

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 1 opens with Luke's transition from his Gospel account to the continuation of Jesus' ministry through the Spirit-empowered church. The chapter falls into three distinct movements. First (vv. 1–11), Luke summarizes the forty-day post-resurrection period: Jesus presents himself alive, instructs the apostles about the kingdom of God, commands them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit, and — at the moment the disciples ask about the restoration of Israel's kingdom — reorients their attention from eschatological timetables to missional responsibility ("you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth," v. 8), before ascending visibly into heaven. Two angels then rebuke the disciples' upward gazing and redirect them toward the return. Second (vv. 12–14), the apostolic company — numbering about 120, including the women and Jesus' brothers — returns to Jerusalem and devotes itself to unified, persistent prayer. Third (vv. 15–26), Peter stands to address the community, grounds the replacement of Judas in the fulfillment of Scripture, and leads the selection of Matthias to reconstitute the Twelve. The chapter thus covers the hinge period between Jesus' earthly ministry and the Spirit's coming: the church is formed, oriented, commanded, gathered, and waiting.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this passage is to establish the foundational posture and identity of the church before the Spirit arrives — and by extension, to call every subsequent generation of believers into the same posture. The passage answers two questions the disciples keep getting wrong: *What is the church's business?* (worldwide witness, not eschatological calculation) and *How does the church prepare to do it?* (gathered prayer, not anxious initiative). The angels' question — "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" — functions as the passage's sharp edge: it exposes the human tendency to gaze upward at glory when the commission points outward toward the world. God is calling the church to stop waiting passively, stop calculating calendars, stop fixating on restoration categories, and start doing the one thing Jesus left them to do — bearing witness, in the Spirit's power, to the ends of the earth.

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ commissions, reorients, and gathers His church before the Spirit's arrival.

Primary Claim: The church does not need more information about the times and seasons — it needs to stop looking at the sky and start bearing witness; Christ has already given everything required for the mission, and the Spirit is coming to empower it.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Kingdom Question (v. 6): The disciples ask, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” The principal interpretive divide here is between dispensational and Reformed/covenantal readings. Dispensationalists typically argue that the disciples’ question was legitimate — that Jesus’ answer does not deny a future national restoration of Israel but only withholds the timetable. Reformed interpreters read Jesus’ response as a redirection rather than a deferral: the question itself is reframed, not answered. The disciples are not corrected for believing in a future physical kingdom but for asking a question that points them in the wrong direction — backward toward national categories when Jesus is pointing outward toward universal witness. The context supports the Reformed reading: Jesus does not say “yes, but you can’t know when” — he says the question belongs to the Father’s authority and immediately pivots to the mission. The pivot (v. 8) functions as the *real answer* to their real need. **Refute:** the dispensational reading imports a category (national Israel restoration) that the passage does not affirm and that Jesus’ own response actively sidesteps.

The Ascension and the Angels (vv. 9–11): Some readings spiritualize the ascension (treating it as a symbolic departure or a visionary experience) in ways the text resists. Luke describes the event with the same matter-of-fact physicality that governs his Gospel resurrection narratives: “he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” The bodily, visible ascension is exegetically load-bearing — it explains the disciples’ upward gaze, provides the content of the angels’ announcement (“this Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go”), and grounds the expectation of a bodily return. Any reading that dissolves the physical ascension collapses the integrity of the angels’ promise. **Refute:** spiritualized readings cannot account for the physicality of the text or the logic of the angelic announcement.

The Replacement of Judas (vv. 15–26): Two questions arise: (1) Was Peter right to proceed before Pentecost? Some interpreters (notably certain evangelical traditions) argue that Peter acted prematurely — that Paul, not Matthias, was the “true” twelfth apostle — and that the lot method was sub-Pentecostal. The text does not support this reading: Luke narrates the event without any editorial criticism, Peter’s scriptural reasoning is presented as sound, the prayer over the lots is explicitly addressed to the Lord (“You, Lord, who know the hearts of all”), and Matthias is numbered with the eleven without qualification (v. 26). The “Matthias was a mistake” reading is eisegetical — it imposes a Pauline trajectory onto a text that does not hint at one. **Refute:** the narrative commends Peter’s action; the text itself resolves it. (2) Were the lots legitimate? The use of lots to discern divine will is thoroughly grounded in Old Testament practice (Proverbs 16:33) and is appropriate in the

pre-Pentecostal period. After Acts 2, lots do not appear as a discernment method in the New Testament — the Spirit’s direct guidance supplants the need. This is a historically-grounded observation, not a criticism of the act. **Acknowledge:** the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition’s emphasis on Spirit-guided discernment is legitimate in its outcome, even where the method (lots vs. direct Spirit-speaking) differs.

Key Canonical Support

- **Luke 24:44–49** — The immediate predecessor passage: Jesus opens the disciples’ minds to understand the Scriptures, declares that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed to all nations, and commands them to wait for the Spirit. Acts 1 is the fulfillment of Luke 24’s commission and promise.
- **Isaiah 49:6** — “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” The Servant’s mission — salvation to the ends of the earth — is the exact phrase Jesus uses in Acts 1:8. The church’s witness is the fulfillment of Servant Israel’s calling through the Servant Messiah.
- **Psalms 16:8–11 / Psalm 110:1** — Both are cited in Acts 2 (the immediate sequel), but their logic is already operative in Acts 1: the risen, ascended Lord who sits at the Father’s right hand is the one who has authorized this commission and promised the Spirit. The church’s mission flows from the enthroned Messiah.
- **Matthew 28:18–20** — The Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...” Acts 1:8 is the Lukan parallel, with the same structure (authority → commission → scope) and the same universal horizon (“to the end of the earth”). The church’s Acts 1 posture is the fulfillment of what Matthew 28 commanded.
- **John 16:7–15** — Jesus’ promise of the Spirit as Counselor, who will guide into all truth and glorify Christ. Acts 1’s waiting community is poised exactly at the threshold of this promise. The Spirit they are waiting for is not an abstract power but the personal agent who will make the witness effective.

Aim: To show that Christ has already settled every question about the church’s identity, mission, and resources — and to call the reader to stop gazing at what is not their business and start witnessing in the Spirit’s power.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
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Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Luke addresses Theophilus; summarizes the first volume (Gospel of Luke); notes Jesus' post-resurrection instruction to the apostles through the Holy Spirit before his ascension.	"All that Jesus began to do and teach" — the Gospel is the first act; Acts is the continuation. The Spirit's role in Jesus' own teaching noted.
3	Jesus presents himself alive with many proofs over forty days; teaches about the kingdom of God.	"Many proofs" — the resurrection is an evidentiary claim, not a faith-leap in the dark. Forty days echoes Moses and Elijah.
4–5	Jesus commands them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promised Holy Spirit; contrasts John's baptism with Spirit-baptism soon to come.	"What you heard from me" — the Spirit promise is Jesus' own word (cf. John 14–16). "Not many days from now" — urgency without date-setting.
6	The disciples ask: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"	The question reflects residual nationalist expectation. Not rebuked for the expectation but redirected from the timing and category.
7	Jesus: "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."	The Father's sovereign calendar is not the disciples' business. This is a boundary, not a rebuke.
8	"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."	The hinge verse of Acts 1 and the structural outline of the entire book. "But" — contrast with v. 7. Power, witnesses, geographic scope: Spirit → testimony → world.
9	Jesus is lifted up; a cloud takes him out of their sight.	Bodily, physical ascension. Cloud = divine presence/glory (Exodus, Sinai, Transfiguration). He does not dissolve — he is

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10–11	Two men in white robes appear; rebuke the upward gaze; announce Jesus will return in the same way.	received. “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” — the question is a commission. The return promise is not a distraction from mission but its horizon.
12–14	Return to Jerusalem (Olivet ~1 mile away); the Eleven named; gathered in the upper room with the women, Mary, and Jesus’ brothers; devoted to prayer with one accord.	The brothers’ presence is significant — they were previously unbelieving (John 7:5); the resurrection has converted them. “With one accord” and “devoted to prayer” describe the church’s pre-mission posture.
15–17	Peter stands among ~120; identifies Judas’ betrayal as fulfillment of Scripture (“the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas”).	Peter’s leadership role is already operative. Scripture governs interpretation of events — even Judas’ fall.
18–19	Parenthetical description of Judas’ death and the naming of the field.	Luke’s editorial note for Theophilus, not part of Peter’s speech. “Akeldama” = Field of Blood.
20	Peter cites Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8: “Let his office another take.”	Both psalms are lament psalms about the wicked — Peter reads them typologically/prophetically as applicable to Judas.
21–22	Qualifications for a replacement apostle: must have accompanied Jesus from John’s baptism to the ascension; must be a witness of the resurrection.	Apostolic witness requires both historical companionship and resurrection testimony. This is a historically bounded, unrepeatable office.
23–26	Two candidates: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias; prayer for divine discernment; lots cast;	Prayer addresses the Lord (“You, Lord, who know the hearts of all”) — sovereignty and human decision

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	Matthias numbered with the Eleven.	together. Matthias is affirmed without qualification.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Prologue: Continuation, Command, and Promise
2	6–8	The Reorientation: From Calendars to Commission
3	9–11	The Ascension: The Lord Enthroned, the Church Sent
4	12–14	The Gathering: Unified Prayer as the Church’s Pre-Mission Posture
5	15–26	The Preparation: Scripture, Leadership, and Reconstituted Witness

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ commissions, reorients, and gathers His church before the Spirit’s arrival.

Primary Claim: The church does not need more information about the times and seasons — it needs to stop looking at the sky and start bearing witness; Christ has already given everything required for the mission, and the Spirit is coming to empower it.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — The commission is already issued; the only question is whether you will obey it. Every generation of believers re-asks the disciples’ question in some form: *When will things be set right? When will Christ return? When will the church finally have the conditions it needs to thrive?* Acts 1 makes clear that Christ has not left His church in suspense about its assignment. The times and seasons belong to the Father; the mission belongs to you. The knowledge that the commission is already issued — fully, finally, with all authority — means there is nothing left to wait for except the Spirit’s empowerment,

which has already been given. Reframe your relationship to the future: stop calculating and start obeying.

2. [Affections/Worship] — The ascension is not a loss to grieve but a triumph to worship. The disciples stood staring upward — an instinctively understandable response to watching Jesus disappear. But the ascension is not an abandonment; it is an enthronement. The cloud that received Jesus is the same cloud that filled the tabernacle and covered Sinai — divine glory, not obscurity. The Jesus who ascended is now seated at the Father's right hand, ruling all things, having secured all authority. The right response to the ascension is not anxious upward gazing but prostrate worship followed by purposeful outward movement. Let the reality of the enthroned Christ — not your circumstances — govern the emotional register of your life and ministry.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Stop waiting for the right moment and gather with the church in prayer. The 120 did not use the ten days between the ascension and Pentecost to strategize, recruit, or develop their ministry plan. They prayed — “with one accord,” persistently, in community. This is not a model of passive waiting but of active, united, expectant prayer. The church's preparation for every fresh work of God follows the same pattern: not more programming, more resources, or more information, but more prayer. Identify where you have been substituting activity for intercession, and reverse it. Join with other believers in unified, unhurried prayer — because that is where the church always lives on the edge of what God is about to do.

4. [Mind/Belief] — The Spirit's power is the precondition for effective witness, not your effort. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be* my witnesses” (v. 8) — the sequence matters. The witnesses do not generate power through their witness; the Spirit generates witnesses through His power. This reframes the anxiety that surrounds evangelism and mission. The pressure is not on you to perform; the power belongs to the Spirit. This is not an excuse for passivity but a release from the crushing weight of self-generated ministry. The church that witnesses in the Spirit's power looks different from the church that witnesses in its own strength — both in what it does and in how it handles failure.

5. [Affections/Worship] — The reconstitution of the Twelve signals that God takes the integrity of His mission seriously enough to repair it. Judas' defection was catastrophic — not merely as a betrayal but as a structural fracture in the apostolic witness. Peter's move to replace him is not bureaucratic housekeeping; it is an act of faith that the mission God authorized must be carried forward with integrity. The selection of Matthias, grounded in Scripture and prayer, shows that God does not shrug at the damage sin does to His purposes — He repairs it. This should stir both gratitude and holy seriousness: gratitude that God repairs what sin breaks; seriousness about the weight of faithfulness in whatever role God has given you to occupy.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 1 establishes that the church's existence, mission, and resources are all initiated by Christ, not generated by human effort or historical development. The post-resurrection appearances demonstrate that Jesus' resurrection is evidentiary — Luke insists on “many proofs,” establishing the resurrection as a public, historically verifiable claim. The ascension establishes Christ's present lordship: he does not remain with the disciples as a teacher but takes His throne, from which He will send the Spirit and to which He will return. The Spirit-baptism promise (v. 5) frames the entire Pentecost event as Christ's own gift, not a spontaneous phenomenon. And the reconstitution of the Twelve demonstrates that the apostolic witness — grounded in historical eyewitness testimony from John's baptism to the ascension — is the irreplaceable foundation of the church's message. Acts 1 is the doctrine of the church before the church exists.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 1 displays the sovereignty of God over both the mission and its setbacks with particular clarity. The Father holds the times and seasons by His own authority (v. 7); the Spirit is not an autonomous force but Christ's promised gift; Scripture has already spoken to Judas' defection before anyone asks what to do about it. The passage resists every form of Pelagianism in ecclesiology: the church does not launch itself, power itself, or reconstitute itself by human initiative — it waits for what God has promised, prays under God's authority, and acts on God's Word. The replacement of Matthias is a small but striking illustration of the Reformed conviction that God's sovereign purposes are not derailed by human sin — not because sin is minimized (Judas' fall is treated with full seriousness) but because Scripture already addressed it and God's commission remains intact. The ascension grounds the Reformed understanding of Christ's heavenly intercession and present reign — the church operates not in the absence of its Lord but under the active rule of the enthroned King.

Main Takeaway

The risen Christ has already told the church everything it needs to know: the mission is worldwide witness, the power is the Spirit's, and the timetable belongs to the Father. Stop staring at the sky. Stop calculating what is not yours to know. Go back to Jerusalem — back to the gathered, praying community — and get ready to be a witness. That is the whole assignment, and it is enough.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Acts 1:8 as a slogan rather than a structure.** “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth” is not merely an inspirational phrase — it is the geographic and theological outline of the entire book of Acts. Preachers who quote it without unpacking its sequential, expansive logic miss the verse’s function: it is the mission mandate *and* the narrative map. Exposition should show that Acts 1:8 is a promise with a shape, not just a horizon.
- **Turning the disciples’ question (v. 6) into a rebuke of interest in eschatology.** Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for caring about the kingdom’s restoration — He redirects them from speculation about the *when* to faithfulness in the *what*. Preachers who use this passage to dismiss eschatological interest overcorrect. The rebuke is about paralysis and misdirection, not curiosity. Maintain the distinction.
- **Psychologizing the angels’ question as gentle encouragement rather than sharp commission.** “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” (v. 11) is not pastoral comfort for the grieving disciples — it is a missional reproof. The angels are not saying “It’s okay, He’ll be back.” They are saying “Stop. Turn around. You have work to do.” The edge of the passage must be preserved or its force is lost.
- **Using the Matthias narrative to support any and every leadership selection process.** The lots are specific to the pre-Pentecostal period; the apostolic office is historically bounded (the candidate must have accompanied Jesus from John’s baptism to the ascension — a qualification no one can meet today). This passage grounds the *authority and integrity* of apostolic witness; it does not establish a general model for church governance or elder selection. Distinguish what is normative (Scripture-grounded discernment, prayer, community process) from what is unrepeatable (the apostolic office itself).
- **Treating the 120 in prayer (vv. 12–14) as passive waiting rather than active preparation.** The temptation in preaching this section is to romanticize the waiting period. But the 120 are not hiding or resting — they are *devoted* to prayer (“with one accord,” persistently). The word *proskarterountes* (v. 14) means to continue steadfastly, to be constantly diligent. This is active, sustained intercession — not a spiritual intermission between the ascension and Pentecost. Preach the discipline of it.
- **Missing the brothers of Jesus (v. 14) as a quiet resurrection apologetic.** James and the other brothers of Jesus are present and praying — men who did not believe in him during his ministry (John 7:5). Their presence in the upper room is silent testimony that the resurrection happened and that it converted those closest to him who had previously rejected him. This detail rewards brief notice and should not be passed over as background color.