



The Mission of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-11)

Commentary: Week Two

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

[1:4](#) Verse [4](#) speaks of one of the occasions when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples. He is said to have been “eating with them.” This translates a Greek verb that does not occur elsewhere in this exact form. The word has several possible derivations, and translations differ accordingly: (1) *assemble, gather together with*; (2) *lodge or spend the night with*; (3) *share salt, i.e., eat with*. The NIV has gone with the third alternative. It fits in well with Jesus’ appearance to his disciples in [Luke 24:43](#), where he ate in their presence. On this occasion Jesus commanded his disciples to remain in Jerusalem and await the gift of the Father. The Greek construction can be rendered quite literally, “Stop departing from Jerusalem,” implying that at this point the disciples had been coming and going from the Holy City. They were to remain there and await the Father’s promise. That promise has already been introduced in [Luke 24:49](#) (“clothed with power from on high”) and is made explicit in the following verse in Acts (“you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”).

[1:5](#) The promise of the Spirit is specified in v. [5](#) with a reminder of the tradition attributed to John the Baptist in the Gospels: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” ([Luke 3:16](#); cf. [Mark 1:8](#); [Matt 3:11](#); [John 1:33](#)). The reference is to the unique, unrepeatable event at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples in a visible form like fire ([2:3](#)). John’s was a baptism of repentance, and the church would continue to use the outward form of his water baptism as a confession of the name of Jesus on entry into the community of believers ([2:38a](#)). Unlike John’s baptism, the new converts would also receive the presence and power of the Holy Spirit ([2:38b](#)). Throughout Acts new converts experienced repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit. All three are essential elements of the conversion experience. The succeeding narrative of Acts shows no set pattern in which these various elements appear. The Spirit can come before baptism ([10:47](#)), in conjunction with baptism ([2:38](#)), or some time after baptism ([8:16](#)). The Spirit’s presence in the lives of believers is also evidenced in less dramatic ways such as the Ethiopian’s joy ([8:39](#)), Lydia’s hospitality ([16:15](#)), and the Philippian jailer’s offer of first-aid ([16:33](#)). Although the Spirit cannot be tied to a mechanistic pattern, these patterns show that repentance and the gift of the Spirit are essential to the conversion experience.

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 81-87.

3. Christ's Legacy: The Call to Witness [1:6–8](#)

[1:6–8](#) Verses [6–8](#) are closely tied together. In v. [6](#) the disciples asked Jesus about the time of the kingdom. In v. [7](#) Jesus rejected speculation about “times” altogether and in v. [8](#) replaced this with the relevant subject—the Christian task in the interim period before the kingdom’s coming.

The setting of the disciples’ question is rather vague, “when they met together” (v. [6](#)). The verses that follow clarify that this was the last time Jesus appeared to them, just prior to his ascension (v. [9](#)), and that the location was the Mount of Olives (v. [12](#)). It is not surprising from Jesus’ prior remarks about the coming of the Spirit and the fulfillment of God’s promises (v. [5](#)) that the disciples concluded the final coming of God’s kingdom might have been imminent. In Jewish thought God’s promises often referred to the coming of Israel’s final salvation, and this concept is reflected elsewhere in Acts (cf. [2:39](#); [13:23, 32](#); [26:6](#)). Likewise, the outpouring of the Spirit had strong eschatological associations. Such passages as [Joel 2:28–32](#) were interpreted in nationalistic terms that saw a general outpouring of the Spirit on Israel as a mark of the final great messianic Day of the Lord when Israel would be “restored” to the former glory of the days of David and Solomon.

Jesus corrected the disciples by directing them away from the question about “times or dates” (v. [7](#)). These are matters wholly within God’s own purposes and authority. During his earthly life Jesus had denied such knowledge even for himself ([Mark 13:32](#)). In denying such knowledge to the disciples, the hope in the Parousia is not abandoned. If anything, it is intensified by the vivid picture of Jesus returning on the clouds of heaven in the same mode as his ascension ([Acts 1:11](#)). Neither did Jesus reject the concept of the “restoration of Israel.” Instead, he “depoliticized it” with the call to a worldwide mission. The disciples were to be the true, “restored” Israel, fulfilling its mission to be a “light for the Gentiles” so that God’s salvation might reach “to the ends of the earth” ([Isa 49:6](#)). In short, to speculate on times and dates is useless. The Lord’s return does not revolve around such speculation but around God’s own purposes, and those purposes embrace the salvation of the world. The surest route to the Parousia is the evangelization of the world.

Verse [8](#) places the disciples’ question in proper perspective. The “restoration of the kingdom” involves a worldwide mission. Jesus promised the disciples two things: power and witness. The future tense here has an imperatival sense: “you *will* [must] receive power”; “you *will* be my witnesses.” Luke stressed this commission from the risen Lord at the close of his Gospel ([24:47–49](#)). All the same elements are there—the witness, the call to the nations, the power of the Spirit. The power they were to receive was divine power; the word is *dynamis*, the same word used of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels. It is the *Spirit’s* power ([2:1–21](#)). The endowment with the Spirit is the prelude to, the equipping for, mission. The role of the apostles is that of “witness” (*martys*). In Acts the apostles’ main role is depicted as witnessing to the earthly ministry of Jesus, above all to his resurrection (cf. [1:22](#); [2:32](#); [3:15](#); [5:32](#); [10:39, 41](#)). As eyewitnesses only they were in the position to be guarantors of the resurrection. But with its root meaning of *testimony*, “witness” comes to have an almost legal sense of bearing one’s testimony to Christ. In this way it is applied to Stephen ([22:20](#)) and to Paul ([22:15](#); [23:11](#); [26:16](#)). The background to this concept is probably the servant psalms of Isaiah, where God called on his servant to be a witness ([Isa 43:10](#); [44:8](#)). L. Keck notes the close connection between the Spirit’s power and the witness to Jesus, observing that what was true of those first apostolic witnesses is still true of witnesses today: “The less Jesus is the core of witness, the less power we have.”

The geographical scope of [Acts 1:8](#) provides a rough outline of the entire book: Jerusalem ([1–7](#)), Judea and Samaria ([8–12](#)), the ends of the earth ([13–28](#)). As such it can well be considered the “theme” verse of Acts. It is not by accident that Jerusalem came first. In Luke’s Gospel, Jerusalem was central, from the temple scenes of the infancy narrative to the long central journey to Jerusalem ([9:51–19:28](#)), to Jesus’ passion in the city that killed its prophets ([13:34](#)). The story of Jesus led *to* Jerusalem; the story of the church led *from* Jerusalem. Judea and Samaria are probably to be taken together; Judea was

understood in the sense of the Davidic kingdom, which would include the coastal territories and Galilee as well. Samaria would be included within Judea in this broader sense, but it is mentioned separately because of its non-Jewish constituency. The “ends of the earth” are often taken as referring to Rome, since the story of Acts ends in that city. The phrase is often found in the prophets, however, as an expression for distant lands; and such is the meaning in [Isa 49:6](#), which may well lie behind [Acts 1:8](#). In fact, the final verse in Acts ([28:31](#)), with Paul preaching “without hindrance” in Rome, suggests that the story has not reached its final destination—the witness continues.

4. The Ascension of Christ [1:9–11](#)

[1:9–11](#) The ascension is related with the utmost brevity (v. [9](#)), with the emphasis again being on the instruction to the disciples, this time by two heavenly messengers (vv. [10–11](#)).

The ascension tradition is unique to Luke-Acts, in all the New Testament being found only here, in [Acts 1:2](#), and in [Luke 24:51](#), though it is implied in [John 20:17](#). It is, however, closely related to the many New Testament texts that speak of Jesus’ exaltation to the Father, such as [1 Tim 3:16](#); [1 Pet 3:21f](#). What is unique to Luke’s ascension narratives is that he depicted in pictorial form the final departure of the resurrected Lord from the earth, thus marking an end to the forty-day period of resurrection appearances. One should not get the picture that the ascended Christ was no longer active among believers. He continued to reveal himself to such as Stephen ([7:56](#)) and Paul ([9:5](#)). These visions, however, were not on the same order as the appearances over the forty days. These close with the ascension, and Jesus will not return to earth until the Parousia (v. [11](#)).

The ascension narrative evokes rich biblical reminiscences—the translations of Enoch and Elijah, the cloud that enveloped Mt. Sinai. Indeed, clouds are often associated with theophanies. One particularly thinks of the transfiguration narrative of [Luke 9:28–36](#). The picture in [Acts 1:9](#) is that of a cloud enveloping Jesus as he disappeared from sight, just as in [Luke 9:34–36](#) the appearance of the cloud led to the disappearance of Moses and Elijah. The vivid pictorial depiction of Jesus’ ascension into heaven serves to give tangible form to the apostles’ testimony to the exaltation of Christ. Indeed, Luke stressed this by referring to their seeing and looking intently no fewer than five times in vv. [9–11](#), and he returned to the importance of their eyewitness in v. [22](#).

Luke did not dwell on the ascension. He quickly shifted the apostles’ gaze back to earth (v. [10](#)). Two men suddenly appeared beside them. They were angels, heavenly messengers, as their white garb indicated. Angels often accompanied heavenly visitations as interpreters of the event, such as those who interpreted the significance of the empty tomb ([Luke 24:4–9](#)). Indeed, a striking parallel exists between the women who were rebuked for seeking “the living among the dead” ([Luke 24:5](#)) and the disciples who stood there “looking into the sky” ([Acts 1:11](#)) for one who had just returned to God’s eternity beyond all creaturely bounds of earth and space. The angels addressed the apostles as “Men of Galilee” (literally, “Men, Galileans”). That their Galilean origin was highlighted may not be incidental. A strong Galilean witness motif is in Luke-Acts. The women of Galilee witnessed the crucifixion ([Luke 23:49, 55](#)); at this point the men of Galilee became the apostolic witnesses to the ascension.

The apostles’ gaze into the sky is understandable after witnessing such a miracle. The angelic rebuke, however, is necessary. Moments of high spiritual experience are never ends in themselves. It was time to come down from the mountain and witness to what they had seen. The angelic rebuke was followed by a promise: “This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” It was a strong affirmation of Jesus’ return—not just a promise but a reality concretized and affirmed by the ascension they had just witnessed.