

Acts:

A Life of Witness

Week One: Overview and Acts 1: 1-8

Can I Get a Witness?

Note to Leaders: You will need a way to watch a short video this week.

Opening Question: Spend a few minutes on introductions (name, major, etc..) and outline the basic structure for Bible study this semester (1 hour studies, different ways to engage the Word, open to everyone!!). The title of our study this semester is "A Life of Witness". Ask everyone to share 1 event that they got to "witness" this summer that brought them joy.

SETTING THE STAGE

The book of Acts is a sweeping testimony of the spread of the church after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It covers LOTS of years and LOTS of geographical locations, but at its heart it speaks to the idea of witness. How is it that our lives somehow give witness- show evidence- to the person of Christ and the beautiful kingdom that He ushered in? Acts helps us to see that this call to be a witness- to reflect and share the work and person of Christ- takes all kinds of different forms. Sometimes that witness is loud. Sometimes it is quiet. Sometimes our witness happens in communal ways. Sometimes it happens in very particular, individual ways. Sometimes we get to witness out of deep joy. Sometimes we witness out of deep heartache. Acts is full of stories of God filling everyday people with His Spirit so that they can join Him in the work of proclaiming Christ in both their words AND in the ways they live their everyday lives. We will use the first 10 chapters of Acts to explore this idea of witness and what it means to bear witness to God's resurrection life in every part of our lives.

CONTEXT

As we start our exploration of Acts, it is helpful to get an overview of the book as a whole. As a group, it may be helpful to watch the 8.5 minute animated video about Acts below. As you watch, note anything that is new or interesting to you, paying special attention to the details about the author, background, history, or purpose of the book. Once you have watched the video, use the questions below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kloEVvSV5M>



What did you find interesting or notice in the overview video?
(this conversation may flow into the questions below)

Who wrote the book of Acts and what do you learn about the author?

The most common understanding is that Acts was written by Luke- the same author who wrote the gospel of Luke (Acts 1: 1-2). Luke is historically known to be a physician and a traveling companion of Paul (Paul is a Jewish leader highlighted through much of the New Testament as the main missionary to the Gentile world- he wrote the majority of the letters in the New Testament). Luke is the only Gentile (non-Jewish) writer in the New Testament.

Acts 1 (and Luke 1) mentions Theophilus- who is this?

The word "theophilus" means "friend of God", so the phrase can be interpreted generally. But tradition understands Theophilus as a follower of Christ who helped to fund Luke's writing of both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts- both of which involved spending significant time gathering stories and eye-witness accounts of those who had lived with and been loved and taught by Jesus, as well as Luke's own experiences as a leader in the early church.

When is Acts written?

Although Acts narrates events and the decades that happen directly following Jesus' life and ministry, there are various perspectives on the date of writing, ranging from AD 60 to AD 90.

What are some of the challenges in the new church related to its Jewish origins?

Many of the first believers still understood their life with Christ to involve Jewish traditions. As more Gentiles (anyone who was not a Jew) became followers of Jesus, these early Jewish believers had to let go of their traditional understandings of the kingdom of God, leading to a much more expansive and diverse body of Christ.

What are some challenges in the new church related to its Roman context?

Rome gave religious freedom to certain religious groups, including those who practiced Judaism. But as Christianity came to include all kinds of different people from all kinds of different backgrounds, the church feared religious persecution from Rome. Part of Luke's purpose in writing Acts is to show that Christianity is a legitimate religion, grounded in the real-life events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, as witnessed by countless people.

CONTENT

Read Acts 1: 1-8 out loud together as a group. Then talk through the following questions:

1. What do you learn about the Spirit in these verses (vs 2, 4-5, 8)?
2. What is the purpose of the gift of the Spirit in verse 8? What will the power of the Holy Spirit equip believers to do?
3. There are 4 different "places" mentioned in vs 8 related to witness. Since most of us don't know biblical geography very well, we can miss the significance here. In essence: Jerusalem= home, Judea= close to home and mostly familiar, Samaria= people who lived in the surrounding area who were considered enemies, and Ends of the Earth= people far beyond any boundaries that they could imagine. Talk about this short little sentence and why it matters, especially as the church is just beginning and its leaders are receiving these first kingdom instructions.

APPLICATION

How does all of this connect to our lives? Here are some questions to help guide your discussion. Choose one or several.

- Acts tells us that a key part of our life as followers of Christ involves being a witness- sharing with others the face and message and person of Christ. Is this a part of your Christian identity that you think about very regularly? Where or when are you most aware of this part of your faith life? What is challenging about this identity? Does the idea of being a witness in your faith life feel like an invitation or a burden?
- Have you ever had someone "witness" to you in a way that felt aggressive, insensitive, or harmful? Share that experience. Have you learned anything from that experience about what it means to be a witness to God in your own contexts?
- While Acts 1 names geographical areas involved in witness, it also highlights relational aspects. Jesus does not just say "Go out and witness to people who have never heard of me" (though that is certainly part of the "ends of the earth" instruction). He also in essence says, "Make sure the people who know you the most- your family, the ones you live with, go to school with, call your best friends- regularly see my face reflected in how you talk and live your life." How often do you think of this aspect of witness- the one close to home? Is it easier or harder to talk and proclaim and live truths about God's work in your life to those you are with everyday?

PRAYER

Close your time together in prayer using one of the ideas below

- Use words/images/themes from the overview to guide your prayer.
- Take prayer requests and pray over each other as a group or in small groups
- Use this written prayer:

Father, Son, and Spirit-

We thank you for this book, for these words that remind us that each of us is invited into your kingdom building work. You take us just as we are- students, siblings, friends, neighbors- all of us equipped with the same Spirit who can't wait to proclaim the beauty of Christ through our regular, everyday lives. God, if there is someone today who needs to hear your story again- who needs to be reminded of your love, or goodness, or faithfulness, or power, or tenderness- would you help us know how to speak or demonstrate those things as faithful witnesses? May we never grow tired of watching your kingdom deepen and expand- in our homes, in our neighborhoods, amongst our enemies, and around the globe.

We pray these things in your name,

Amen