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The Book of Acts and Evangelism in Argentina

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abstract

This article looks at platforms for the Gospel in the book of Acts and how they apply to evangelism in Argentina. A general overview of evangelism in Acts is discussed, and then specific platforms are presented. Those include the market place in Athens, the place of prayer in Philippi, and the many locations where the Gospel was presented in synagogues. An exposition of Acts 13 is included that helps explain why synagogues were natural platforms. The applications to Argentina include visiting those with a connection to a church. One example is visiting the parents of adolescents who attend church activities.

evangelism in the book of acts

Wanting to share the Good News in Argentina has been a priority during my career, as would be expected from an evangelical foreign missionary. I wanted to evangelize, but I did not want to be rude or discourteous. In some situations, I did not present the Gospel because it did not seem to be the time or the place. Later I would feel a tinge of guilt for not having spoken up. Furthermore, I found myself increasingly intrigued by the evangelistic practices in the book of Acts. The

evangelistic encounters seemed to be very natural, never forced nor ill mannered. I have also wanted to discover how the practices of the early Christians could be adapted to evangelism in Argentina. What especially caught my attention were the circumstances surrounding the presentation of the Gospel in Acts. With whom did the Christians share the Gospel? Why did they share the Gospel at that particular moment in that particular place? In many cases, those questions are not answered (Acts 4:31; 8:4; 14:6–7, 21, 25), but there are others where more information is presented.

One instance for example, an angel told Christians to preach the Gospel (Acts 5:17–21). The Holy Spirit guided the Apostle Paul to share the Good News in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:19–20, 29, 34–39). An angel and the Holy Spirit were involved in telling Philip where to go and with whom he should speak (Acts 8:26–31). The Lord Jesus told Ananias to go speak to Saul (Acts 9:10–18). The Lord God spoke to the Apostle Paul in a vision so that he would preach the Gospel in Macedonia (Acts 16:6–7, 9). Still other opportunities presented themselves as a result of miracles. Crowds gathered to witness what happened when paralytics were healed (Acts 3:3–8, 11–12, 15, 19; 8:5–7; 14:8–11, 14–15). The believers would then preach the Gospel to the curiosity seekers who had gathered.

One supposes that most Christians would share the Gospel if God audibly told them to do so or if a crowd gathered as a result of a miracle performed in the name of Jesus. It seems rather obvious why the Christians evangelized in those particular moments and places with the people who were present. We would probably be surprised if a believer, in Argentina or elsewhere, were to remain silent in the face of such an opportunity. These types of cases do not require any explanation.

Other situations occurred, however, when the early Christians took advantage of natural platforms in order to share the Good News. Those examples are what really caught my eye as I thought about evangelism in Argentina. I find it surprising how many times believers seemed to just walk through wide open doors. What kinds of natural platforms are mentioned in Acts?

At times, Christians were before the authorities and had to defend themselves (Acts 5:27–32; 25:26–26:2, 22–23). However, it is very unlikely in twenty-first century Argentina that Christians would be arrested and need to present the Gospel as their defense before the authorities. That application on that score would be very limited. Other platforms seem far more relevant to contemporary evangelism.

For instance in Philippi, Paul and his companions found a place of prayer on the Sabbath Day (Acts 16:13–14) and spoke to the women assembled there. One would expect that a place of prayer would lend itself to a discussion of spiritual

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matters, especially when Jews came upon a Jewish prayer meeting. Likely, there would be an immediate affinity and willingness to interact. The result was that Lydia responded to the message. In Athens, Paul “preached the Good News about Jesus and the Resurrection” in the market place (Acts 17:17–21). This market place in Athens was an appropriate platform because the Athenians spent all their time discussing new ideas. They were especially interested in what Paul said because his beliefs were not only new, but also strange to their way of thinking.

Acts 17:17 mentions another place that was a ready platform for the Gospel—the synagogue. It is indeed striking how often Acts mentions synagogues as places where the Good News was presented. The variety of locations where such preaching occurred is equally striking. For example, soon after his conversion, Saul, later named the Apostle Paul, preached that Jesus was the Son of God in the synagogues of Damascus of Syria (Acts 9:19–20). Saul and Barnabas proclaimed the Word of God in the synagogues of the isle of Cyprus (Acts 13:2–5). In Iconium, part of present day Turkey, Paul and Barnabas preached the Gospel so effectively in the synagogue that a number of Jews and Gentiles believed (Acts 14:1). In Thessalonica of Macedonia, Paul preached the message of Christ’s death and resurrection in the synagogue (Acts 17:1–3). Fairly nearby in Berea, the Gospel was preached in the synagogue with the result that Jews and Greeks were converted (Acts 17:10–12). Not far from Athens, Paul would go to the synagogue in Corinth, part of modern day Greece, to discuss the Gospel with Jews and Greeks on the Sabbath, trying to convince them of its truth (Acts 18:1–4). After leaving Priscilla and Aquila, Paul went to the synagogue to share the Good News with the Jews in the synagogue of Ephesus, on the western side of modern day Turkey (Acts 18:18–19). He evangelized in the synagogue there for three months (Acts 19:1, 8). Apollos also taught about Jesus at the synagogue in Ephesus (Acts 18:24–26).

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The Gospel was preached in the synagogues of a number of different places. Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, Macedonia, and Greece are all given as examples. The question arises as to why the early Christians devoted so much effort to presenting Christ in so many synagogues. What made the synagogue such an effective platform? One instance is given to further explain about what went on when the believers would go to a synagogue.

Acts 13:13–16 relates how Paul and his companions arrived at Pisidian Antioch, also in modern day Turkey. On the Sabbath Day, they went to the synagogue and listened as the Law was read. After the reading of the Law, the synagogue rulers asked them if they had a word of encouragement to share. Paul then began to speak in response to that invitation. It is very clear that his word of encouragement was the Gospel (Acts 13:27–30, 38–39).

Wesley believes that anyone was allowed to share after the reading of the Law. One would wonder about that explanation because the synagogue rulers specifically asked Paul and his companions to address the congregation. John Gill, on the other hand, claims that only learned teachers were allowed to speak in the synagogue (898). He is left to speculate as to why the Christians were invited to speak because they were obviously strangers. Albert Barns' position is that Paul and his group were Jews who were unknown and had come from far away. Therefore, the rulers wanted to give them the opportunity to say something encouraging as special visitors. Barns' position seems like the one that most coincides with the wording of Acts 13:15. It also coincides with experiences in other cultures. Years ago in Northern Argentina, it was the custom to allow first-time visitors to greet the church. Years ago in the United States, I once attended a church far from home and on the spot was invited to preach when I identified myself as a missionary appointee. In other words, those who visit from some distance away are special guests who may have something encouraging to share with those of like faith. That would seem to explain why Paul was given the opportunity to speak.

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Acts 13 is the text that explains most about what happened in the synagogue. The Jewish Christians, who had come from outside the immediate area, were considered special guests and given the opportunity to address the congregation if they could be of encouragement. Obviously that was a platform to share the Gospel! That would explain why the synagogue is repeatedly mentioned as the place where the Good News was shared.

Thinking about the place of prayer, the market place in Athens, and the synagogue in this light caused me to reflect on the evangelistic task. For example, as far as we know, the Jewish Christians walked by other lost people on the way to the synagogue and did not present the Gospel to them. No implication is given that they felt guilty for not doing so. The early believers simply took advantage of the most obvious open doors available to them.

evangelism in argentina

I began to ask myself what were the obvious platforms for the Gospel in Argentina? It took me quite a while to think of anything! Little by little, however, ideas came to mind. The first possibility that occurred to me was the parents of adolescents at the church we normally attended. Most of the young people were

from non-Christian families, but they were also relatives of church members. I spoke to the pastor about visiting the parents of the adolescents. Though hesitant at first, he finally agreed with the idea and accompanied me during the visits. Our approach was to say, “We are very glad your child attends our church. Out of respect for you as the parents, we would like to explain what we believe and teach your child. Would that be okay?”

Other groups caught my attention. For example, there were wives whose husbands did not attend church. We would visit them in their homes, as well. What we said was very similar to our approach to the parents of the adolescents. We would say, “Out of respect for you as the head of the household, we would like to share what we believe and teach when your wife attends worship services. Would that be all right with you?” Finally, there were those who visited church. Again, our approach was very similar to that used with the parents and husbands: “We are very glad that you attended our church. We would really like you to know what we believe. Are you free so we can explain our beliefs more fully?”

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Another experience I had was in a neighborhood where I was helping with a new church plant. Several believers lived in that neighborhood, and I would accompany them to visit neighbors. Being with someone from the neighborhood seemed to make the neighbors feel confident that I was trustworthy. As in the situations already mentioned, we would ask the people we visited if they wanted to hear the Gospel. They would always say yes.

Another platform I noticed was taxi drivers. I do not own a car in Argentina, and in some situations, I was carrying money, a credit card, or something rather important. Since robberies are less likely in a taxi than in a bus, I would often take a taxi when I had something of value. If the driver was not listening to the radio, then I would ask, “I would like to share with you about the Lord Jesus Christ. Would you like to hear about Him?” Nearly always he would say yes.

A few times the drivers said no. When that happened I would say, “Oh, why not?” The answers I got revealed a lot about their lives. One time the driver told me he did not believe in love. I asked if he believed that his mother loved him, and he said he didn’t know. I was very surprised by that answer and asked, “How could you not know?” He said he never knew his mother. As long as he could remember, he had always lived on the street. I then asked him where he slept at night as a little boy. He said wherever he could find a place to lie down. That man’s story opened my eyes to a side of life that I knew very little about. Aside learning interesting things about their lives, when drivers said no, we usually wound up talking about the Gospel anyway as a result of their answers to my question, “Why not?” One

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started to explain about his experiences and did listen to elements of the Gospel that I thought appropriate to point out. When I reached my destination he said, “It’s too bad we can’t talk longer.” This was a person who at first said he did not want to hear about Jesus!

The results were that I was able to share the Gospel more often, and more people made professions of faith than at any other time during my missionary career. The reason seems to be, first of all, because we crossed the natural bridges and used the platforms that were available. We had a good reason to knock on the door of parents of adolescents, husbands of church members, and visitors to the church. A connection existed between them and us. Another connection was with the believers’ neighbors in the church plant neighborhood. I was with someone the neighbors knew and trusted.

Another factor that seemed to elicit a favorable response, including with the taxi drivers, was to ask if someone wanted to hear about Jesus. When I was in seminary, I heard about that approach. The brother who shared it, and unfortunately I do not remember his name, said a no is as good as a yes. If someone says no, the Christian can ask, “Why not?” The explanation for the negative response often opens the door to share at least elements of the Gospel.

I felt that asking permission to share the Good News honestly made people feel respected. They immediately had the impression that I was not going to be rude or discourteous. Going out of my way to make sure unbelievers did not feel imposed upon seemed to be very effective in Argentina. Of course, there are many people with whom I do not share the Gospel. Like the early Christians walking to the synagogue, I walk by people all the time with whom I have no connection, and I say nothing to them. I need not feel guilty about that. Like the Apostle Paul in the synagogue, I must take advantage of the platforms I do have.

summary

Christians in the book of Acts used the natural platforms they had to share the Gospel. While there are many Gospel presentations which are not detailed in Acts, there are also many situations where the believers obviously just walked through open doors. There is no indication of guilt when the Good News was not presented because of the lack of an open door. Looking for platforms for the Gospel in Argentina gave me many more opportunities to share the Gospel with much better results. My hope is that this article will help Christians feel better about sharing the Gospel and do so more often.

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