

THE EMPOWERING OF THE FIRST WITNESSES

Chapter 2 of the book of Acts tells the story of the empowering of the first witnesses. The chapter begins with an explosion of revelation—"Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2). Wind is a common symbol of the power of the Holy Spirit to produce life.¹ The Spirit had come "suddenly," and "from heaven" to breathe life into the body of the infant church, just as God once breathed life into the lifeless body of the first man. The Spirit did not come in response to long years of planning and dedication on the part of God's people. No, the power of an indestructible life filled the room that day because God himself had sent the Spirit. The tongues of fire represented inspired, prophetic speech that would declare "the wonders of God" (Acts 2:11). All the supernatural phenomena in the upper room indicated that the proclamation of the church would be divinely inspired by heaven.

The sound of the wind and the sight of the fiery tongues attracted a huge crowd to the place where the 120 believers had just been filled with the Holy Spirit. Some in the crowd were both "amazed" by the supernatural phenomena and "perplexed"—they did not understand what it meant (Acts 2:12). Others missed the supernatural character of the event altogether and mocked the 120, thinking they were drunk (Acts 2:13).

Peter saw both the confusion and the skepticism. He "stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd" (Acts 2:14). The speech Peter gave the crowd was a prophetic proclamation inspired by the Holy Spirit.² The fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Joel 2:28–32 had just begun. Peter began his speech by quoting this prophecy:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:17–21).

In other words, the coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurated an *age of revelation*. Instead of having only a few prophets in each generation, now "your sons and daughters will prophesy." Visions and dreams were now normal for the people of God. There were no longer age, economic, or gender restrictions on the Holy Spirit's revelatory ministry. He was to inspire both sons and daughters, along with male and female servants, to prophesy and to understand revelatory phenomena. The Spirit was coming in such power with diverse revelatory phenomena because he was giving birth to a prophetic people. Just as the Holy Spirit "overshadowed" a young Jewish girl so that the Leader of all the prophets was conceived in her womb, so the Holy Spirit now "overshadowed" the 120 so that the prophetic church could be born—prophetic because its head is the King of the prophets.

The prophetic birth of the church is symbolic of the fact that God's program to redeem the earth could not have been thought up by or executed by the plans of man. Acts 1 and 2 depict a church birthed by revelation. These chapters teach us that apart from supernatural revelation the church will never fulfill its redemptive mission on the earth.

THE PATTERN UNFOLDS

Some Christians live all their lives without ever consciously experiencing a direct communication from the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, or one of the heavenly angels. They are so used to reading the Bible in terms of their own experience that it is easy for them to miss one of the book of Acts' most astonishing characteristics. When they read it, their *lack of experience* with God's voice selectively filters out Luke's emphasis on divine supernatural communication between God and his servants. They either miss or refuse to consider the implications of Acts' startling repetition of supernatural revelation.

With the exception of chapter 17, every chapter of Acts contains an example of, or a reference to, supernatural revelatory

communication from God to his servants. Consider the following examples:

Chapter 1. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the eleven (vv. 3–9). After Jesus ascended into heaven, angels came down and gave the eleven directions (vv. 10–11). Finally, Matthias was chosen by lot to take Judas' place. Presumably, God was supernaturally guiding the decision of the lot just as he did in Old Testament times (v. 26).

Chapter 2. A violent wind and tongues of fire swept in the room where the 120 were praying, and they all spoke in tongues (v. 2–4). Then Peter preached an inspired sermon, quoting the promise of prophetic ministry from Joel 2:28–32 (vv. 14ff.).

Chapter 3. The healing of the lame man at the temple gate called Beautiful revealed the glory of Christ (v. 13).

Chapter 4. Peter's defense of the Gospel and the apostles' ministry was an example of preaching inspired by the Holy Spirit and also a fulfillment of Jesus' own prophecy in Luke 12:11–12 and 21:12–15 (vv. 8ff.).

Chapter 5. Peter prophesied the death of Ananias and Sapphira (v. 3ff.). An angel freed the apostles from jail (vv. 19–20).

Chapter 6. Stephen performed miraculous signs and wonders and spoke so effectively by the Holy Spirit that no one could refute him (vv. 8, 10).

Chapter 7. In Stephen's final moments, the Lord Jesus revealed himself to Stephen so that he could actually see the Son of God standing at the right hand of the Father (v. 55).

Chapter 8. First an angel from heaven gave directions to Philip for ministry (v. 26), and then the Holy Spirit spoke to him directly, giving him further directions (v. 29). Finally, the Spirit himself carried Philip away to Azotus (v. 39).

Chapter 9. Jesus appeared to Saul and gave him the beginning of his commission on the Damascus road (vv. 3–6). Jesus spoke to Ananias and sent him to minister to Saul (vv. 10–16).

Chapter 10. An angel appeared in a vision to Cornelius and told him to send for Peter (vv. 4–6). In the meantime, God caused Peter to fall into a trance, gave him a vision, and declared to him that all foods were clean (vv. 10–16). The Holy Spirit spoke to Peter and told him to go with the three men Cornelius had sent (v. 19). While Peter was preaching to Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and all the Gentiles in his house so that all of them spoke in tongues (v. 46).

Chapter 11. The prophet Agabus correctly predicted a famine (v. 28).

Chapter 12. An angel visited Peter in his jail cell and delivered him from certain death (vv. 7–11).

Chapter 13. The Holy Spirit spoke to the church at Antioch, telling them to set apart Barnabas and Paul for a specific ministry (v. 2). On his first missionary journey, Paul accurately predicted a judgment against the sorcerer Elymas so that Elymas was blinded (vv. 9–12).

Chapter 14. While Paul was preaching at Lystra, there was a man sitting in the audience who had been lame from birth. Paul looked at him while he spoke and supernaturally saw that the man had faith to be healed. Paul told the man to stand up, and he was instantly healed (vv. 9–10).

Chapter 15. The Holy Spirit communicated to the apostles and elders in the Jerusalem council that it was good not to burden the Gentiles with the law (v. 28).

Chapter 16. On his second missionary journey, the Holy Spirit forbade Paul and his companions to preach the gospel in Asia (v. 6). The Holy Spirit also denied Paul and his companions permission to enter Bithynia (v. 7). Later on this journey Paul was given a vision of a man in Macedonia, beckoning them to come over and help (vv. 9–10). This proved to be the direction in which the Lord was leading Paul's missionary team. At Philippi the Lord specifically opened Lydia's heart to believe the Gospel Paul was preaching (v. 14).

Chapter 18. The Lord spoke to Paul in a night vision and told him that no one would harm him and that the Lord had many people in the city of Corinth (v. 9–11).

Chapter 19. Twelve believers at Ephesus, on whom Paul laid his hands, spoke in tongues and prophesied (v. 6).

Chapter 20. Paul spoke of the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit when he said he was compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem (v. 22). He also said the Holy Spirit had warned him that suffering was waiting for him (v. 23). Paul gave a prophetic word to the Ephesian elders when they had gathered to meet him at Miletus that they would never see him again (v. 25).

Chapter 21. A number of believers urged Paul *through the Spirit* not to go to Jerusalem because they knew of the danger waiting for him there (v. 4). This chapter also records that Philip's four daughters were all prophetesses (v. 9). Agabus prophesied to

Paul that the Jews of Jerusalem would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles (vv. 10–11).

Chapter 22. Paul retold the story of his conversion and how the Lord appeared to him on the Damascus road (vv. 6–16). He also told about his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion when, in the temple, he had fallen into a trance in which the Lord warned him to leave Jerusalem and revealed he was sending him to the Gentiles (vv. 17–21).

Chapter 23. The Lord appeared to Paul while he was held prisoner in Jerusalem and encouraged him by telling him he would not only testify about Jesus in Jerusalem, but he would also testify in Rome (v. 11).

Chapter 24. In Caesarea, Paul gave a speech before Felix, the governor, that was inspired by the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Luke 12:11–12 and 21:12–15 (vv. 10–21).

Chapter 25. Paul gave another speech at Caesarea to Festus, the governor who succeeded Felix, that must be viewed in the same light as the speech of chapter 24, an inspired utterance by the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Luke 12:11–12 and 21:12–15 (vv. 8–12).

Chapter 26. When king Agrippa came to visit Paul, he retold the story again of his conversion and how the Lord had appeared to him on the Damascus road (vv. 9–16).

Chapter 27. Paul accurately predicted the destruction of the ship meant to take him to Rome (v. 10). An angel of the Lord appeared to him during the night, telling him he would not drown in the shipwreck and that God would spare the lives of all on board with him (vv. 21–26).

Chapter 28. In the final chapter, God supernaturally spoke through miracles. The first miracle occurred when a poisonous viper bit Paul's hand, but he was not hurt (vv. 3–6). This led to a series of miracles in which Paul was used to heal all of the sick on the island of Malta (vv. 7–9).

REVELATION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The book of Acts portrays a church that lives by revelation. But what do the biblical writers mean when they speak of revelation? And why was God's revelatory activity so vital to the early church?

In the New Testament, "revelation" refers to a secret God has made known. When God "reveals" something, he is showing us something we could not know, or did not know, through natural means. For example, in the context of defending his apostleship, Paul said,

Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went *in response to a revelation* and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles (Gal. 2:1–2).

By using the term "revelation," Paul is telling us he did not go because he thought it was a good idea or because he felt pressured by others. He went because God directed him. He doesn't tell *how* the revelation came. Apparently that wasn't important for his readers to know. What was important was that they understood it was the Lord himself who had directed him. If the Lord had not given the revelation, Paul would not have known he was supposed to be in Jerusalem.

Paul was confident that God would reveal things to ordinary Christians. He wrote to the Philippians,

Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will *reveal* that also to you (Phil. 3:15 NASB).

In effect, Paul was telling the Philippians that he knew some of them had a different attitude about maturity than he had. However, this didn't seem to bother him. He was confident God could remove the veil from their eyes and make known to them the same truth God had revealed to him. Paul could have used logical arguments or an apostolic command to force his view on the Philippians, but instead he seems to have believed this would be an unnecessary use of his apostolic authority. He trusted the revealing ministry of God to change the Philippians' attitude. Both Paul's letters and the book of Acts demonstrate that Christians never outgrow their need for God's revelatory ministry.³

AGENTS OF REVELATION

The ultimate source of revelation in the early church is God the Father. He is the one who poured out the Holy Spirit (Acts

2:17ff.) and who "anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:38). Normally, however, when God chooses to reveal something to one of his servants in the book of Acts, the agents of revelation are the Holy Spirit, Jesus, or angels.

The Holy Spirit Reveals

The Spirit may speak directly to individuals, telling them where to go and what to do (Acts 8:29; 10:19–20), or he may speak to a whole church, telling them how to begin a new missionary enterprise (Acts 13:2). The Holy Spirit can hinder or forbid a missionary team when they unwittingly begin to leave the geographical will of God (Acts 16:6–7). On other occasions the Holy Spirit may compel a person to go to a certain destination (Acts 20:22). And the Holy Spirit may warn a faithful servant ahead of time about the suffering that will accompany the fulfillment of the servant's task (Acts 20:23).

The Holy Spirit may also inspire a sermon or testimony for Jesus. When Peter was brought before the religious leaders to give an account of the healing of the lame man, he was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:8). The filling of the Holy Spirit is the power of God speaking through an individual.⁴ On other occasions, however, it is said that believers themselves speak "through the Spirit" (Acts 11:28; 21:4). The guidance of the Holy Spirit may even become so dramatic that he supernaturally transports a believer from one place to another, as in the case of Philip (Acts 8:39). The leadership of the early church was so sensitive to the Holy Spirit they could describe his leading by saying, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ..." (Acts 15:28).

Jesus Reveals

Jesus appears to Stephen as he is being stoned to death (Acts 7:55) and to Paul on the Damascus road. Paul's experience was so foundational for the history of the early church that it is told three separate times in the book of Acts (9:3–6; 22:6–16; 26:9–16). The Lord also appeared to Ananias and gave him specific instructions for his ministry to Paul (Acts 9:10ff.). We don't know how many times Jesus appeared to Paul throughout his ministry, but the book of Acts does record three appearances of Jesus to Paul that

occurred after his conversion. In these cases, Jesus appeared to Paul giving him directions, comfort, and encouragement (Acts 18:9–11; 22:17–21; 23:11). I began this chapter by describing the first of these appearances, which occurs in Acts 18:9–11. The other two are instructive as well.

Paul described the first appearance of the Lord to him after his conversion:

When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. "Quick!" he said to me. "Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me." "Lord," I replied, "these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him." Then the Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:17–21).

In this instance, the Lord spoke to Paul for three reasons. First, to give him protection through a warning, "they will not accept your testimony about me." Second, to give him direction, "Leave Jerusalem immediately ... I will send you far away." And third, to provide Paul with a long term definition of his ministry, "I will send you far away to the Gentiles." At first, this did not seem to Paul to be the best possible plan. It made more sense to stay in Jerusalem. After all, he was well-known, no one would doubt his sincerity, and he had impeccable credentials. He was sure he would be a credible witness to other Jewish leaders. But he was wrong. In fact, if he had stayed, he would have been *dead* wrong. This episode in Paul's life is a perfect illustration of Isaiah 55:8–9:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

God had a radically different *perspective* on the situation in Jerusalem than Paul did. He also had a very different *way* for Paul to minister than Paul had planned. If God had not spoken to him,

Paul would never have known God's particular thoughts and ways for him at this point in his ministry.

The third recorded instance of Jesus appearing to Paul after the Damascus road conversion took place in Jerusalem. After a violent dispute in the Sanhedrin, the Roman commander put Paul in protective custody. "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome'" (Acts 23:11). This proved to be an extremely timely word of encouragement from the Lord, for "the next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul" (Acts 23:12). Paul did not have to worry about the success of their plot because the Lord had personally appeared to him, assuring him that he would carry the testimony of Christ to Rome.

There is another way in which Jesus is revealed to be a primary agent of revelation in the early history of the church. Lydia was born again when "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14). Neither the book of Acts in particular, nor the Scriptures in general, ever credits anyone's salvation to his or her own disciplined study or pursuit of God. It is always God who takes the initiative and opens a person's heart to believe.

Angels Reveal

Angels were famous for engineering jail breaks (Acts 5:19–20; 12:7–11). They also appeared to various servants of the Lord with specific directions, as in the case of Philip (Acts 8:26) and Cornelius (Acts 10:4–6). On Paul's voyage to Rome, an angel came to him in the night and said, "Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you" (27:24).

DOES THE BOOK OF ACTS REPRESENT NORMAL CHRISTIANITY?

The biblical evidence is clear: Jesus heard his Father's voice both within and outside the Scriptures. So did the apostles and the first-century Christians. The book of Acts shows what it was like to experience God in the first-century church. Remember, in

every chapter, with the exception of chapter 17, Christians experience direct supernatural communication.

Through repetition, which is one of the common teaching techniques of the New Testament writers to emphasize their most important themes,⁵ Luke was teaching his readers that neither they nor the early church could do without God speaking to them in all the diverse ways characteristic of the creativity of an omnipotent and omniscient God.

Why should this surprise us? Isn't this just what Jesus said would happen when he sent the Holy Spirit? He promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would *teach* them all things, *remind* them of his words, *testify* about him, *guide* them into all truth and *show* them things to come.⁶ Teaching, reminding, testifying, guiding, and showing are all normal functions of the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus. So when the Holy Spirit came, he taught Peter that the wind, fire, and tongues in the upper room were what Joel prophesied long before.⁷ When Peter was confused about the events in Cornelius' house, the Holy Spirit reminded him of the words Jesus had spoken earlier, and thus guided him into truth.⁸ When Peter stood before the Sanhedrin, the Holy Spirit filled him, and he testified about Jesus.⁹ When Peter stood before the deceivers Ananias and Sapphira, the Holy Spirit showed him they had lied to God and would die.¹⁰ Teaching, reminding, testifying, guiding, and showing—exactly what Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do.

And these activities were not confined to the apostles. The same things happened in the lives of Stephen, Philip, Agabus, Ananias, and other unnamed individuals in the book of Acts.¹¹

Some try to dismiss the testimony of Acts by calling it a transitional book. But transition to what? A better form of Christianity? Where is this better form? Or is the transition to a type of experience where God speaks only in the Bible? That form of Christianity is not a transition forward, but rather backward, to the religion of the Pharisees who preferred the Book over the living, speaking Word of God (John 5:36–47). The transition Jesus predicted was to an age of revelation by an omniscient Spirit who would surprise God's people by teaching, reminding, testifying, guiding, and showing. And that's just what the Holy Spirit did in the first-century church.¹²

Still, the experience of some Christians leads them to conclude the Christianity of Acts is not normal Christian experience.

Okay, for a moment let's concede that the book of Acts represents abnormal Christianity. In the same way, we could also say that the apostle Paul's passionate devotion to Jesus Christ was abnormal. How many people have you met who could truthfully say with the apostle Paul, "I do all things for the sake of the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:23 NASB)? Or "For to me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21)? I've found this kind of passion to be abnormal in the church today. But wouldn't we be better off to choose the abnormal in this case?

If Acts represents abnormal Christianity when compared with the present state of the church, wouldn't we be better off to choose the abnormal experience of Acts? Isn't it a biblical principle never to be content with our experience of God, but to always want more of his presence, more of his voice, more of his power? We are to be content with our material possessions (Heb. 13:5), but we are never to be content with our present experience of God—thankful, but not content. To be content means to become Laodicean, lukewarm, complacent. And lukewarm believers are in danger of losing the conscious presence of God (Rev. 3:14–22). Wouldn't it be safer to assume that *normal* Christian experience is depicted in the book of Acts rather than in the Western church? Then, if for some reason or other we don't attain the goal, at least we can't be charged with not trying, with settling for less than what God is willing to give.

Before we close this chapter, there's a danger we need to consider. If we say that the book of Acts represents an abnormal state of Christianity, we may be unwittingly guilty of judging Scripture.¹³ When we say it is abnormal, we are comparing the experience of the New Testament church in the book of Acts to *something else which we regard as normal*. Is this "something else" another scriptural history of the New Testament church? No, the book of Acts is the only inspired, inerrant account we have of the church's history. None of the histories of the church written since Acts have the same divine authority or truth. Because its ultimate Author is God, the book of Acts is a perfect witness to the kind of life the early church experienced. It is also a witness meant to teach us about life in God.

Luke's repeated stress on the creative ways in which the voice of God broke through every kind of barrier in every kind of circumstance to speak, warn, guide, deliver, inspire, comfort, pre-

dict, and judge, ought to make us careful about calling these experiences abnormal. It could be that if we're not experiencing these things, it is *our* experience of God which is abnormal, rather than the experience of the New Testament Christian.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying we should experience an unbroken chain of angelic visitations and audible voices. Even the apostles were forced to live with ambiguity and endure the silence of God. Sometimes God let an apostle die an "untimely" death as in the case of James, while on another occasion he sent an angel to deliver Peter from execution.¹⁴ There will always be times when "the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions" (1 Sam. 3:1). Who can deny the sovereign ebb and flow between the ocean of heaven and the shores of earth? But aren't we to long for the flow rather than be content with the ebb?

If all things are possible for him who believes, and Acts shows us some of these possibilities, shouldn't we make the Christianity of Acts our goal? Better yet, why should we assume that Acts represents the apex of Christian experience? What if the Lord of history really has saved his best wine for the last days? Wouldn't you like to drink it?

I never saw a miracle, never heard God's voice outside the Bible, until the Christianity of Acts became a serious model for me. Since that turning point, I have experienced many of the same things reported in apostolic times. I know credible witnesses who have experienced more than I have. I believe Acts *does* represent normal Christianity. And anything less really is less.

The very same thing could happen to you if you gave God a chance to speak to you as he did to those in Acts. Somewhere I read that it only takes the faith of a grain of mustard seed.

ARE PROPHECIES, DREAMS, AND VISIONS FOR TODAY?

Jack Deere could have given you all the reasons why such things appeared once the Bible was complete. That is, until Jack searched the Bible deeply enough for it to search him. What he found revolutionized his Christian walk—and it can transform yours as well.

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—Wayne Grudem, professor of biblical and systematic theology,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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