

Pray First, Evangelism Happens

By Kie Bowman

Jesus said, “Wait.” Admittedly, that advice is counterintuitive. After all, didn’t Jesus say we should go into all the world? Yes, Jesus said, “go” (Matthew 28:19). But before we “go,” Jesus said we should “stop” (Luke 24:49).

The waiting period Jesus referred to is mentioned in the last chapter of Luke and similarly in the first chapter of Acts. The two passages are both written by Luke and clearly reflect the same idea.

“And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

“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.’” (Acts 1:4-5)

It’s clear that Jesus wanted His followers to experience the empowering of the Holy Spirit prior to any evangelistic outreach. In many ways, the Apostles, after the resurrection, were the most prepared, knowledgeable, and eager group of people who have ever existed to do mission work. They had first-hand personal knowledge of everything Jesus had done and said during His earthly ministry.

In addition, they were eyewitnesses of the cross and the resurrection. They must have been eager to tell their story, but Jesus said they weren’t ready. They needed the power of

the Holy Spirit. So, He told them to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Spirit.

In these two separate passages, Luke uses two completely different words to describe the waiting process. In Luke's gospel, the word "stay" is used nearly 50 times in the Greek New Testament. It means to sit down or be set in a place. The verb includes the idea of permanence as opposed to momentarily stopping or being set down briefly.

In Acts, however, Luke uses a different word, translated as "wait" (1:4). The word is found only once in the Greek New Testament. It literally means to circle around a place—almost like the idea of hovering. We might even paraphrase it, in a colloquial manner of speaking, as "to hang around."

The most important question related to these two words is this—how did the Apostles interpret Jesus' instructions when He told them to stay or wait? How did they imagine "waiting"? How did they wait? They prayed.

In Luke's gospel, we're told they went to the Temple "continually" to praise God (Luke 24:52). In Acts, we find them praying in the large upper room of a home (Acts 1:14). For ten days, therefore, from the Ascension of Jesus until Pentecost, we find the followers of Christ doing nothing but splitting their time between praising God publicly at the Temple and praying privately together in the upper room. In answer to their non-stop prayer meetings, God fulfilled the promise of Jesus and poured out the Holy Spirit onto the praying church.

The Acts Blueprint

Within minutes after the Spirit filled them, the disciples were out of the house, into the street, and preaching the first sermon of the Church! The result was phenomenal. That day 3,000 people gave their lives to Christ and were baptized

(Acts 2:41).

Have you ever wondered how many people were saved between the Resurrection and Pentecost? None are recorded. Think about that. The Apostles spent about three years with Jesus and apparently did not reproduce themselves even one time in 50 days, with all of the knowledge, information, and personal experience available to them. But after the 10-day prayer meeting and the coming of the Spirit, 3,000 were saved and baptized. Does that suggest anything to us? It should.

Immediately after the baptism of 3,000 people, the church organized itself into a teaching, loving, praying community (Acts 2:42). When Luke summarized those idyllic early days, he said they were, *"praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved"* (Acts 2:47). They prayed, and people were saved. It's a pattern Luke will emphasize throughout the book of Acts.

Later when the church was threatened for preaching in Jesus' name, they met again for prayer, and the result of their prayer meeting was bold evangelism (Acts 4:31). When the Church was handicapped by internal divisions, the Apostles encouraged others to address the divisions while they recommitted themselves to prayer and ministering the Word (Acts 6:4). As a result, the ministry of evangelism increased, and even Jewish priests came to Christ in record numbers (Acts 6:7).

When Peter went to Joppa, known today as Tel-Aviv, he prayed for a dead woman who came back to life. The result was an evangelistic flurry in the city, and "many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:40-42).

Then, years later, in the city of Antioch, now in modern-day Turkey, a group of five leaders gathered for a prayer meeting. While they were fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit called

Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to evangelize the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-5). This became the biggest of all evangelistic enterprises because it took the gospel outside of a small, exclusive focus on Jews and out to the rest of the world.

What have we noticed in this overview of evangelism in the book of Acts? For one thing, prayer preceded every evangelistic outreach mentioned. Fortunately for us, the Acts pattern of prayer and evangelistic success is not limited to the pages of the Bible. The pattern has proven true wherever people have prayed for more souls to turn to Christ.

For instance, in the area of today's financial district in lower Manhattan in New York City, near where the World Trade Center once stood, God worked a miracle more than 150 years ago. The Old North Dutch Church on Fulton Street was more than 100 years old and dying. Its once influential ministry had dwindled to a handful of the faithful. The area around the church had dramatically changed from residential to commercial. Other churches were relocating, but the leadership of the Old North Dutch Church decided to try something new to reach people. They hired a committed Christian businessman to reinvigorate the outreach of the old church.

Jeremiah Lanphier started in July and tried a number of things, including going door to door to speak to business leaders, encouraging hotels to send their guests to the nearby church on Sundays, and numerous other efforts without success. He finally felt so discouraged he decided to host a prayer meeting for the other businessmen in the area. He printed thousands of flyers advertising the noon event, which he handed out on the streets. On September 23, 1857, no one showed up until 12:30.

Eventually, that day, six men dropped by to pray. It was an inauspicious beginning, but what happened over the next few weeks was miraculous. The noon prayer meeting eventually started meeting every day, and more people started attending.

A financial crisis in New York City drove even more anxious businesspeople to the daily prayer meetings. Within three months, the prayer meetings had spread all over the city and were reaching 50,000 people.

Soon, prayer meetings sprang up all over the nation. It was a genuine move of God. Miraculously, 1 million people were saved in 18 months when the U.S. population was only 30 million. The Prayer Revival of 1857-1858 may be the largest evangelistic harvest per capita in U.S. history. How did it happen? The church recognized the need. They found the right leader, and he led prayer meetings, and God saved hundreds of thousands of people.

The Acts blueprint has repeatedly shown itself to be God's desired path for evangelistic harvest wherever it has been attempted. God's people pray, and more people get saved.

Here's a more recent example. One of the most amazing testimonies of the last 30 years in the Body of Christ has been the miracle of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Tuesday night prayer meeting, but it started in an awkward, normal, unimpressive way. The key to the growth of the prayer meeting and of the church was what followed. According to Pastor Cymbala, the little group of prayer warriors started seeing people on their prayer lists getting saved. A wayward son here, a disinterested husband there, and eventually, the miracles of salvation became too numerous to ignore. God's people prayed, and lost people got saved. The church grew to an attendance of more than 10,000 with conversion testimonies that have inspired the Body of Christ for decades.

The Acts blueprint worked in first-century Jerusalem, in 19th-century Manhattan, and in 20th-century Brooklyn. It works wherever it's tried. Unfortunately, we often don't step out in faith to try it. As F. B. Meyer once observed, "The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer but unoffered prayer."

Will you pray for more people to be saved? Will you pray evangelistic prayers?

Taken from *Evangelistic Prayer* (PrayerShop 2024) by Kie Bowman. You can pre-order this book now; copies will be available in late March.

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