12; 14:22; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

3. The power of His Holy Spirit (vv. 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 1:1-16), 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.

“And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven. -- Luke 24:49

a. 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).

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8(NLT)

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. ¹

¹ Please see appendix 1 for more about the Holy Spirit.

Key word. “Witness” in the Book of Acts is used twenty-nine times as either a verb or a noun. A witness is somebody who tells what he has seen and heard (Acts 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.

– 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 Savior.

– Not every Christian can bring a sinner to the place of faith and decision (though most of us could do better), but every Christian can bear faithful witness to the Savior.

“A true witness delivers souls” Proverbs 14:25

b. Acts 1:8 also gives us a general outline of the Book of Acts as it describes the geographical spread of the Gospel.

Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)

Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–9)

Gentiles and to the ends of the earth (Acts 10–28).

No matter where we live, as Christians we should begin our witness at home and then extend it “into all the world.”

“The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home.” -- Dr. Oswald J. Smith

4. The assurance of His coming again (vv. 9–11).

Jesus’ ascension into heaven was an important part of His ministry

– John 16:5–15 -- He had not returned to the Father, He could not have sent the promised gift of the Holy Spirit

– Hebrews 4:14–16 -- The Savior is our interceding High Priest, giving us the grace that we need for life and service

- 1 John 1:9–2:2 -- He is also our Advocate before the Father, forgiving us when we confess our sins
- Mark 16:19–20 -- The exalted and glorified Head of the church is now working with His people on earth and helping them accomplish His purposes

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 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.

Therefore, angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation.
 -- Hebrews 1:14

The two messengers gave the believers assurance that Jesus Christ would come again, just as He had been taken from them.

B. 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),
- 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.

Key phrase. “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 (Ps. 133; Gal. 3:28), the kind of unity that Christians need today.

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.

C. 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.

- Acts 1:15–26 -- Believers prayed for guidance in making decisions
- Acts 4:23–31 -- For courage to witness for Christ
- Acts 2:42–47; 3:1; 6:4 -- Prayer was a normal part of their daily ministry
- Acts 7:55–60 -- Stephen prayed as he was being stoned
- Acts 8:14–17 -- Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans
- Acts 9:11 -- Saul of Tarsus prayed after his conversion
- Acts 9:36–43 -- Peter prayed before he raised Dorcas from the dead
- Acts 10:1–4 -- Cornelius prayed that God would show him how to be saved
- Acts 10:9 -- Peter was on the housetop praying when God told him how to be the answer to Cornelius’ prayers
- Acts 12:1–11 -- John Mark’s house prayed for Peter when he was in prison, and the Lord delivered him both from prison and from death
- Acts 13:1–3; 14:23 -- The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Barnabas and Paul
- Acts 16:13 -- It was at a prayer meeting in Philippi that God opened Lydia’s heart
- Acts 16:25ff -- Prayer meeting in Philippi opened the prison doors
- Acts 20:36; 21:5 -- Paul prayed for his friends before leaving them
- Acts 27:35 -- In the midst of a storm, he prayed for God’s blessing
- Acts 28:8 -- After a storm, he prayed that God would heal a sick man

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.

“Prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan.”

— John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*

In the Book of Acts, you see prayer accomplishing all of these things.

D. 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.

Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word. -- Acts 6:4

A few questions to be asked about this first chapter?

1. What about Leadership?

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.

2. 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.

– 2 Timothy 3:16 -- “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable*”

– Matthew 4:4 -- “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God*”

We must use the whole Bible and balance Scripture with Scripture as we seek to discover the mind of God.

3. Could Paul have been one of the Twelve?

Mathias was picked for Judas' position and then never heard from again.

- Except for Peter and John, *none of the original Twelve* are mentioned by name in the Book of Acts after 1:13!

Acts 1:21–22. 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 could not have because he could never have met the divine qualifications.

Paul made it clear that he was *not* to be classified with the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:15–24).

The 12 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).

4. Why did they need to fill the 12 positions at this time?

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; Acts 3:26; 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 12 Apostles to give witness to the twelve tribes of Israel.

5. *Akeldama* = Field of Blood

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

What was their secret? The power of the Holy Spirit!

Homework

1. If Acts tells how the Church began to fulfill its mission through the Holy Spirit, how does 1.1-26 relate to this theme?

2. From Acts 1.2-5, what was apparently the purpose of the forty days Jesus spent with His disciples after the resurrection?

3. Why is it necessary for Jesus to stop giving direct instructions to his disciples and ascend to be with His Father (Acts 1.9)? See John 16.5-15.

4. How did Peter describe the chief function of an apostle (1.22)? What were the qualifications if such a person (1.21-22)?

5. What role did prayer have among the believers between the Ascension and Pentecost?

6. Acts covers many topics that are relevant to our lives. On the next 2 pages are some of the book's themes with space to write what you learn from this study. Write what you can about each theme and give verse reference as we go through this study.

What is the Church's Mission?

What is the Church's Message?

What is the Holy Spirit's role in the church and the World?

How do believers respond to opposition and persecution in Acts?