

WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT

The Cure For Spiritual Anemia

Acts 1:6-11 2:1-4 4:31-33

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Did I ever tell you about the first time someone responded to the altar call during one of my sermons? I was all of 16 years old, preaching in my home church, Maple Grove Baptist Church. I was preaching because it was in me and I couldn't help it. It had to come out. Lo and behold, when I gave the invitation at the end of the sermon, Mildred Rainey, one of the finest, most humble women in the church walked the aisle in rededication of her life. Now it happened that as she was walking out of her pew, she tripped on the cord of the wall clock, and the clock came crashing down. That's a real mood killer! (I've always wanted to say that the first time someone came forward during one of my sermons, time stood still!). But the point is, I was shocked. I was preaching because the Spirit was in me and I couldn't help it.

I sense that in the Book of Acts, those early believers simply couldn't help it. There is simply no understanding the New Testament without looking at the Book of Acts and the role of the Holy Spirit. Someone has said that this book of the Bible could be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit," and that one way to think of the Holy Spirit is that he is an extension of the Risen Christ's personality in our world.

Acts was written by Luke and is really volume two of a two-part set (sort of like "Star Trek, The Next Generation," or the "Despicable Me" movies, parts one and two). Acts takes up where Luke 24 left off--with the Risen Christ--and goes all the way to Paul's arrival in Rome to share the Gospel, some 35 years later.

Now look at with me at Acts 4:31-33 again. Here are some themes I pick up which run throughout the Acts storyline. **1. Total commitment.** Eugene Peterson says we need the Book of Acts to remind us that our faith is not a spectator sport! We are engaged! Totally sold out! These believers were all in! Because they couldn't help it. **2. Sacrificial love,** not just for their own, but for all needy and broken. They shared, because they couldn't help it.

3. Courageous, contagious faith-sharing. Did you notice a pattern in all three scriptures I read this morning? It is power--the capacity, inner drive, the motivation to do what they would not/could not do on their own. In other words, they couldn't help it! In fact, the word used in 4:33 for "giving testimony" is a word that comes from agriculture, yielding a harvest. They couldn't help sharing. It was the natural fruit of their lives. They can't help it.

4. Patience and joy in the face of persecution and suffering. Later, in Acts 5, the early believers were beaten for sharing the Gospel and rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for

Jesus (v. 41). Much farther into this book, in 23:11, Paul is about to go through one of the darkest times of his life in terms of suffering. The verse says, "That night the Lord stood near him and said, 'Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.'" And let me just say to you, if you haven't had that kind of a night, if you live long enough, you will ...when you feel helpless, all alone and afraid. And suddenly, you hear the Lord say to you, "Courage! I'm not done with you! I'm leading...let me!" Courage, FBC JC! Courage, dear friend!

And by the way, later in that 23rd chapter of Acts, a plot is hatched to assassinate Paul. The authorities discover the plan and escort him out late at night, surrounded by a Roman garrison. Sometime later, when he is in prison, no doubt reflecting on that night, he writes, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [mount a garrison around] your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

Alan Kreider has written that early Christianity grew at an explosive rate--40% per decade for three centuries. And all of that in a hostile environment! And here's the kicker. Those early believers did little preaching (it was illegal and dangerous). It was mostly their lives that did the evangelism: caring for the poor, integrity in the face of persecution, economic sharing, sacrificial love [*Center Church* by Tim Keller, pp. 284-285]. These things attracted people like magnets. In a way, Luke is saying that the Risen Christ is still walking earth as he was in Luke's Gospel--just doing so in and through believers! And guess why they're sharing. Because they can't help it.

So here's the question. Do we look like these believers? Or is there among us an anemia, a lack of capacity to carry the oxygen of the Holy Spirit through the Body of Christ? I want to recall us this morning to these four things: total commitment, sacrificial love, courageous, contagious faith-sharing and patience and joy in the face of persecution and suffering. We can do this! Because with the Holy Spirit, we just can't help it!