



## Sharing the Gospel as Witness to Jesus: Acts 1:1–11

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The first time I ever addressed a church group, my topic was “Sharing the Gospel.” During my last year of high school, the broadly evangelical church I attended had one program for high school girls: “Heaven in the Home.” For about eight weeks we gathered on Wednesdays after school and began with a Bible study session led by a woman from the congregation. We would then split off into two groups, each led by another woman from the congregation. One part of the group learned cooking while the other learned sewing, and the evening would culminate with the whole group gathering to eat dinner together. After four weeks the halves of the group switched activities. I participated in both the cooking and the sewing in my turn (useful skills, even if the gendered reasons for them weren’t so great!), but looking back, it’s telling that the part I really wanted to take was a role that was not passed around among the girls—leader of the Bible study. I can’t even remember why I particularly wanted to do it, but I do remember my theme: “We should never be too embarrassed, reticent, cool, shy, or popular to share the gospel with our friends, because everything is at stake!” I could not bring myself to say that our non-Christian friends were destined for hell, but there was no need. We all knew what we’d been told about how Jesus saved us from our sins and that a personal relationship with him was the only way to heaven. So I exhorted the “Heaven

*Some of the best models for sharing the gospel message of Christ Jesus are, paradoxically, the oldest. In the book of Acts, the first Christian disciples encounter, and then share, a gospel rooted in the power of God to transform their lives and their world.*

in the Home” girls to share the gospel more boldly and persistently among our friends at school.

I was mostly addressing myself. I had become skittish of talking about Jesus—despite my deeply held convictions—in part because my first attempt at converting a neighbor had led to my deep embarrassment. She (in her twenties) told me (age nine) how sweet it was that I wanted to look out for her, but that she was already a Christian. She was Quaker, a denomination I’d never heard of and that I thought might not be the “right” kind of Christian, but I figured I’d just let it go. I had tried. I had told her about Jesus because I liked her and I didn’t want her to go to hell, but if she and Jesus already had some kind of arrangement, I figured I’d let well enough alone. And I was so mortified to have mistakenly assumed that she’d never heard about Jesus that I made a quick exit. That was when I realized that most people I was likely to meet in my suburban neighborhood had already heard about Jesus and the basic message that if you accept him as Lord and Savior, he’ll cleanse you of your sins and take you to heaven when you die, but if you don’t accept him, you remain in your sin and go to hell.

Some version of the above sentence is the most prominent result of a Google search for “What is the gospel?” When Christians posit that “the gospel is the truth that we are all sinners or criminals before God, and under the sentence of eternal death or separation from God and all that is good,”<sup>1</sup> then “sharing the gospel” ends up looking rather more like “threatening someone with eternal suffering” than offering them “good news.” I am not now surprised at the reluctance I felt as a high schooler to share this; but I have since learned that the gospel of which I was ashamed is quite different from the one of which the apostle Paul was not (Rom 1:16). And the content of the gospel message means everything for how it is shared. The message “You’re going to be punished with eternal unimaginable suffering unless you accept this exact doctrine” justifies *any* attempt to communicate it because whatever terrible thing one might do or say to a person as a means to convert them can never be as bad as eternal infinite suffering. But an evangelistic philosophy where the ends justify the means ought to be immediately suspect. And, more importantly, a message that consists principally of a threat of eternal torture has little to do with the story of Jesus. It is not wrong to be ashamed of a “gospel” that, in both form and content, renders Jesus unrecognizable in relation to the New Testament’s presentation of him.

The question “How ought Christians to share the gospel?” is inextricable from the question “What is the gospel?” because how one answers the second question shapes one’s response to the first. This lesson was among the first that I learned, rather to my chagrin, when I began writing a dissertation about witness in the book of Acts. From its first verse, Acts assumes its readers’ knowledge of “everything Jesus did and taught” (Acts 1:1),<sup>2</sup> and the book’s principal theme is

<sup>1</sup> Ed Stetzer, “What Is the Gospel? A Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3–4,” *Christianity Today*, June 3, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/u5478ze>.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of a fresh reading and close attention to linguistic nuance, all translations of biblical texts are those of the author.

how Jesus's followers spread the message about him. Jesus himself calls the means of spreading that message "witness." More specifically, Jesus tells his disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and up to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Being witnesses of Jesus is the shape of spreading the message about him that Jesus enjoins, but neither the apostles nor we can begin such activity without having a clear handle on Jesus's essential identity and significance. Acts requires clarity on the question "Who is the Jesus to whom his disciples must bear witness?" I could not begin with what form apostolic witness takes in Acts because the disciples' manner of communication had to reflect the content of their message, which was supposed to be Jesus's story as told in Luke. I had to start with Luke.

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Jesus's own disciples' general obliviousness (Luke 9:33), their miscomprehension whenever he spoke of his death and resurrection (Luke 18:33–34), and their most recent dispute about "who was the greatest among them" (Luke 22:24) on the very evening of his arrest demonstrate how easily even those who seek to follow Jesus can get him disastrously wrong. Perhaps as a safeguard against exactly such further misunderstanding, Acts' introduction provides its readers an interpretive lens on "everything Jesus did and taught" (Acts 1:1) by summarizing his own post-resurrection activity with his disciples: "He presented himself to them, alive after his suffering, appearing in many sure signs throughout forty days and speaking about the reign of God" (Acts 1:3). The risen Jesus, present with his friends, speaks on the same theme as always—the reign of God. Acts 1:1–3, therefore, urges the reader to recollect who Jesus is as shown through "everything he did and taught" about the "reign of God" according to the "first book" to Theophilus. That is the Jesus to whom Acts 1:8 exhorts Jesus's followers to bear witness. According to Acts, then, the first step of being Jesus's faithful witness is developing bone-deep familiarity with how he portrayed the reign of God in his life and teaching in Luke's Gospel. Without that, we are at least as prone as Jesus's first disciples—if not more so—to imagine ourselves faithful to him while we jostle for positions of dominance and dispute among ourselves who is the "greatest." Jesus is quick to correct them, and us: "Domination is the status quo among the nations, with their paternalistic benefaction and authoritarianism, but not among y'all" (Luke 22:26). It is rather late to be realizing that the "greatest" in God's reign looks dramatically different from the "greatest" among the nations; this true measure of greatness defines Jesus even before his conception.

When the angel Gabriel announces to Mary her forthcoming motherhood, he promises that her son, Jesus, "will be called 'great' and 'Son of the Most High,'

and to him the Lord God will give the throne of his ancestor, David; he will reign over the house of Jacob and of his reign there will be no end” (Luke 1:32–33). With these words, Luke provides the first hint that Jesus’s role unifies theology and politics—he will reign over David’s dominion according to God’s character. Jesus takes David’s throne as the “Son of the Most High,” (1:32) whose visitation Zechariah prophesies will “guide our feet into the way of peace” (1:78–79) and whom Jesus himself later calls “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (6:35). After beginning his ministry in an announcement of good news to those who are poor, captive, and oppressed (4:18) and demonstrating that reality through a litany of healings and exorcisms (4:33–40), he summarizes his mission as the compulsion “to bring good news of God’s reign” from city to city (4:43).

When Jesus next opens his mouth to speak of God’s reign, he says something that defies easy translation: “Blessed are the poor, for like-you is the reign of God” (6:20).<sup>3</sup> The reign of God is like the poor, or for the poor, or functions on the same kind of power that the poor wield in order to persist through the hardships of their lives. Moreover, God’s reign will turn the deficiencies of their lives to surfeit: fullness instead of hunger, laughter instead of weeping, and a place at the center instead of marginalization (6:20–23). Through Jesus, God is bringing to an end the political pattern that functions on dominance and exploitation and is, instead, ushering in a politics that reflects God’s essential power—the ability to create something where there was nothing, to restore wholeness after corruption, and to bring life even in the face of death. Jesus tells of God’s reign throughout his teaching ministry, particularly in recurring juxtaposition of poor and rich. The parables of the extravagant sower (8:4–15), the good Samaritan (10:27–35), the anxious rich man (12:16–21), the generous father (15:11–32), the shrewd manager (16:1–9), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31), the persistent widow (18:1–8), and the nobleman with the minas (19:11–28), as well as Jesus’s teaching encounters around these parables, all illuminate this essential feature of God’s character and reign: a patient power that eschews violence and wins, instead, through resilience, persistence, and boundless beneficence. Likewise, Jesus displays such power in his many miracles of healing and exorcism (4:33–40; 5:12–26; 6:6–10, 18–19; 8:26–56; 9:11). Such acts, Jesus says, provide evidence of God’s reign (11:20). The ultimate revelation of this power, however, is the climax of the story: on Good Friday and Easter, God overcomes the politics of force with an overwhelming infusion of life-giving power—crucifixion turned inside out with resurrection.

Acts’ opening sentences remind the reader of all of this that Jesus did and taught, focusing on the central theme of God’s reign. Jesus’s followers are meant to become a community governed by truth-telling, generosity, and mutual care: “The

<sup>3</sup> The NASB, NRSV, NIV, and ESV translate, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” which obscures the fact that the nominative feminine singular adjective *ὡςτέρα* (“like you,” or “yours-ish”) appears where one would expect the genitive plural pronoun *ὑμῶν* (“yours”). While “yours” is a perfectly acceptable translation, it does not capture the work of an adjective, namely, to modify a noun (*βασιλεία*). Since *ὡςτέρα* is a pronominal adjective, it stands in for *οἱ πτωχοί* but modifies and agrees grammatically with *βασιλεία*, which allows “poor” to modify “reign of God.”

‘greatest’ among you must become like the youngest; your leaders must be caregivers” (Luke 22:27). All along, Jesus has shown and told his followers how living in God’s reign is to make them like God and distinct from societies governed by conventional power. The time has come for them to show and tell the world what Jesus showed and told them: “I’ve told you and shown you God’s power in this world; now you, empowered by the same Holy Spirit, will show and tell what you have seen and heard everywhere you go” (Acts 1:8).

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The rest of Acts offers the only New Testament narrative account of how Jesus’s disciples responded to this commission, which makes Acts a signal resource for Christians today who would share the gospel. The message the apostles preach and attempt to live is not an atonement theory or a threat of eternal punishment. Rather, they emphasize Jesus’s resurrection as God’s answer to the powers that wielded death against him (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; 17:31), the consequent possibility of forgiveness through repentance (2:38; 3:19), and the purposeful formation of a community embodying and sharing God’s creative, life-giving power (2:42–47; 3:1–11; 4:32–37; 6:1–7). While I do not believe Acts is intended to present the apostles as mistake-free, their words and life together follow the pattern of what Jesus did with them and so provide a working template for Christians today. Jesus’s principal witnesses in Acts—Peter, Stephen, Paul—pursue their mission with inexorable gentleness. They speak of Jesus’s resurrection, practice community care and hospitality, absorb the violence done to them rather than retaliating (4:21–31; 5:40–42; 7:54–60; 14:19–23; 16:19–34), heal people with chronic debilitating conditions (3:1–11; 5:12–16; 14:8–10; 16:16–18), maintain dogged commitment to truth—speaking it boldly to both friendly and adversarial audiences—and persisting through persecution and the threat of death (2:14–40; 4:8–20; 5:21, 29–32; 7:2–53; 10:34–43; 13:16–47; 17:22–31; 22:3–21; 23:6; 26:2–25; 28:31). All of these strategies are inseparable from the gospel of God’s life-giving power as realized in Jesus’s resurrection: each of them bears explicit or implicit witness to the power by which God outlasts, out-creates, and overwhelms death-dealing forces with life.

Noteworthy in this context is how the apostles’ social status plays into their credibility and efficacy as witnesses of Jesus. The apostles have neither money nor high status; the Sanhedrin judges Peter and his companions “unlettered and common” (Acts 4:8–13). They are subject to the ruling authorities; whatever power they have, it is not the ability to imprison or punish anyone. In keeping with bearing witness to Jesus’s resurrection by wielding only life-giving power, when faced with

opposition, they absorb persecution rather than inflicting it. That bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus requires such a position of vulnerability vis-à-vis ruling authorities is most strongly suggested in the dramatic shift in Saul/Paul's posture and position from before to after his first encounter with the risen Jesus (Acts 8–9).

Before his experience of Jesus, Saul/Paul exercises the power of the ruling authorities to bind, imprison, and try followers of Jesus in an attempt to keep "the Way" from spreading. He begins by approving and assisting the perpetrators of Stephen's stoning (Acts 7:58; 8:1). He continues by launching a campaign of arrests against Jesus's followers, going house to house and dragging disciples off to prison to be tried before the authorities (8:1–4), and in the next scene of the narrative where he appears, he is headed toward Damascus with high priestly authority to arrest any of Jesus's followers he might find there (9:1–3). After encountering Jesus on the way, Paul abandons his violent methods and becomes, instead, willing to die in order to spread news of Jesus (21:13). Later, his Roman citizenship and education as a Pharisee notwithstanding, Paul speaks the truth as he knows it from a position of vulnerability before Jewish and Roman authorities alike (Acts 22–26). Peter and the first apostles, Stephen, and Paul all speak the gospel message most vehemently before those who have the power to put them to death. For these witnesses, sharing the gospel seems to function on the same logic as the comedic principle of "punching up"—the comedian ridicules only those who are her equal or superior. And what's true of jokes is also true of the gospel: whether or not it works depends a great deal on who tells it.

The social positions of Jesus's first witnesses in Acts add a layer of relevant context that Christians aiming to share the gospel today must take into account as part of presenting the message accurately by means commensurate to its peaceable power. We must ask ourselves what sort of social position or power we have in relation to our audiences. The power and position (or lack thereof) of Jesus's first witnesses suggest that the message of Jesus cannot be effectively communicated by those who have the power to enforce it. The gospel of God's unrelentingly life-giving power cannot be communicated if it contains any hint of a threat toward those who do not comply. For example, for the majority of white North American and European Christians today, awareness of our privilege in relation to many audiences might make us rightly reticent to press the message of Jesus upon persons who are vulnerable to us.

The point emerges most clearly in the case of international missions, which far too easily devolve into neocolonialism, but domestically it also criticizes the sort of bait-and-switch ministries that, for example, offer services and shelter but require attendance at a worship service or Bible study in exchange. It does not mean that those who occupy a significant intersection of privileges may not bear witness to Jesus, but the witness must never depend upon exercising the power of that privilege against those who do not have the same kind of position. Such privilege can be put to good use, however, when a person who has it advocates for more vulnerable people among those who have power and are more likely to listen to a person with the relevant privilege. But whatever sharing of the gospel persons

with a certain level of power might engage in, they must exercise special care not to exert any sort of pressure or threat that would undermine the message. The reign of God will not be built with the devil's tools.

Regardless of one's social position, communicating the message of Jesus accurately requires fluency in the story of Jesus and, in particular, a clear understanding of the portrait of God's reign that Jesus creates through his words and deeds, as well as through his death and resurrection. Whereas the culturally prevailing definitions of the gospel in Western Christianity are, too often, reducible to atonement theories, such abstractions scarcely appear at all in either Luke or Acts. In Luke and Acts, Jesus's trial, crucifixion, and resurrection are a politically charged encounter that exposes the weakness of destructive power in the face of God's overwhelming creative power. A corrective that attends to the pervasive political interest of the message Jesus displayed and taught (it is the *reign* of God, after all) is sorely needed.

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The evangelistic strategy that makes salvation all about individuals' being saved from the sins they personally committed is not necessarily wrong, but it is incomplete; it misses how very many of the world's problems are systemically embedded in political patterns and social structures in which individuals may be complicit, but over which they may have little personal control.<sup>4</sup> In the circles where I grew up, stories of people being "saved" by Jesus out of lives of addiction and violence were celebrated for the power of their "testimony," but for those who see themselves as basically good people, a "salvation" that only addresses personal guilt can feel superfluous. When I consider my own unavoidable complicity in, for example, environmental degradation and economic exploitation, merely by the food and clothing I must buy because I cannot always afford the organic-fair-trade-sustainable option, it becomes clear that I participate in a web of wrongdoing from which I cannot extricate myself. My ability to be free from individual sin requires systemic change—an alternative politics free of vicious systems.

A gospel of merely individual salvation distorts the message Jesus lived and proclaimed; it also requires persuading people that they are individually "sinners and criminals before God"—which might be a difficult pill—before an evangelist

<sup>4</sup> Viewers of the NBC comedy series *The Good Place*, especially season 3 episodes 10–12, will appreciate the difficulty of making good choices when every choice is fraught with both positive and negative effects.

may present the solution to the problem. By contrast, regardless of where they land along the spectrum of political parties, most people can see that the world is broadly not as it should be. Systemic injustices of one kind or another are not too difficult to spot, even from a position of substantial social privilege. A gospel that promises, at its core, a coming wholesome, just, universally life-giving political system addresses both individual and social sins.

The reign of God offers a comprehensive salvation that I find endlessly compelling. Given my work teaching Bible at a Christian liberal arts university, new acquaintances give me many opportunities to speak about what I do. My work is not, of course, synonymous with the gospel, but a posture of hospitality and openness seems to foster surprising moments when someone solicits an articulation of the gospel. When those moments come, I try to say something like, “I believe Jesus raised from the dead says that God’s fundamental power is to create life, to restore it where it has been damaged, and to resurrect it where it has been destroyed. I think God is remaking the world so that it will, one day, run on the power of creativity, generosity, and hospitality. And I am willing to stake my life on that hope because I want to inhabit and participate in the world that God’s remaking promises.” It is a much different form of “evangelism” than what I imagined when I addressed my “Heaven in the Home” group, but my close attention to Acts has led to this way of using words about Jesus and to seeking community that helps me live in a way that reflects God’s life-giving power and wholesome remaking of the world. ⊕

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