

((PREACHING *the* WORD))

ACTS

The CHURCH AFIRE



R. KENT HUGHES

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Acts

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jon McGrath, Simplificated Studio

Cover image: Adam Greene, Illustrator

First printing 1996

First printing ESV edition 2014

Printed in the United States of America

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Scripture references marked PHILLIPS are from *The New Testament in Modern English*, translated by J. B. Phillips © 1972 by J. B. Phillips. Published by Macmillan.

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-3826-1

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3829-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3827-8

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3828-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hughes, R. Kent.

Acts / R. Kent Hughes

p. cm.—(Preaching the word)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 13: 978-0-89107-873-9

ISBN 10: 0-89107-873-8

I. Bible. N.T. Acts—Homiletical use. I. Title. II. Series:

Hughes, R. Kent. Preaching the word.

BS2625.5.H84 1996

226.6'07—dc20

95-41952

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s ethos backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I do not, but *he does*.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
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I

“You Will Be My Witnesses”

ACTS 1:1-11



ONE REASON I LOVE TO STUDY the book of Acts is its uniqueness. It is *the* sourcebook for the spread of early Christianity. Without it we would know little about the apostolic church except what could be gleaned from Paul’s epistles. It is the chronicle of the spreading flame of the Holy Spirit.

It is also a book with a splendid theme, tracing the work of the Holy Spirit through the birth, infancy, and adolescence of the Church. Its title could well be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” or “The Acts of the Risen Christ through the Holy Spirit Working through the Church.” Acts forms the perfect counterpart and contrast to the Gospels. In the Gospels the Son of Man offered his life; in Acts the Son of God offered his power. In the Gospels we see the original seeds of Christianity; in Acts we see the continual growth of the Church. The Gospels tell us of Christ crucified and risen; Acts speaks of Christ ascended and exalted. The Gospels model the Christian life as lived by the perfect Man; Acts models it as lived out by imperfect men.

The study of Acts is particularly important to us because it teaches us how to experience a stimulating, exciting life—how to make our lives count. One man said, “I have been a deacon in my church for years; built a church building, raised money, served on committees. But one thing my church never gave me was a relationship with Christ that would make my life exciting.”¹ Rather than having an effervescent, relevant faith, this man found his life about as stimulating as a stale glass of ginger ale. He did not know the secret of Acts.

In our day one of the *nicer* things said about the institutional church is that it is “irrelevant.” The book of Acts carries the remedy. Whether you are young and virile with Superman-like energy, or restless with what you have

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seen of a dull, ho-hum, business-as-usual Christianity, or at the age where you are receiving birthday cards that say things like “When it’s time for a dental checkup, do you send out your teeth?” the message of Acts is for *you!*

The author of Acts was Luke the physician, and he begins with a reference to his already completed work on the life of Christ, which we know as the Gospel of Luke:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (vv. 1, 2)

Naturally Theophilus remembered, and his thoughts turned to Luke’s great scroll and its remarkable account of Christ’s life. He was thereby primed for what was to follow.

Then in verses 3–5 Luke continues with some new information as he tells Theophilus something more of the time after Christ’s resurrection:

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (v. 3)

Luke is the only Scriptural writer who tells us that Christ’s post-resurrection ministry covered forty days. Evidently Jesus appeared at intervals, coming and going from Heaven at will, showing miraculous signs and instructing his disciples “about the kingdom of God.”

Luke’s record of the stunning encounter on the road to Emmaus is a typical example. Christ met the two followers in an altered physical form and “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27), so that they later said (Luke 24:32), “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” The picture of those forty days is one of enraptured excitement, unfolding mystery, suspense, and anticipation.

Luke goes on in verses 4, 5:

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Christ’s conversation with the apostles must have been awesome! It may have even led to all-night rap sessions. What was this baptism “with the Holy

Spirit”? Would Jesus take them to the Jordan and rebaptize them? Would they hear a voice from Heaven like Jesus did? Rabbis had said the restoration of Israel’s political fortunes would be marked by the revived activity of God’s Spirit. So now some of the disciples burned with the hope of a political theocracy. Would they themselves be given supernatural powers? Peter probably wanted to go through walls just like the Master had done. What would be their duties? Certainly each one would have a special mission marked with incredible power and great success. They were forbidden to leave Jerusalem for now, but then . . . How long before this would happen? Jesus said, “Not many days from now.” They could not wait!

In the midst of this ongoing, frenzied speculation, Jesus called the eleven together at the crest of the Mount of Olives. The apostolic band was aflame with expectancy.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (vv. 6–8)

These were Jesus’ final earthly words. It has been more than 2,000 years, and Jesus has not during that time planted his feet on *terra firma* and audibly addressed his followers. Perhaps that silence is intended to prevent anything from obscuring Jesus’ last words, so they will continue to reverberate in the Church’s ears.

Our Lord has laid down in the clearest terms the mission for those who are to follow him. This is the mission of the church that would dare to call itself New Testament—the mandate of apostolic Christianity.

Verse 8 is the key verse of the entire book of Acts. Chapters 1–7 tell of the witness “in Jerusalem,” chapters 8–11 the witness “in all Judea and Samaria,” and chapters 12–28 the witness “to the end of the earth.” This is the foundation on which to build an effervescent, exciting faith.

The Mission Itself

The core commission is seen in the heart of verse 8: “. . . and you will be my witnesses.” We are to be “*witnesses*” for Christ! This is the recurring message of Acts. For example:

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. (2:32)

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You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. (3:15)

We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. (10:39)

You will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. (22:15)

This witness about Christ is often counterfeited but never duplicated. Perhaps you have had the experience of having some neatly dressed young men come to your door and, after some friendly conversation, invited them in, only to have them set up a flannelgraph while saying something like, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we had prophets today?” They then present an incredible religious maze: the Aaronic priesthood, the priesthood of Melchizedek, a modern prophet from upstate New York (who was heralded by an angel with an Italian name), the Urim and Thummim (i.e., a pair of giant spectacles through which their prophet translated their sacred book), a “plan” that can promote you to the Terrestrial, Celestial, and finally Telestial Heavens, etc. An amazingly complex religious system given under the guise of being a witness for Christ’s latter-day church, their gospel is in reality a complete reversal of the good news of Christ’s grace.

The true witness to which Christ referred is not like that. To be a witness for Christ is to bring a message that is a marvel of simplicity: Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh; he died to pay for our sins; he was resurrected; now he is exalted in Heaven; he calls us to believe in him and so receive forgiveness of sins. This is good news. There is nothing to join, no system to climb—just a person to receive and, in him, eternal life.

Though this witness is simple, it requires costly commitment from its carriers. It radically touches our inner complexities—who we are deep inside. Not only must we have the message, the *logos*, the Word, but we must also attract the magnificent compliment that Sir Henry Stanley gave David Livingstone after discovering and spending time with him in Central Africa: “If I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian, and he never spoke to me about it at all.”² Livingstone’s witness went far beyond mere words.

If we are to be effective witnesses for our Savior, we cannot be water boys in the game of life. We have to roll up our sleeves and pitch in. Our lives must display the inner reality of what we externally proclaim. That is why gospel flames raced across Asia. The apostles walked their talk. That is why

Paul was able to reach the Praetorian guards while under arrest in Philippi (see Philippians 1:13). Are we witnesses like that?

This matter of *ethos*—who we are—demands absolute, soul-searching honesty because it is so easy to deceive ourselves. Those of us with a Bible-believing heritage who constantly hear and talk about spiritual things can by the sheer weight of discussion come to believe that we live up to what we talk about, even if we do not. Being an authentic witness demands an open, tender heart that is always growing in the experience it proclaims.

To be a witness we must have *logos*—the Word of Christ, *ethos*—the inner reality of what we proclaim, and *pathos*—passion. The apostles were passionate for Christ. Observe Peter at Pentecost, Stephen at his stoning, Paul before Felix. They fervently promoted their faith. They were a band of zealous believers who turned their world upside-down.

When George Whitefield was getting the people of Edinburgh out of their beds at five o'clock in the morning to hear his preaching, a man on his way to the church met David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic. Surprised at seeing him on his way to hear Whitefield, the man said, "I thought you did not believe in the gospel." Hume replied, "I do not, but *he does*."³

The message is simple, but the demand on the messengers is serious. For effective witness, there must be the Word, the inner reality, the passion.

The command to be Christ's witnesses is for all true believers in him. There are no loopholes. No one can say, "This does not apply to me." Our honor exceeds that of any worldly ambassador, whether it be mainland China, France, or the private offices of the Prime Minister of England. Christ's last word to us is, "You will be my witnesses."

The Mission's Extent

How far is this witness to spread? "In Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (v. 8). We have heard these words so many times that it is difficult to feel their impact. But what a shock these geographical designations must have been to the disciples. Jerusalem? The Lord was crucified there. Judea? They had been rejected there. Samaria? Minister to those half-breeds? The end of the earth? Gentiles too? The words were not only spiritually revolutionary, but socially and ethnically unheard of.

We all know the story. The Lord's outline was carried out to the letter. Jerusalem was filled with the preaching of the gospel, and 3,000 were saved in one day. Later Philip broke the taboos of Judea and crossed over into Samaria. Social revolution!

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Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free, male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant, clasped hands and sat down at one table, and felt themselves all one in Christ Jesus. They were ready to break all other bonds, and to yield to the uniting forces that streamed out from His Cross. There never had been anything like it. No wonder that the world began to babble about sorcery, and conspiracies, and complicity in unnameable vices.⁴

The good news of Jesus was even being whispered in Caesar's own kitchen (see, for example, Philippians 4:22).

How impressive is the scope of the missionary heart. Followers of Christ yearn for the gospel to go to the ends of the earth *and* into their own community. There can be no burden for distant unreached peoples without a burden for unreached neighbors. Christian believers see that it is their duty to cross over ethnic divisions. Christ demands a world heart! A heart that prays for those at home just as much as for those being touched by overseas missionaries. Jesus' final words to his Church demand expansive hearts.

Christ's words taken seriously are nothing less than the declaration of a benevolent war. They are a call for every believer—every forgiven sinner now following Christ—to spend and be spent. Nechayev, a nineteenth-century disciple of Karl Marx, was thrown into prison for his role in the assassination of Czar Alexander II. Prior to his death he wrote:

The revolutionary man is a consecrated man. He has neither his own interests nor concerns nor feelings, no attachment nor property, not even a name. All for him is absorbed in the single exclusive interest in the one thought, in one passion—REVOLUTION.⁵

Although his motives and goals were wrong, Nechayev stated well the heartbeat of true commitment—the kind needed to accomplish the objectives of the Church, God's missile of salt and light hurled into the world to proclaim the triumphant message of sins forgiven and lives transformed. Too often we are overly concerned about personal comfort. If the Christian faith is worth believing at all, it is worth believing heroically!

Jesus' words are a call to zeal, and zeal—fervor, passion, urgent and loving service—is the medium by which the spiritual war is waged. Whether we are at home or bridging society's barriers or making our way to the ends of the earth, we are to be people of one thing—seeing one thing, caring for one thing, living for one thing—to *please God*. Whether we live, whether we have health, whether we have sickness, whether we are rich, whether we are poor, whether we get honor, whether we get slain, our deepest desire is to please

him. And what does he want? “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The apostles did this, and we are to do likewise. What a call—to be personal witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ! That is too much—it is too hard! And to demand that it be to the ends of the earth—impossible! That is why our Lord prefaced the statement with a promised provision of power.

The Mission’s Power

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” There was a brief interlude of about ten days, and then the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, there were tongues of fire, they spoke in other languages, and spiritual *power* rolled through them. It was thus no surprise when Peter later walked by the Beautiful Gate, saw a lame man, and said, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (3:6). And suddenly there was a high-jumping cripple in front of the temple. And again, John and Peter stood before the entire Sanhedrin and said, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (4:19, 20). Consider also the first gospel concert—in Philippi after Paul and Silas were beat up and tossed into the slammer. *Power!*

When the Holy Spirit comes upon followers of Christ, the most unlikely people become fountains of power. This spiritual power is always available, and he displays it according to his sovereign plans. God imparts his power when and how he wants to. Years ago when I was a youth pastor I noticed that a lot of young people would show up on Sunday morning, but when it came to Wednesday night Bible study I could hardly get a baker’s dozen. I would have eight, then fifteen, then eight . . . I almost quit. I was so discouraged that I *had* to depend on the Lord. I remember finally just giving it all to the Lord, and one night when there were only eight a young man came to know Christ. He brought another young man to the group, and *he* came to know Christ. In two months my group went from fifteen to ninety, and then to 120! I only remember four Wednesday nights out of a year and a half that someone did not trust Christ!

This was a most unlikely occurrence, and it had nothing to do with me. The kids were praying and bringing their friends, and their friends were weeping, repenting, and trusting the Lord. There was life-changing power at work!

The power of the Holy Spirit is the supreme qualification and assurance

of Christ's witnesses. The mission? To be "my witnesses." The mission's extent? "In Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The mission's power? ". . . when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

This is a dramatic text—Christ's final statement on earth and the key to the book of Acts. But then things became even more dramatic: "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (v. 9). Some other versions suggest that the cloud came right down onto the mountain. That cloud may have been the *Shekinah* glory—a visible representation of the pleasure and presence of God. This was the same symbol that Moses had encountered on Sinai when God covered him with his hand so that Moses only saw the afterglow. It was the same cloud that traveled before Israel by day (a pillar of fire by night). It was the cloud that lay over the tabernacle and filled the temple. It was the cloud that Ezekiel saw depart over the east gate. It was the same presence that surrounded Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration when his face shone forth like the sun (Matthew 17).

The apostles' hearts were pounding, and their eyes were wide as saucers as God powerfully underscored his Son's final words to his Church! The truth conveyed through these events should resound in the inner chambers of every believer's heart.

The ascended Christ was to be the confidence—the flame—of the apostolic movement. Having ascended, he now intercedes for the Church and has sent the Holy Spirit, "another Helper" just like himself (John 14:15). And so we can be his witnesses.

Verses 10, 11 give us the stunning epilogue:

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

The teaching here is clearly meant for a missionary church. "Jesus is returning again—so get going!" How does your life stack up? How does mine? Like a day-old glass of ginger ale? The life of a Christian can and should be exciting, effervescent. The key is genuine commitment to God's plan. Some of us are moved with such thoughts, but give us an hour watching our favorite sports team and it all vanishes—the worries of this life. Or a young husband and wife who are struggling financially may feel unable to think about anything except their limited funds or an uncertain future, though in actuality that does not exempt them from being witnesses for Christ and

following him. Regardless of the particular difficulties confronting us, we are called to be his witnesses.

Commitment is the key to a sparkling, meaningful life. *Logos, ethos, pathos*—what a life!

Prayer

Our gracious Lord, the call is too high for any of us. But we thank you that the other Comforter who is just like Jesus is not only with us but in us. God, help us to be giving, praying, sacrificing, honest, true, passionate believers, just like the apostles were. In Jesus' name, Amen.