

Evangelism in the Book of Acts

[Written for: *PT 341: Theology and Practice of Evangelism*, at
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, February 14, 1997]

by Paul Rutschow

What can the Book of Acts possibly teach us, who live in a technologically advanced age, who live in a world that is at the same time much larger and much smaller than the one in which the apostles lived? What can the Book of Acts teach us about evangelism?

The Book of Acts will not teach us very many specific methods. It will not teach us how to use the electronic media to spread God's Word in a "cost - effective" way. About the most advanced media the apostles had was the spoken word - or perhaps written letters. The Book of Acts will not teach us whether our adult instruction courses ought to begin with the story of creation or with a look at the 10 Commandments or a look at the way in which we got our Bible. The Book of Acts will not tell us how a congregation ought to structure its evangelism committee.

But the Book of Acts will teach principles of evangelism. Since the goal of evangelism - to spread God's Word to others - has not changed, and since the means of evangelism - God's Word - has not changed, the basic principles of evangelism as found in the Book of Acts can still instruct us today. The specific applications of those principles will be different than the applications that were made in the first century AD, and many will even be different than the applications that were made 50 years ago, but the principles themselves are the same.

Having said that, let's take a look at the Book of Acts, see how the apostles practiced evangelism, draw some basic principles from that, and apply those principles to ourselves in our role as evangelists today.

We begin with a look at Acts 1:8: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

It is instructive to note that there is no direct command in this passage. Jesus does not say to his disciples, "Go and be my witnesses." (Certainly he could have spoken in such a way. In fact, he did in Matthew 28. But it's clear that this command takes the form of a gospel imperative.) Instead Jesus simply assumes, simply takes it for granted that they will do this. This will occur. It's the natural thing.

Why is it so natural? Jesus gave the answer in the first half of the verse. He says that the Holy Spirit will come on them. When they receive the Holy Spirit - that is, when they receive a fuller measure of the Holy Spirit, when their faith grows - it is inevitable that they also will be witnesses. They will be evangelists. As their faith is strengthened, so is their zeal for witnessing.

The application for us as future pastors is twofold. First, as evangelists ourselves, when we feel our zeal for evangelism flagging, when we find ourselves making more and more excuses not to leave the confines of our own congregations, when we find all sorts of "urgent" things to do within our church building before we can think about going out to the unchurched, when we question the purpose of evangelism - when any or all of these things happen, we need to spend a little less time wondering about our lack of zeal and a little less time trying to artificially stimulate a sense of zeal, and we need to spend a little more time letting the Holy Spirit come on us with power.

And he does that through the Word of God, through the message of a Savior who died for all. If we get ourselves back into the Word, the Holy Spirit will come upon us, and we will be better witnesses, better evangelists.

The second application we can make from this is that as future trainers of evangelists, future leaders of congregations that are supposed to be filled with evangelists, we need to be careful about spending too much time, effort, and sweat on prodding our people to become evangelists. That is, we need to remember that true evangelism comes from the heart. It comes from a heart overflowing with love for God, from a heart that is eager to share the message of that love with others. It comes from a heart that is filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit fills us through his Word.

Really, this second application isn't any different than the first one. But it is so important that we take it to heart. It is possible to shame people into evangelism. It is possible to quote grim statistics such as "98% of people in Japan are going to sleep tonight without the knowledge of a Savior. 98% of people in Japan are therefore doomed to hell - unless you send missionaries over there by your offerings." It is possible to say, "Jesus said, 'I'll show you how much I love you.' Then he stretched out his arms and he died. If he loved you that much, why can't you love him enough to spend one afternoon in your life distributing fliers for Vacation Bible School?"

But both of these aim at the Old Adam in a person. Both of these aim at coercing obedience. Now it is certainly true that every Christian has an Old Adam, and therefore a pastor will need to speak to the Old Adam, But the pastor also needs to speak to the New Man. The pastor needs to strengthen the New Man by preaching the Word. The only way to truly instill a mission mindset in a congregation is by preaching the gospel. If we want our congregation to say with Peter and John, "*We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*" (Acts 4:20) we will preach the gospel. Then the Holy Spirit will come upon them. Then they will be witnesses.

Acts 2:14 - 40 - Peter's marvelous sermon on Pentecost is an excellent lesson in evangelism.

The first thing we can learn from Peter's sermon is - and this may seem simplistic - speak from the Bible. One-third to one-half of Peter's sermon on Pentecost is simply quotes from the Old Testament. Yes, it is true that Peter's hearers were especially familiar with the Old Testament - undoubtedly more familiar with it than most people are today with the Bible - but it is also true that the Word of God is always powerful. In other words, it's OK to tell stories and to draw parallels, but they ought to always reflect the Bible. Speak from the Bible, and then explain it. If anything you are saying does not add to an understanding of a Bible truth, then understand that you are no longer doing evangelism in the true sense of the word - preaching the gospel. Don't think that you need to tell all sorts of humorous stories about your fishing trip last April in order to gain an audience for your message. It's too easy to be focused on gaining an audience that we forget exactly what the message is. The Word of God does not need us to make it palatable or powerful. The Word of God authenticates itself and is its own best witness. "The Bible says" is always more powerful a statement than "I think" or "Pastor X says."

The second thing we can learn from Peter's sermon is - and this too seems simplistic - preach law, and then preach gospel. Preach Moses, and then preach Christ. That is the essence of evangelism.

To go into all the reasons why this is necessary - and why this order is necessary - would take us too far afield from the topic of this paper, but a brief summary paragraph is perhaps appropriate:

Without the law, there can be no joyous gospel. If we don't tell people about their individual need for a Savior, then how can we show them their Savior? Preaching the law does not in anyway minimize or detract from Christ's work. Rather, it heightens the marvelousness of Christ's work.

Another thing we can learn from Peter's sermon is that we ought to preach specific law to our evangelism prospects. When Peter talked about Jesus' death, he did not let his hearers escape blame. Though the hearers must have been tempted to blame those Romans who actually tried Jesus, actually sentenced him to death, and actually nailed him to a cross, Peter did not let them deceive themselves. Instead he placed the blame squarely on them, treating the Romans as mere accomplices at best - "*You with the help of wicked men - PUT HIM TO DEATH*" (2:23). Peter says a little later, "*God has made this Jesus, whom YOU crucified, both Lord and Christ*" (2:36). When Peter was done with the law, there was no doubt in the minds of his hearers that he was specifically condemning their action - and not merely the actions of mankind in general.

(For another example of Peter's specific preaching of the law, see the sermon in Acts 3 - "*You handed over... you disowned...you killed the author of life.*")

Similarly, we need to preach specific law. This need not be done in a heavy-handed way to accomplish its purpose. But it does need to be done. When going through the 7th Commandment with a prospect, it may not be enough to simply tell them that God considers stealing to be a sin. It may be necessary to tell them that when they skip out of work 30 minutes early on Friday, they have broken the 7th Commandment. It may be necessary to tell them that when they "fudge" on their income taxes, they are actually cheating the government, and therefore they are actually stealing.

As has already been said, while it may not be a particularly enjoyable thing to do, preaching law is an absolutely indispensable part of evangelism.

On the other hand, there may be prospects on whom the law has already done its work - that is, people who have already been made aware - perhaps by their conscience - that they have sinned. These people may already be crushed by the guilt the law has brought about. In this case, the law has already been preached - although perhaps not by yourself - and the gospel ought to be applied immediately.

The principle that the gospel ought to be spoken immediately after the law has had its intended effect is shown clearly by Peter's words in verse 38. The people were crushed by their guilt - terrified by it, in fact - and wanted to know what they ought to do. Without a moment's hesitation, Peter applied the gospel: "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins ...The promise is for you and your children*" (Acts 2:38,39).

(For a similar example of immediately applying gospel - and only gospel - to the terrified sinner, see the words of Paul and Silas to the jailer at Philippi in Acts 16:31.)

Again, to go too far into depth on this point would stray from the purpose of this paper and would end up being a rehash of Walther's The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. But it is worth remembering that the primary goal of evangelism is not to convict people of sin. Therefore we ought not bask in our victory and rejoice in the good job we have done when we preach the law so well that people cry out, "What shall we do?" The primary goal of evangelism is to preach the gospel. As soon as a prospect realizes his sin, is frightened by the consequences of it, and desires to escape the consequences of it, we must immediately preach the gospel. To do anything else is sinful, inhuman torture of a soul for whom Christ has died.

Finally, there is one last thing we can learn from Peter's sermon. It is apparent that not everyone immediately believed Peter's message. In fact, it is fairly certain that some did not believe him at all. But Peter did not give up on those people. Peter did not think to himself, "3000 new souls isn't bad. That should look pretty good on the statistical report." Rather, the Bible tells us, *"With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'"* (Acts 2:40). The picture is of the shepherd who has 99 sheep in his sheep pen but does not rest until that last sheep is brought home - no matter how stubborn and no matter how foolish that sheep has been in the past.

(For another example of not giving up see Paul's dealings with the Corinthians in Acts 18:4.)

The application to our evangelism is obvious: Don't give up. Understand and accept the fact that not everyone whom you evangelize will be converted, but don't limit the power of the Holy Spirit by telling yourself that a specific individual with whom you come into contact is one of those people who can't be converted. (People may have looked at Saul in this way before the events of Acts 9. God didn't.)

Don't hastily remove people from your prospect file. Perhaps it's a good idea never to remove people entirely from your prospect file (unless, of course, they formally request that you do so or unless they join another church). After all, God has not removed them from the category of "all men" whom he wants to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Acts 17:22 - 31 - Paul's sermon to the Athenians is an excellent example of good evangelism.

Paul's introduction indicates that he has taken the time to learn something about his audience, to learn about their customs, their culture, and their religion.

Paul didn't do any of this so that he would be better able to trick the Athenians into believing what he had to say. He didn't do this in order to better be able to smooth - talk them or flatter them. Paul did this for one reason - so as to know the best way to clearly communicate his message to the Athenians. He wanted to make sure the Athenians understood how this message related to them.

It's easy to let our "heresy radar" go wild when we hear someone talking of adapting to a culture in connection with evangelizing. There's a tendency to think that if we change from the way we have done things in the past, it is inevitable that we will change from the message we have preached in the past. This is not true.

It's true that Paul did not begin his sermon as other sermons in Acts have begun - by pointing to the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah and then to Jesus' fulfillment of these prophecies. If he had, the Athenians would have quickly become confused or bored or perhaps even annoyed that this man was going to try to convert them to a Jewish - and therefore, in their minds, decidedly inferior - way of thinking. And yet Paul still got to where he needed to go - a call to repentance.

Paul got to that call to repentance by beginning where an evangelist must begin with someone who does not know or accept the Bible - with people's natural knowledge of God. Whether they like it or not, people have to admit in their heart of hearts that someone greater than they put this world together. And if he did that, if he created us, then he also has power over us. Therefore if he has rules for us, and we haven't obeyed them, we are in trouble. So we need to find out about him and how to get ourselves right with him.

Once people are forced to confront that, we can do as Paul did. Tell them about that God, who he is, what his rules are, what we have done, and what his plan - not ours - is for fixing the problem.

(For another example of beginning evangelism with people's natural knowledge of God, see Paul's words to the people at Lystra in Acts 14:15 - 17.)

It is interesting to note that Paul began his sermon by referring to the religiosity of the Athenians. He did not immediately tell them that their "religion" was in fact no religion at all. But Paul made that clear to them soon enough when he said that the God who made the heavens does not live in temples built by human hands, and when he said that this same God was not like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man's design or skill.

The reason I say this is interesting is because there can also be a tendency to think that if we acknowledge or do not immediately put down someone's religion, we will necessarily be compromising the truth of the gospel. We need to remember that our main goal is not to put down other religions, but to preach the gospel. While we need to be careful that we don't use this as an excuse for avoiding having to say unpleasant things, we need to also be careful that we don't come on like a bull in a china shop.

The whole subject of exactly how to present the Word of God in our evangelism is an important one, and it is one that some people would like to ignore. Some people would like to say that it's simple - we preach the Word. But how? The apostles didn't simply sit their hearers down and say, "*Genesis 1: 1: In the beginning...*", and then proceed to read the entire Old Testament to them. Peter started his sermon on Pentecost with a number of Old Testament references, while Paul's sermon to the Athenians contained no Old Testament references - although it certainly contained Old Testament teaching.

The point is that the Word may be preached in various forms or in various ways, and it is impossible to prescribe exactly how it ought to be preached in every situation. When deciding how to evangelize, a simple thing to remember is, "Preach law. Preach gospel."

Acts 3 - None of us will probably ever heal a crippled man as Peter and John did in Acts 3. But we may be given credit for doing other great things. Perhaps we may be given credit for turning someone's life around by bringing them to the church. If we subsequently take a call to another church, the person may tell us that they just don't know if they'll keep coming to church after we leave because we changed their lives and so church just won't seem the same after we leave. It may seem to them as though we have done something even greater than healing a crippled man.

Peter and John refused such misguided and misdirected praise and credit by saying, "*It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him*" (3:16). Just as Peter and John had to remind the people of what they had said at the outset - that the power to do this miracle had come from Jesus of Nazareth - we may have to resist the urge to accept such praise. We may have to kindly make it clear that it was not our own words or efforts that accomplished it, but the power and love of the Savior, Jesus Christ. We would need to remind the person mentioned earlier that in the most important sense there will be nothing different about church. There will be a different messenger in the pulpit on Sunday, but he will be preaching the same message - the message of the one who has changed their lives - Jesus Christ.

To sum up in one sentence what we can learn from Peter and John's reaction here, I would say, "Always point people to Christ." (For another example of turning people's attention from the messenger to the message, see 14:8 - 17.)

A second thing we can learn from this stop is that dealing with people's physical needs may open opportunities for us to deal with people's spiritual needs. This crippled man did not appear to be looking for a Savior. It seems that he was simply looking for a handout. Peter and John gave him a handout, they gave him something that filled his physical needs - and then some - and then proceeded to use that contact to preach the gospel to him.

The mission of the church is not to reform society or to eliminate hunger (although God does tell us to love one another), but programs such as a food pantry may open the door to evangelism opportunities. People may not initially come for the right reasons. We can't expect unbelieving man, sinful by nature, to come to church for the right reasons. But even if they don't come to hear the gospel, when they see our lives of Christian witness, they may be more willing to give our message a hearing. In fact, they may even be eager to hear it.

Peter and John did not say to the man, "Is that all you think is important? Getting a handout? Even if we healed you, that would not be important. We can heal you, but that's not our business. We are not physicians to people's physical ills, we are not ministers to people's physical needs, but we are physicians of the soul. Therefore leave us with your begging. Come back when you are ready for spiritual food." Neither should we be too quick to pass up opportunities to minister to people's physical needs.

Acts 4:23 - 30 - As the believers prayed for the work of evangelism, so ought we to pray for the work of evangelism. Pray that God's Word may work in the hearts of unbelievers. Encourage your people to do likewise. It's a guaranteed way to aid evangelism. because God promises to answer prayers that pray for his kingdom to come to the hearts of unbelievers.

Acts 6:1 - 7 - The application we can make here can be summarized by a statement I've often heard from my father - You can't do it all. The apostles realized that their responsibilities were becoming overwhelming. They correctly understood that it would be improper for them to neglect tending to people's spiritual needs in order that they might tend to people's physical needs. Yet they also knew that it was improper for them to neglect the physical needs of people. (One might add that it ought to be impossible to fully divorce tending people's spiritual needs from tending their physical needs. Even while delivering food, the men the apostles appointed would be able to inquire as to the spiritual health of the widows.)

The apostles couldn't do it all. They needed help. So they asked for it. After consulting with the whole group of believers, they appointed seven men to assist them. (Another important concept in an evangelism program - or any program - is that since the congregation works together, they ought to make decisions together, rather than having the pastor or anyone else unilaterally impose his will on the rest of the congregation.)

You can't do it all - not in the work of ministry, and not even in the work of evangelism. Don't be afraid to admit that you can't do it all. Don't be afraid to ask for help. One of the roles of a pastor is to train believers for works of discipleship. Train people, and then use them. Ask and you might be pleasantly surprised at what kind of a response you get. Believers are glad to help one another - especially in doing the work of God. Sometimes all they need is for someone to ask them.

Acts 8:4 - After the persecution, those who had been scattered preached the Word wherever they went. We may not have members who scatter because of persecution. Today members are more likely to scatter because they get a job transfer. But they can preach the Word wherever they go. Encourage members to do this. Encourage them to look at their new life as presenting them with a brand new personal mission field. If your members are sent to a place far from an orthodox church, strongly encourage them to consider the possibility that God is using

them to start just such a church. The Holy Spirit made it work in the early New Testament church. He can make it work today.

Acts 14:1 - 3 - At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively (better, "in such a way") that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.

One might think that Paul and Barnabas would have left when problems turned up for them. But this passage tells us that is exactly why they stayed. The passage doesn't tell us exactly what opportunities or needs Paul and Barnabas saw in this situation that made them decide to stay. In addition, it is also true that there may come a time and a situation for an evangelist in which he may in good conscience decide that a more effective use of his time would be to work on something other than the current situation. However, one of the factors in his considerations ought never to be the degree of discomfort his decision will bring to himself personally.

It might be easier for the pastor to stop making visits to the home of a woman whose husband is openly hostile to the pastor and his message, but maybe that situation especially demands that the pastor would continue visiting. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Iconium in part to protect the faith of the new believers. In the case of the woman and her hostile husband, perhaps without the pastor bringing the power of the gospel to her, the spark of faith in her heart would be stomped out entirely by the hostility of her husband. The point is that when an evangelist is deciding where to evangelize, the question should never be, "What will make things easiest for me?" The question ought to be, "Where can the gospel be spread most effectively, and where is it needed most?"

(For another example of preaching the gospel even when it may be difficult or dangerous to do so, see Acts 4:1 - 20.)

Acts 16:1 - 3 - He (Paul) came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Here we see Timothy give up his Christian freedom in the name of evangelism. The application to evangelism here is obvious - give up your Christian freedom if necessary. But it's a difficult thing to do. Part of the reason is because we are stubborn by nature. It is easy to resent the fact that we should be kept from doing something that we are allowed by God to do. We resent the person's ignorant "knowledge." (Finally, a person who does not know the Bible is bound to have misconceptions. These misconceptions should not surprise us, and neither should they anger us.) We have a feeling that we ought to be able to say or do anything we want so long as it is true or permissible.

But such speech or action may contradict the law of love. Our first task is to preach the gospel, not to annihilate every misconception the person may have. Paul could have taken Timothy with him as an example of uncircumcision and as an example of Christian freedom under the new covenant. But if he had done this, the apparent disrespect he would have been showing for the old covenant would likely have kept him from being allowed to speak about the new covenant. Or if he had, his audience would already have been biased against it. But instead

he took Timothy with him as an example of a Gentile who had entered the Jewish faith - a faith which found its fulfillment in the promised Messiah, whom Paul was about to reveal to them.

Similarly, we may be able to invite some Mormons into our house and triumphantly exhibit our Christian freedom by drinking a beer in front of them. But we ought to be like Paul, and we ought to realize that although it may allow us to win the battle, our real concern is to win the war. Our real concern is to win the soul. Therefore we want to avoid something that might keep them from giving our message an honest hearing - or even any hearing at all.

Acts 16:6-10 - Paul and Barnabas make a decision to go to Mysia, but through a vision the Holy Spirit sends them to Macedonia instead. So Paul and Barnabas went. They were flexible, and they were willing to abandon their own plans in order to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will probably not make his will known to us in such a dramatic fashion. But if we keep our eyes open, he will alert us to changes that we may wish to make. If whites and blacks are moving out of your urban neighborhood while Hispanics are moving in, the time to consider how to serve those people with the Word is now. By the time it becomes almost impossible for the church to carry on ministry and evangelism in the way it has been, it will be too late. If your agricultural community 75 miles east of Los Angeles is attracting professional couples in which both partners work in the city, you probably ought to start considering how a daycare center could serve your congregation as an evangelism tool. And the time to do that is now. Now is not the time to rigidly, almost fearfully, say, "We've never done ministry that way before, and the church seems to have survived just fine." First, it survived just fine under somewhat different circumstances than it is facing now and under much different circumstances than it will in the future. Secondly, and more importantly, the goal of the church is not survival. The goal of the church is evangelism. So now just might be the time to say, "We've never done ministry that way before, but it seems to be the best way to do evangelism right now."

Throughout Paul's missionary journeys, we see Paul returning to places in which he had established congregations, "*Strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain in the faith*" (Acts 14:22; see also 18:23). In fact, that was much of the reason for Paul's second missionary journey. He said to Barnabas, "*Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the Word and see how they are doing*" (Acts 15:36). In addition, we see from the rest of the New Testament that Paul also kept in touch, that Paul continued to "strengthen and encourage the disciples" by means of letters.

Evangelism does not end when people become members. Remember, the goal of evangelism is not merely to get people into church, but to get them into heaven. Keeping that goal in mind, we will feel a certain joy when prospects become members. We will be glad that they are now members of God's family. We will celebrate the fact that one more sheep has been brought into the sheep pen. But we will not forget that enemies still exist. We will not neglect strengthening the sheep against their enemies of the devil, the world, and their sinful flesh. And, like a good shepherd, we will not take our watchful, caring eyes off the sheep - especially in the initial stages of their membership.

We will want to make sure that they have and take advantage of opportunities for continuing education in, and therefore also strengthening, by the Word of God. We will want to make sure that they regularly hear the Word of God in worship. We will want to provide them with fellowship opportunities so that they may be strengthened by the faith of other believers. We will want to give them opportunities to exercise their faith by serving in the church in some way.

Finally, in the last 8 chapters of Acts, it is interesting to see how Paul treats his trials and imprisonment. He seems to have one main goal in mind throughout - spreading the gospel. Note how he uses every opportunity available to preach the gospel - to the crowd of Jews in Jerusalem (22:2 - 21), to the Sanhedrin (23:6), Felix (24:14 - 16, 25), to Agrippa (26:4 - 29), to the sailors (27:23 - 25,35), and to the leaders of the Jews in Rome (28:17 - 23). Paul's entire mindset is one of evangelism. It's not something he does on occasion. It is who Paul is.

Similarly, evangelism is not simply something for which we block out a set amount of time each week - although there is certainly value in doing so. It is more than that. It is what we are. We are evangelists. As evangelists, we are therefore never "off duty." We are always looking for opportunities to evangelize.

I conclude with a look at the words of Paul in his farewell to the Ephesian elders. He said, "*I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God*" (Acts 20:26 - 27). What a clear conscience Paul had! Note that Paul does not say that every person to whom he spoke was converted. He does not even say that he always approached every situation perfectly. No one does either of these things. But he says that he has been faithful. He has proclaimed the gospel - and left the work of conversion up to the Holy Spirit. He has spoken the whole will of God - law and gospel - and prayed that God and his powerful Word would overcome any weakness in his presentation or approach. May God grant that we be able to say these words of Paul when looking at our evangelistic efforts. Then we will have been faithful, God-pleasing, successful evangelists.