

A Record Of Commitment

Acts is a book of change. It records a time of decision-making, a time to “obey now” or to reject the call of Jesus. It reveals the apostles’ continual quests for answers and their urgent pleas for men and women to respond to the drawing power of the grace of God. The reader is struck with the truth that the story of Jesus called for drastic and immediate changes.

This book tenders no middle ground—no safe haven for the one who delays a decision, no comfort for the doubter, no sympathy for the one who wants to try some middle-of-the-road solution. Each story tells of either firm commitment or rejection, sometimes even angry rejection that turned into persecution for the preacher. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ strong statement “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters” (Matthew 12:30).

THE COMMITMENT OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES

During the climax of Jesus’ life the apostles were weak, confused, vacillating, and sometimes even cowardly. At Jesus’ arrest in the garden, they all left Him and fled (Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50). Peter followed Him afar off (Mark 14:54; Luke 22:54), but then cursed and denied knowing Him (Luke 22:60). John, if he was the anonymous man mentioned in John 18:15, 16, was deeply concerned as he entered into the court of the high priest with Jesus, being known himself by the high priest. Later, he went outside and

brought Peter in with him. However, neither of them is mentioned as defending Jesus or objecting to Pilate’s decision concerning Jesus. They did not help to carry the cross, nor help to bury the body of Jesus (Luke 23:50–53)!

These same men later gave sterling and courageous witness to His resurrection, and they did so with great power (Acts 4:33). When persecuted, they prayed for boldness to continue to preach Jesus as the Christ, even immediately after being commanded not to do so (Acts 4:29). They were told not to speak any more in Jesus’ name (Acts 4:18), but they heeded Jesus more than they heeded the Jewish officials (Acts 4:19, 20; 5:28, 29).

These apostles continued to withstand mounting persecutions. Although they were arrested and put in jail, they continued preaching when the angel released them (Acts 5:18–20). Brought back before the Sanhedrin, they were questioned, rebuked, castigated, and finally beaten and whipped unlawfully (Acts 5:27–40). Even then, in the face of terrible public persecution by the highest Jews in the land, and with their backs streaming blood into the dusty streets of Jerusalem, the apostles returned to their fellow Christians, rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41)! In spite of life-threatening persecutions, these men, formerly so lamb-like, now became lions of courage and continued to preach daily at every opportunity they had (Acts 5:42).

The women were considerably different; for although they stayed in the background weeping for Jesus at His death, they showed far less emotional vacillation (Luke 23:27–31). They beautified the tomb of Jesus (Luke 23:55, 56) and went early on the first day of the week to the grave site (Matthew 28:1). These women, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna, and the “other Mary” (perhaps the mother of James) were the first to know that the tomb was empty (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1, 2; Luke 24:10).

These women were also loyally present among the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room on the occasion of the choice of Matthias as an apostle (Acts 1:14–26). It seems, therefore, that the women among the disciples of Jesus were always there, quietly supportive during His trials and crucifixion and gently caring in His death and entombment. They were staunchly committed after His resurrection and even held special ladies’ prayer meetings at the time of one of Peter’s imprisonments (Acts 12:12).

Joseph of Arimathea claimed the body of Jesus from the cross and buried it. His discipleship was quite unusual, since he was a member of the Sanhedrin (Luke 23:50). For “fear of the Jews,” he had kept his faith a secret (John 19:38). His public action of claiming the body of Jesus assured that his discipleship would no longer be kept a secret. Nicodemus assisted Joseph in the burial and provided the spices to anoint the body (John 19:39, 40). He also was a member of the Sanhedrin, a “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). Since both of these men boldly involved themselves in burying Jesus’ body, it can be assumed that their stature among the Sanhedrin and the Jewish community changed considerably after exhibiting their commitment to Jesus.

The 120 brethren, less than six weeks after the crucifixion, showed a staunch loyalty by continuing to meet together (Acts 1:15). Besides the apostles and the women, Jesus’ brothers also were present. Earlier, Mary’s other children had not believed in Jesus as the Messiah. They had derided Jesus for not going to the Feast of Tabernacles to prove His claims by performing miracles (John 7:1–5). One of these half-brothers, James, later became prominent in the church, presiding at the Jerusalem meeting about the problem of circumcision (Acts 15:13). He was also mentioned as a “pillar” in the church at Jerusalem

(Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12), and he was the inspired author of a New Testament letter (James 1:1).

From the time of Jesus’ arrest and trials to the Day of Pentecost, dramatic changes occurred. Previously, the disciples had wavered; later great fear (respect) for the Lord Jesus was upon all of them (Acts 2:43). The first Christians displayed unity of beliefs and practices; compassionate and caring love for one another; and a close bond of togetherness and fellowship in their worship (Acts 2:42–44). They met the needs of their fellow Christians in a sacrificial way rarely seen before or after (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32–35). Something had happened in their lives which resulted in a commitment resoundingly famous for all time.

THE COMMITMENT OF OTHERS

Let us look at many courageous people in Acts who committed their lives to Christ. Barnabus, a Levite, owned a field on the island of Cyprus; and when funds were needed among the early disciples, he sold the field and laid the money at the feet of the apostles to be distributed among the needy (Acts 4:36, 37). Later, he interceded for Saul of Tarsus among brethren who were fearful of him because he had been so prominent in terrible persecutions (Acts 9:26, 27). Barnabas evidently gave his life to preaching, for he was with Paul on the first journey (Acts 13:2). At the conclusion of that journey, he was with Paul in Jerusalem to discuss the problem of circumcision (Galatians 2:1); but he was carried away, along with Peter, in erroneous actions. As a result, Paul believed he should rebuke them (Galatians 2:13, 14). Barnabas continued as a prominent teacher and preacher in Antioch (Acts 15:35), also making other missionary journeys when he and Paul separated (Acts 15:39). He, too, was committed to Christ.

Stephen, a gentle giant of a preacher, was fiercely and valiantly committed to the Lord. He did not fear the dangerously stirred-up Jews; in losing his life, he was able to pray for his murderers (Acts 7:54–60).

Philip was one of the seven special servants who helped to correct the neglect of some Grecian widows among the disciples (Acts 6:1–5). He later left Jerusalem and entered the city of Samaria to preach in a great revival which resulted in many responses to the Lord (Acts 8:5,

6). Leaving that great work at the call of an angel, he found another great opportunity to teach the gospel when he joined an Ethiopian in his chariot and “preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:26–35). Next, he preached at Azotus and continued preaching through all the cities on his way to Caesarea (Acts 8:40). He is recorded as being at Caesarea years later, still an evangelist; and he had four virgin daughters who prophesied. He hosted Paul and his companions when they returned from Paul’s third missionary journey (Acts 21:8). His life had been committed to Christ.

Saul of Tarsus became one of the standout soldiers of the cross, intense in all that he did (Acts 9:27–29). Earlier, he had been just as intense as a persecutor of Christians (Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:21). His decision for commitment to Jesus as the Christ is one of the most outstanding events in early church history. What could have changed his mind but an unanswerable truth that Jesus was proven to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4)? Luke recorded that after the conversion of this persecutor, congregations in three provinces of Palestine had peace, being able to grow rapidly (Acts 9:31). Saul’s commitment to Jesus made a difference in the early church!

Dorcas, the “good-deeds” woman of Joppa, showed a quiet, dignified commitment in caring for others. She dedicated her caretaking abilities to serving the Lord in ways that left her name respected and admired by many (Acts 9:36–39). Her commitment to the Lord could be seen after her death in tangible results of her work and generosity.

Cornelius was such a good, moral man that few, even today, would dare to compare their moral character with his (Acts 10:1, 2, 22). He was the first Gentile to be converted to the Lord, and his conversion story is a landmark of what Jesus did to break down racial prejudices.

Sergius Paulus was a government leader, a proconsul in Paphos on the island of Cyprus. He committed to Christ when he saw Paul strike Elymas the magician temporarily blind for being deceitful and fraudulent in opposing Paul’s work (Acts 13:6–12).

Lydia was a businesswoman from Thyatira, visiting in Philippi, who met Paul at a place of worship. Already a worshiper of God, she quickly responded to the truth and then prevailed upon

Paul and his companions to accept her hospitality (Acts 16:13–15). Her generosity and hospitality were evidences of her commitment.

The jailer in Philippi turned his life around, leading his whole family to become Christians (Acts 16:27–34). His immediate concern and care for his beaten prisoners, Paul and Silas, showed his repentance. He even brought them into his personal dwelling, caring for them and feeding them.

Crispus, a Jewish ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, joined Paul in resisting the blasphemy of his fellow Jews. He stood somewhat alone at first in his decision to be baptized into Christ, but Luke implied that his conversion to Christ stimulated many of the other Corinthians to believe and be baptized (Acts 18:8). One must remember how prominent such a ruler of a synagogue would be; his commitment to Christ would have had shattering effects throughout the entire Jewish community in Corinth.

Acts also tells of a teacher named Apollos who needed further instruction. Converted under the teaching of John the Baptist, he had begun teaching the truth. After the establishment of the church, the teaching of John the Baptist was no longer accurate, because Jesus had died and the kingdom—the church of the Lord—had begun its reign upon the earth (Acts 18:24, 25). Apollos’ work in Ephesus had left a dozen men baptized with John’s baptism, a baptism no longer valid. Paul immersed those men into Christ, administering to them the baptism Christ commanded.¹ Their first immersion, being invalid and out-of-date, had done nothing spiritually for them. Paul evidently was surprised to find disciples of Jesus of any sort in Ephesus, for he was usually the first to arrive in any city with the gospel. When he learned that they were unacquainted with the Holy Spirit, he investigated their baptism (Acts 19:1–7). He corrected the twelve men, baptizing them accurately and bringing the new birth into their lives.

¹Apollos’ own baptism evidently was valid, since he had been baptized during the time when John’s baptism was to be used. The fact that in the same context Luke specified that the twelve disciples were rebaptized while omitting any mention that Apollos was rebaptized leads one to conclude that those baptized with John’s baptism at the proper time did not need rebaptism on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

When Priscilla and Aquila became acquainted with Apollos, they found him still teaching the outdated doctrine of John's baptism. They took him aside privately and instructed him more accurately, and he updated his doctrine immediately. He continued as a valuable and powerful preacher for the Lord (Acts 18:26–28).

Apollos is a prime example of commitment. He was willing to change his teaching about baptism when he was confronted with his error. Paul later reminded the Christians in Ephesus that they had been saved "by grace" (Ephesians 2:8, 9); yet the incident in Ephesus supports the conclusion that "salvation by grace" includes checking on one's baptism, even to the point of a rebaptism. It also includes changing the doctrine one teaches when the truth presented reveals error in previously held concepts.

Priscilla and Aquila are found again and again in the work of the Lord. They were first mentioned with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1–3). Later, they traveled with Paul and worked for the Lord in Ephesus (Acts 18:18, 26). While there, they joined Paul in greeting their former acquaintances (1 Corinthians 16:19). Sometime afterward, they worked in Rome (Romans 16:3). Still later, most likely after Paul's first imprisonment for two years in Rome (Acts 28:30, 31), this godly couple was back in Ephesus working with Timothy (2 Timothy 4:19). Since 2 Timothy most likely was written after Paul's Roman imprisonment, it is assumed that the last glimpse of Aquila and Priscilla in the New Testament is at Ephesus. Their travels and involvements with several churches left a trail of great commitment to the work of the Lord.

Onesiphorus was an intriguing person who visited Paul while he was in jail in Rome. Paul

said that Onesiphorus had "refreshed" him during this visit, when so many others had turned away from him (2 Timothy 1:15, 16). Onesiphorus was able to encourage Paul, while most of the time it seems that Paul visited among brethren and did the encouraging. Onesiphorus had to search for Paul to find him, and he was not ashamed of Paul's being in jail ("my chains"). Further, he was well known for his service for the Lord in Ephesus (2 Timothy 1:17, 18). Here was another case of courageous commitment.

CONCLUSION

Acts is a book about *courage and commitment*, not compromise and convenience! It is a book of *crusading for Christ*; it is a stirring account of *commitment to a cause*. Though costly, sometimes even to the giving of one's life, faithful following of Jesus is demonstrated fully in this book. No sacrifice was too great for the disciples when they considered the sacrifices already made by the Father and His Son. Each case of conversion in Acts was a costly commitment. Jesus had said that commitment to Him would first take self-denial (Matthew 16:24).

Jesus accepts no less than our best. Half-and-half Christianity is insufficient. A heart cannot be divided with devotion partly to Christ and partly to the world. Friendship with the world is "hostility toward God" (James 4:4). The only way to follow Jesus is to do so wholeheartedly, 100 percent, being absolutely and totally given to His service. The great and first commandment is still to love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matthew 22:37, 38). ♦

"A Christian shows what he is by what he does with what he has."

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