

Explore the Bible: June 2

Commissioned • Acts 1:4-11, 23-26

By Roland L. McMillan



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When Acts 1:1 says that the Gospel of Luke was about what Jesus “began to do and to teach,” it implies that the story of Jesus is continuing. In Acts 1:5, the way that the story of Jesus continues is specified: the story of Jesus continues through the Holy Spirit. As the story in Acts moves on, we see that the Holy Spirit continues the story of Jesus in and through the church. The Holy Spirit is not an “it.” He is not an impersonal force. Instead, he is a “he.” The Triune God reveals himself to us in three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

In Acts 1:4, Jesus is referring to what he already had spoken about in Luke 24:49, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit always has been in the world just as he was present at creation (Genesis 1:2). However, at Pentecost, the Spirit would come in a fresh, new way to empower his church for mission.

As Jesus spoke about the baptism of the Spirit, the apostles understood something significant was happening, but they did not understand exactly what was happening. Their question about the kingdom being restored to Israel reflects their confusion. Jesus redirected their question to a call to mission. Speculating about timetables for the end of the world is pointless. Worldwide mission is the business of the church, empowered by the Spirit, until Jesus returns.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus says that “y’all will be my witnesses.” The “witness” theme here actually began in Luke 23:49 with the women from Galilee who were witnesses of Jesus’ crucifixion. As the story continues in Luke, they were witnesses of his burial and his resurrection. Jesus himself emphasized that the apostles and other disciples were witnesses in Luke 24:48. In Acts, being a witness is grounded in the historical reality of Jesus as told by those who were eyewitnesses, including the forty days of resurrection appearances mentioned in Acts 1:3. Acts 1:22 mentions this as a requirement for the man who would replace Judas as an apostle. The next time the witness theme appears is in Acts 2:32 as Peter bases his Pentecost sermon on the historical reality of Jesus. In our day, when Christianity often is treated as superstition or mere religious opinion, recognizing the historical reality of Jesus is important. The apostles guaranteed the authenticity of the early Christian message about Jesus.

After speaking about worldwide mission, Jesus literally ascended just like he was resurrected literally. The apostles watched him rise until they could not see any more because of a cloud. There are similarities with the way that Enoch and Elijah left earth, the cloud at Mt. Sinai, and Jesus’ transfiguration in Luke 9:28-36 with Moses and Elijah. Two angels, messengers from God, interpreted the event for the apostles just like two angels interpreted the resurrection for the women at the tomb. The angels at the ascension emphasized the literal return of Jesus someday. Until that time, the

church has the worldwide mission from Jesus, his last words before his ascension.

One part of Acts 1 that often raises questions is the casting of lots in verse 26, something like rolling dice or flipping a coin to make a decision. Casting lots is described because it happened, not because it is commanded for us today. When they cast lots, the apostles were not trusting in random chance because of the prayer described in 1:24-25. They were trusting in God, just like Jesus praying before he chose the apostles (Luke 6:12). Making decisions by casting lots happened in the Old Testament, where the result was understood to be determined by God. After Pentecost, the church makes decisions under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

McMillan is pastor of Prentiss Church, Prentiss.