

Evangelism in the Acts of the Apostles

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Evangelism in the Acts of the Apostles—whew! Talk about a subject that could be written on voluminously! It might even lead one to crystallize the topic into one area of evangelism with which Acts deals. That, however, is not what this paper will do. Intended is a sweeping overview of the evangelism (definitely in the broad sense) which the book chronicles.

Why be so broad and general? There are many tangents one could go off on in evangelism, but by objectively, assessing evangelism in Acts, I hope to be able to hold up what Acts says on the subject to what is being done in personal lives, congregations, and church bodies today, as a means by which to evaluate the concepts, methodologies, etc. held or employed today. Are we in the ballpark with what we're doing today in evangelism? Those, comparisons won't be made in this paper *per se*, but will be left to the reader to consider on the basis of what is presented.

I would insert two preliminary qualifiers. Firstly, all references, unless otherwise noted, are from the Acts of the Apostles. Secondly, the workings and power and motivation of the LORD working through the word are a given for everything which is set forth. If they are not mentioned specifically, it is only for the sake of space.

What comprised evangelism in Acts?

What did people do as they shared Jesus? Simply put, they testified to the fact that Jesus was the Christ, that he was exactly who he claimed to be. Since this was what Jesus told them to do (1:8), this is what they did, “proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (5:42; cf. also 9:20,22; 18:5). This is certainly evangelism in the narrow sense. Proclaiming the gospel through messages of law and gospel must of necessity be mentioned, since it is the heart of evangelism in the broad sense. A succinct example is given by Peter (2:36-38) as he points out not only sin but specifically Christ's crucifixion. This he follows with a message of forgiveness in Christ, since the people were crushed by the law. This is certainly proclaiming the “whole will of God” (20:27; cf. also 3:17-19). The purpose of such vehement law preaching as found in the close of Stephen's last speech on this earth (7:51-53) was to prepare for the gospel. Unfortunately his hearers couldn't hear such gospel gems as Paul's words to the Philippian jailor (16:31) and other gospel invitations (2:38; 3:19; 8:12; 10:36).

To what did people testify very specifically? *The resurrection of Jesus Christ*. If there was anything people talked about to others, it was this. “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (4:33). The list of specific instances of such testimony is long and revealing (1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:2; 4:10; 4:33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30,33,34,37; 17:18; 25:19; 26:8).

Included in the telling of good news is that which the believers shared with each other. They shared specific instances in their daily lives of how God had worked in their life, this doing to strengthen each other. When God gave Peter and John the backbone to speak before the chief priests and elders, they shared that fact with others, for the glory of God and the building up of one another's faith, good news to be sure (4:23; cf. also 12:17; 14:22; 15:4,30; 21:19). Closely related are the instances, especially in the life of Paul, where someone gave testimony to a personal, spiritual experience, in keeping with the angel of the Lord's directive, “Tell the people the full message of this new life” (5:20). Paul unabashedly used his own conversion and his worship life to illustrate the workings of God and the wonders he can perform (22:6-7; 24:14; 26:12-18).

In addition to the obvious use of the word, baptism also had its place in the evangelism of the early church. It was encouraged (2:41), carried out (2:41), and commanded when appropriate (10:47). Apart from the means of grace, a vital part of evangelism was the prayer of the believers. They joined in prayer for themselves (4:24,29) and for their hearers (26:29). Evangelism was comprised of using the means of grace in its various

modes of application to present the living Jesus to people. In other words, people were communicating something which was very important to them, something they had experienced firsthand, the effect of Jesus in their life (26:16b).

How was evangelism carried out?

How was it made possible that this work would be done? How did people feel about doing it? What methods did they employ? These questions could certainly be the stuff of books. Yet, I'll try to get a lot in a little space.

As to how the believers would be able to carry out such a task, I found only one answer—through the Holy Spirit who was active by the word of Christ which dwelt in the believers' hearts. That says a lot as far as how evangelism is and ever will be carried out. When the Holy Spirit came on the disciples, there was one definitive result: "You *will be* my witnesses" (1:8). Other references to this enabling factor are equally clear (2:18; 4:8,31; 6:10; 7:55).

The resultant attitudes toward evangelism which came from the work of the Spirit had one common factor—they were all positive. To show the all-encompassing enthusiasm which permeated the believers' work of proclaiming the good news, an adverbial listing of attitudes is offered. People testified to the living Lord Jesus: as a necessary work (1:22); earnestly (2:40); unabashedly (3:8); boldly, despite opposition (4:31); joyfully (5:41; 13:52); as a matter of priority and an act of service (6:2), with self-sacrificing love (7:60); fearlessly (9:27); boldly (9:27; 14:3; 19:8; 28:31); accurately (17:2-3); without hesitation (20:27); with sincere desire (21:39); resolutely (23:1); persistently and confidently (26:29).

The specific methods employed to carry out evangelism varied from place to place, yet the basic format of the proclamation had four constants. They were: 1) Old Testament history and the prophecies in it which were fulfilled; 2) Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah who completely fulfilled those prophecies; 3) a specific and pointed preaching of the law; and 4) a clear and concise gospel invitation. Although not all were employed in the same order or to the same degree, they were generally present in the lengthier evangelistic sermons which we have recorded in Acts. In contemporary terms, the evangelism presentations in Acts usually followed a basic outline. Let's consider Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2.

After referring to the prophecy of Joel to explain the "strange" events of the day, Peter put forth a short, concise statement on the person and work of Jesus. He followed with a quote from the Easter Psalm 16 to prove that David was referring to Jesus with those words and further demonstrated that David was a prophet who was foretelling Christ's resurrection. Another prophecy of David testified again to the person of Jesus, that he was the true God-man, the promised deliverer. Peter also included specific law (2:23,36). The Holy Spirit used the law to thoroughly convict the people of their sin (2:37), and thereupon Peter held out the spectacular cure for the problem, forgiveness in Jesus, and the blessings which God promised to those who put their faith in Christ (2:38-39; cf. also 22:16). It is a beautiful example of what is probably referred to several other times in Acts as an explanation or teaching about Jesus (4:2; 8:35; 17:2-3; 28:23). Other specific examples of such a presentation are Peter's words to the crowd after healing the beggar (3:13-26) and the testimony of Stephen (7:2-53; cf. also 22:3-21). Stephen sure did a great job of giving a presentation of sin and grace, especially considering the extenuating circumstances he faced. Such law/gospel presentations were certainly not the only way to evangelize, but, of necessity, they must have formed the groundwork for the methods which now follow.

This paper is not the place to do a study of the use of tongues in the early church, but tongues were a way in which the early New Testament believers shared the good news. Especially in the Pentecost narrative (2:6) did the LORD bless his word so that vast numbers of people from various nations of the earth might hear and believe the message of salvation. An advantageous way of using language is also evident in Paul's words to the riotous crowd in Jerusalem (21:40). He spoke to them in their own language. Present day application is obvious. Other methods of using the spoken word are Paul's use of the debate format (9:29; 18:28) and simple spreading of the good news by word of mouth (11:1).

The verses about Tabitha of Joppa are a good reminder that we ought not underestimate the preparatory nature of good works for the spread of the Gospel. Because she actively lived her faith, Tabitha became a gospel conversation piece throughout Joppa and the result was that “many people believed in the Lord” (9:42). Another interesting way in which living the Christian life serves the furthering of the gospel is evidenced by the unity which was enjoyed in the initial Jerusalem congregation (4:32). Although that passage doesn’t clearly say how unity speaks the gospel message, Jesus makes it clear to us in his High Priestly prayer (John 17:23). That their hearts and minds were one could only be accomplished if they had the heart and mind of Jesus.

Further testimony to the power of Jesus’ resurrection is seen indirectly in the mutual encouragements which seemed to be in abundance between members of the various congregations in Acts (11:23; 14:22; 20:1-2). Add to the personal, spoken words of encouragement the letters which went from congregation to congregation and that’s another method of evangelizing (15:22-31, esp. v.31). Implied are also the New Testament epistles, many of which were composed in the time frame which Acts covers.

Nor do we wish to exclude the hymnody of the early church as a means for sharing Christ. One has to wonder about the effect which Paul’s and Silas’ hymns had on the inmates as they heard the melodies which carried the name of Jesus through the corridors of that Philippian jailhouse (16:25).

The actual making of what we know as evangelism calls was a method employed throughout the book of Acts. Paul’s call to the Philippian jailer’s household would certainly apply. They didn’t just believe because their father came home and told them to, but through the same sin and grace presentation which the jailer himself had heard. Perhaps a better specific example would be that of Felix and Drusilla (24:24-26). Though their motives were not entirely upright, Paul had the chance to speak with them individually, seemingly a number of times.

Finally we note the practice of the traveling missionaries to establish indigenous churches wherever they went. Especially did Paul make this his practice as he moved from village to village, preaching and establishing cell after cell of Christian groups, perhaps leaving an associate to serve there for a time, but eventually expecting them to stand on their own with Christ at their side to defend them. Paul, too, made follow up calls on these fledgling Christians (15:36; et al). The methods of evangelism varied throughout the book of Acts. Even the people’s own awareness that their actions were making a statement of their faith may well have been unaware to them. But whether, it was actions which led to words or the words of the apostles themselves, all the methodology had this in common: at it’s heart was the message of sin and grace, of man’s faithlessness but God’s faithfulness in his Son Jesus.

Who evangelized whom?

Who was performing all the work of evangelism? The book of Acts begins with Jesus doing just this, speaking about the kingdom of God (1:3). But Jesus’ body, the church, had many of its members doing the work also.

The apostles were instrumental in the first stages of evangelism work. That this consumed a great majority of their time seems to be the case (5:41-42). And who were the apostles to do such work? They were just plain run-of-the-mill fishermen (4:13). Yet, God saw fit to bless his word through their efforts (4:13). What an effect comes through being with Jesus! Quite often this vital work was done by two men, one example out of many being that of Peter’s and John’s team effort (3:1).

When, however, Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses,” he referred not only to those gathered before him or to just those whom we recognize as apostles. Acts tells of a great number of “non-apostles” who were doing evangelism. Not only apostles but all the believers gathered in prayer that the gospel might go out (4:29). Particularly noteworthy are three little words which Luke writes concerning who went out with the gospel. When reporting the scattering of the believers after the persecution, we’re told that those who had been scattered preached the word, and that those who were scattered were all *except the apostles*. Lay evangelism was a far cry from a forced program, it was a way of life, even in persecution (8:1,4; 11:19-21). “Normal” people spoke out the good news of life in Christ. A common beggar who’d been healed by Peter and John

almost made a spectacle of himself witnessing to Christ (3:8). Stephen was another “average” evangelist. Remember, even though he gave that sparkling testimony to those who would stone him, Stephen was nothing more than a waiter on tables, not one of those devoted to specifically to the ministry of the word, but a waiter (6:5,10; cf. also Cornelius, the soldier, in 10:1ff).

Although not everyone did the specific “work of an evangelist,” practically everybody helped. Even those who performed what we might consider trivial tasks had a part and their heart was in the work (6:3-4). Practically everybody we meet in Acts is doing something for the evangelism cause. Only those with the wrong heart were excluded. Simon the sorcerer was disqualified because of the wrong motivation. The Lord’s grace and love in Christ bring forth evangelists, not money or reputation.

By saying that almost all did evangelism, it seems hard to say that the message went out to practically everyone, but it’s true. The message was intended for all (2:38), and so those who spoke witnessed practically to everyone they met. Race meant nothing; both Jews and Greeks were invited to join in the feast of salvation (2:14). Every type of person from every rung on the social ladder was given a taste, from the political and religious rulers of the land (4:8; 26) to the beggar who sat outside the palace or temple (3:2); from women’s groups (16:13) to high-ranking men (10:2ff) to “small and great alike” (26:22). Evangelism went on inside the walls of individual families as people recognized where the beginning has to be made, such as Cornelius’ training of his family (10:2). Several times complete households or families are mentioned. Examples are: Cornelius (10:2; 11:14); the Philippian jailer (16:33); Crispus’ household (18:8). Friendship evangelism is not absent from Acts at all. It is clearly spoken of when we hear about how the friends of Cornelius gathered to hear Peter preach. Generally speaking, practically all of the believers evangelized anyone with whom they came in contact. Whoever happened to be in the market place heard the words of Paul as he reasoned from the scriptures with the Athenians (17:17).

Where did evangelism take place?

Jesus didn’t put too many limitations on where the apostles were to speak the good news. In fact, the very ends of the earth were the only boundaries he established (1:8).

What becomes quite clear is that the work of evangelism didn’t take place behind closed doors, as if it were an embarrassing thing to talk about. The message of salvation was preached openly and publicly. The fellowship of believers enjoyed “the favor of all the people” (2:47), and the beggar whom John and Peter healed praised God so much that all who saw him were effected. He didn’t hide the good news of Jesus (3:8-9). The result of the public meeting of believers in Solomon’s Colonnade was that more and more people believed. I seriously doubt that they were just picnicking (5:12-14). Solomon’s Colonnade seemed like a hot spot for the saving message of Jesus (3:11). Paul, too, was never intimidated by his location. He gave thanks to God before 276 sailors, not thinking twice about where he was at (27:35). These early evangelists were not, however, aimless wanderers. One place they often frequented in their efforts was the place where people would be, the temple courts and synagogues. The believers got into the habit of meeting in the temple courts (2:46). It was even to that very place that the Lord directed the apostles to teach (5:20), the place where the Lord often made his presence visibly known. Paul’s own practice of going first to the synagogue is a well-known fact (9:20; 13:5; et al). It was a natural place to teach about the kingdom.

Door to door work was something not unknown to the early evangelists. The apostles seemed to make house calls a regular part of their ministry (5:42; 20:20).

Wherever they went, the believers gave verbal expression to Jesus, the way to heaven (8:4; 14:7). Whether it was on the road (8:26) or by a river (16:13), from village to village (8:25) or city to city (8:40; cf. also Paul’s itinerary), in prison (16:25) or in the marketplace (17:17), people spoke the word. Sometimes it was in the privacy of someone’s home (18:26), but more often than not it was in public for all to hear.

When did evangelism take place?

Maybe a more appropriate question would be, “When didn’t it?” People spoke the gospel every day (2:46), day after day (5:42; 17:17), on a regular basis (18:4). Whenever the opportunity arose (3:12), people sprang into action. Paul didn’t even let the time of day slow him down, being active at midnight (16:25) and sometimes going straight through until morning (20:7) or from crack of dawn to sunset (28:23) right up until the time of his death (20:24). The believers were ever ready to give an answer, especially when asked to give a reason for the faith they had (10:22; 13:42; 17:19).

Adversity was no reason to stop speaking. Even when told not to do so, the apostles spoke forth (5:28). Stephen was in life-threatening circumstances and he boldly spoke (7:2ff). Times of persecution served only to increase the zeal of Christ’s witnesses (11:19). Even when it seemed, by all outward appearances, to be useless (27:21-26), Paul spoke forth. Being under arrest didn’t slow him down at all (28:17). The only time that the work of evangelism stopped was when people rejected the message, at which times the Lord visibly or invisibly would intervene (22:18).

Why did people do the work of evangelism?

What was said about the enabling work of the Holy Spirit in the “how” section of this paper applies here again. It wasn’t some pious inner compulsion which drove people to speak the gospel, unless it is understood that the Spirit created that zeal in the heart through his own work, as a result of law and gospel brought to the person’s heart. With that understanding, it was a matter of motivation, by the gospel, which drove the believers to obey the Lord’s directive, explicitly given or implied in various references (4:19; 5:29; 9:6; 20:24). When the eyes and ears of faith have been stimulated by the love of God in Christ, one can’t help but speak forth the praises of the Savior for all to hear (4:20). Why did people evangelize? Because the news of the gospel was the most important thing they had and they wanted to share it (3:6).

The Acts of the Apostles nowhere makes evangelism a Sinaitic law, saying, “Do it or die!” People not only did the work, they lived and breathed it. May I in no way be understood to say evangelism boards or mission festivals are useless efforts or agencies; they are worthwhile. But we can never say that they cover all that needs to be done in the lives of Christians or in Christian congregation. Acts certainly gives the principles and truths concerning evangelism, but it doesn’t dictate how we’re to do that. The guidelines it does give are certainly to be considered and even imitated or used for comparison purposes. The early church must assuredly have been doing something right, since the word of the Lord grew in great proportions (12:24). No doubt the hand of the Lord was the primary cause for the successes they enjoyed, but since it is clear that they were led by the Spirit in the specific things which they did in their evangelism work, we would do well to follow.