

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DISCIPLES PREPARED FOR AND CALLED TO WITNESS

(Acts 1:1-8)

The shout that rang out of the darkness of Calvary, “It is finished,” resounds through the centuries to tell of the completed atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. The declaration, “**Jesus began both to do and teach**” (1:1), as it appears in the opening sentence of The Acts, impresses upon us the great message that Christ in saving a lost world had but begun His work. There is no intimation that Jesus “began” in the sense that other great thinkers were to complete plans, discover new truths, or perfect an incomplete beginning; but rather that he was to continue to do, through his disciples, by His Spirit, that which he had initiated, designed and exhorted them to fulfill.

Luke, who is evidently the writer of The Acts, had told in the Gospel which bears his name of the work of Christ on earth before His ascension. The record in The Acts continues the work of Jesus, by his Spirit, through His disciples, after His ascension. Luke tells of the supernatural birth of Christ. He speaks of the supernatural ascension twice, first in the Gospel and again in The Acts. He emphasizes the supernatural power bestowed upon the church shortly after His ascension. He records the marvelous results of the bestowal of Christ’s power by opening to our vision glimpses of the church during the first generation of men who were living after the ascension.

The Acts is the only authentic history of the first generation of the Christian Church. Its record is supplemented to some extent by statements in the Epistles. It does not pretend to be a complete record of the work of the Apostles during that period which it covers. It tells us more of Peter and Paul than of any others. John is mentioned near the first of the Book as he worked along with Peter. Other important leaders in the church, as Philip, Stephen, James, Barnabas, Mark, Silas and Timothy, are spoken of briefly. Many other prominent disciples, prophets and missionaries are named.

THE TITLE

The title by which the Book has been known, “*The Acts of the Apostles,*” is an enlargement upon the actual title which is, “*Acts of Apostles,*” or “*The Acts.*”

As it tells us merely of some of the acts of some of the apostles, we may rather think of it as “The Acts of Jesus,” which he had begun on earth to do and which he continued to do through his apostles and disciples. Prominent workers in the early church are mentioned. In the midst of their work the account suddenly turns to others and perhaps we hear nothing more of them. This striking manner of dealing with men makes evident the fact that the Acts is not written primarily to record the acts of the apostles, but rather the work of our Lord as he began to use men, and continues to use them in the work of his church.

This book tells us enough about three or four of the Apostles that we may know how they worked and the results of their testimony, and that we may have some indication of what others probably did in the service of their Lord. It tells us enough that we may know the power and comfort which the Holy Spirit can give to His disciples; that the church is actually founded upon The Rock and nothing can prevail against it; that the progress of the church does not depend upon any man or group of men, and that Christ has a definite plan for the organization and promotion of the work of the church. Volumes might have been written and yet the story of the early church would not have been complete. The history of the period covered in The Acts during one generation furnishes an example for all following generations.

We have the same problems, the same trials, the same skepticism, the same willingness on the part of some to accept the Gospel and give their lives for him whom they have learned to love, and the same bitter opposition on the part of many who oppose its progress.

THE ONE ADDRESSED

The Book is addressed to Theophilus. The name means, *lover of God*. Nothing is known of Theophilus except that the Gospel of Luke is also addressed to him “**It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus**” (Luke 1:3).

He was evidently, what his name indicates, a lover of God. We have sufficient reason for this conclusion from the fact that Luke addresses two books to him, and also that he speaks of him as “most excellent” or most noble. Inasmuch as the Greek letters of the New Testament were all capitalized it is possible that *Theophilus*, which we translate as a proper name, Theophilus, was not a proper name, but directed to all lovers of God. Although, it is probably addressed to a single individual, according to the usual interpretation, it is intended as a message to all lovers of God.

THE AUTHOR

That the writer of The Acts was Luke seems evident. He had written a former book to the same person and on the same general subject. It was the unanimous belief of the early church, and still is generally agreed, that the author of the Gospel which bears the name of Luke is the author of The Acts.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

There are 1007 verses in this book. The “we-passages” include 318, those known to Paul 366, and those to Philip 66. “We can readily see,” says J.H. Kerr, “that Luke from his own experience, and from what he could learn from Paul and Philip, could write 724 verses, or over seven-tenths of the whole book, without having recourse to any documents. There remain but 283 verses to be accounted for, and these relate to the words of Peter, all of which may have been preserved in some written form to which the historian had access. From this, it is evident that the sources of information contained in the book were written records, oral testimony and personal knowledge” (Introduction to New Testament Study).

THE THEME

The theme of The Acts is, that which Jesus continued to do, by His Spirit, through His disciples. This book is closely linked to, and virtually a continuation of, the Gospel by Luke. In it the author had told “**of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up**” (Acts 1:1-2). That was the end of Jesus’ teaching as man upon earth, but it was not the end of His teaching by His Spirit. Peter, Paul and others continued to preach Jesus Christ. When Peter was asked of the men of the various nations at Pentecost how it was that they heard every man in his own tongue, he told them that Jesus through the Holy Ghost, “**hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear**” (Acts 2:33). When great numbers were brought into the church it was said that “**the Lord added**” them to it. Peter declared that Jesus cured the lame man at the gate of the temple. It was the Lord who appeared to Paul on the way to Damascus. It was the Lord Jesus who appeared to Paul in Corinth and said: “**I have much people in this city.**” Thus all through the Book the Lord continued to work by miracles, by signs, by wonders and by testimony through His disciples.

THE FORMER TREATISE

“**The former treatise**” is evidently that of the Gospel of Luke. In the first five verses we have a brief summary of the Gospel by Luke. This forms a connecting link with the Acts. In that which Jesus *began* to do and we are taken back to the:

(1) Incarnation. Luke tells in as plain language as it is possible to tell of the birth of Jesus. From his “**perfect understanding of all things from the very first**” (Luke 1:3), and from that which had been revealed to him by the Spirit, he told clearly and explicitly that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. The only way that one may doubt or deny the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is to deny that the Gospel of Luke is the true Word of God. Luke also told of

(2) the life and teaching of Jesus. To state it in his own words, he wrote concerning “**all that Jesus began both to do and teach.**” Luke emphasized the humanity of Jesus but he did not neglect his divinity. He told of the miracles as a part of what He did, which should prove to Theophilus and lovers of God throughout the world that Jesus was God as well as man. He recorded that unparalleled miracle, the cure of the paralytic (Luke 5:18-26), when Jesus proved to a crowded assembly that he had power on earth to forgive sins.

In the Gospel, Luke had also told of the:

(3) atonement or “passion” of Jesus (v. 3). The voluntary death of Christ as a sacrifice for sin was the great theme which Luke in the former Book, and in this one, dwelt upon as the most important of all facts for a sinful world. Before Peter called upon the multitudes at Jerusalem to believe in Christ and repent of their sins he presented to them Christ crucified as the Son of God (Acts 2:36-38). Even when in jeopardy of their lives, the disciples always held before their hearers Jesus Christ, the crucified One, as the only Saviour (3:13-18; 4:10-12; 7:51-56; 26:22-23). Even in this brief summary of his former treatise, Luke is not satisfied merely to state the fact that he had told of Christ’s

(4) resurrection, but he makes reference to the many proofs which He had given to prove that He had risen. **“To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days”** (Acts 1:3). The subject of the resurrection was the storm center of discussion in those days, and is still the fact which is most bitterly attacked by many. Some tried to pass over it with a laugh, as did the Athenians; but where the Gospel had taken hold of many, as at Corinth and Ephesus, so mild a form of opposition would not turn men away from faith in the risen Lord. No one could deny, in those days, that Jesus died, but the Pharisees and Sadducees were unwilling to give up the theory that He had died as a blasphemer. The Sadducees were in power at that time. They denied the resurrection and forbade Christ’s followers to teach it. If they admitted that Jesus arose from the dead they knew that they must also admit that He was divine and all of His claims were true. **“If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain”** (I Corinthians 15:14).

It has been repeatedly asserted by careful scholars that there is no better authenticated fact in history than that of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. He was seen four times according to the record of Luke.

He was seen at least twelve times, as recorded by the four Gospels and by Paul in I Corinthians 15:5-8. Paul was a witness to the fact that Christ had risen, and he mentions five other witnesses or groups of witnesses. He was seen by the apostles, under the most scrutinizing circumstances, more than once. He was seen of five hundred brethren at one time. Christ invited a close and careful examination of the identity of His person after His resurrection; consequently His disciples, who were themselves given to doubt, could not have been deceived. His disciples saw Him, heard Him talk, felt His body for marks of identification and ate with Him. No impersonator or apparition could have possibly deceived them. They had been His intimate friends and were the best judges. Luke also tells of:

(5) the ascension. Mark mentions it, but Luke is the only one of the four evangelists who describes the ascension of Christ (Luke 24:50-51). He refers to his record here in the second verse, **“until the day in which he was taken up.”** The ascension is described later in the chapter; it is mentioned here merely to connect the records of the two books. Moreover, in the Gospel, Luke had recorded the charge of Jesus that:

(6) the disciples were to wait for the Spirit (vv. 4-5).

The record in Luke is, **“And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high . . . And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God”** (Luke 24:49, 52-53). The statement in the Acts is: **“And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence”** (Acts 1:4-5). At the beginning of Christ’s ministry John had foreseen these days. He said: **“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire”** (Matt. 3:11).

Luke alone preserved a very striking prophecy of Jesus: **“I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished”** (Luke 12:49-50). We are not accustomed to think of Jesus being “straitened” or held in, but He Himself tells us that it was true at that time and would be true until after His baptism should be accomplished, in other words, until after He had washed away sin in His blood upon the Cross. After the work of atonement was completed he would be ready to **“cast fire upon the earth,”** or to send the Holy Spirit upon His disciples with power. He had said: **“Greater works than these shall ye do.”** This would not be because there were any of the disciples greater than Jesus but because He would send His Spirit to work through them in mighty power, and enable them to do the work on the basis of His finished atonement.

Why then did not Jesus pour out His Spirit upon the disciples immediately after the resurrection, or at least immediately after the ascension? We may not be able to answer this question fully, but there are reasons which seem obvious. The plan which Jesus followed was according to prophecy. The presentation of the two wave-loaves, upon the Feast of Pentecost, typified the presentation unto God of the first-fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection. The fulfillment of prophecy would have been a sufficient reason for the charge to wait at Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost, but there were other reasons. An important reason was that the disciples might have the opportunity to re-study the Scripture in the light of what had just taken place. Before Christ’s ascension **“Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scripture”** (Luke 24:45). They had much to reinterpret and fix in their minds before they could be the best witnesses for Christ. Moreover, as the disciples compared notes concerning the evidences of Christ’s resurrection and meditated and prayed concerning what He had told them beforehand, and became more deeply convinced that He was indeed the Messiah they would be the better prepared for the reception of the Spirit and the earnest work which was to follow.

THE FINAL COMMISSION OF JESUS

1. Misconceptions corrected: **“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power”** (1:6-7).

This question may have been asked by the disciples before Christ had opened their mind, that they might understand the Scriptures. But it is quite possible that even after their minds were opened there were some things in Scripture which they did not understand. There is still a great difference of opinion concerning the answer to this question and we, therefore, need not be surprised if they did not understand it. It is well that we shall study the signs of the times in the light of prophecy and in the light of all Scripture, but there are times and seasons of God's working which will be withheld from us. It is best that this is God's plan. It is well that the future of our own lives and the hour of our own death is withheld from us. That which is withheld from us would not benefit it; if it were known to us it might tend to hinder us in the great work of witnessing to which we are called.

2. The assurance of power: **“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you”** (1:8a)

Knowledge of future events in the world will not give men power in the service of Christ but the presence of the Holy Spirit will give mighty power. The Holy Spirit could not be neglected then, and cannot be neglected now, if the witnesses for Christ are to have power. There was a definite time set for which they must wait in order to fulfill the plan of God. It is not necessary today that days of time shall elapse while we wait upon God before we may receive the Holy Spirit.

If we are waiting until we feel some ecstasy, some remarkable movement within us, we may displease God. The Spirit of Christ will not come into an empty vessel, nor will He come into a vessel that is to remain useless. He will come at once into the hearts of His people if they will manifest His power, if they are willing to present their bodies a living sacrifice and witness for Him. But He will not come into men's hearts merely that they may satisfy a curiosity or experience some mighty thrill within them.

3. The charge to the witnesses: **“ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth”** (1:8b)

A witness must know, not merely by hear-say, whereof he speaks. Those who are to be witnesses for Christ must know Christ. They must know Christ so well that no amount of cross-examination can pervert their testimony. The world is constantly cross-examining the Christian. Men of the world are watching us at our work, in our trading, in our buying, in our selling, in our homes, at our worship, in our prayers, in our teaching, in our preaching, in our giving and in all our ways of living. If our testimony breaks down in any part it may lose its entire effect.

The disciples were to be witnesses first in Jerusalem, or at home. The warm-hearted disciple of Christ today will begin to witness wherever he is, he will not wait for a golden opportunity, he will make one. It may not be easy to witness at home, nor is it easy to witness away from home. The witness should make up his mind from the very outset that he will have to bear his cross. It was not long after the early disciples began to witness at Jerusalem until they were scattered everywhere through persecution, but they did not stop witnessing on that account. They went everywhere preaching the Word. They went to other parts of Judaea, so Samaria to Cyprus, Asia Minor, Africa, Greece, Rome, Spain and India.

It is important that the homeland shall be Christianized for the benefit of other lands. When the missionary goes out to a foreign field, and from his own land there follow him vessels loaded with intoxicating liquor, when that liquor is adulterated and sold at an exorbitant price to the heathen, the effect is tremendously adverse upon the testimony of the missionary. When the representatives of the land from which the missionary comes desecrate the Lord's day the natives are much harder to convince that Christians should keep the Sabbath. When the natives learn to publish their own newspapers and when those papers tell of lynchings and murders in the land from which the missionary comes his testimony is greatly hindered.

This is said to be a missionary age. The book that has made it so, more than any other, is the Book of Acts for it is the great missionary book of the Bible. It tells us of the beginning of missionary work in the Christian church and of the rapid extension of that work until it progressed so widely that, though written nineteen centuries ago, it is still the greatest challenge of all books to the enlargement of the missionary enterprise throughout the world.

William Carey

“Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes” (Isa. 54:2)

The missionary work had so languished that in the early days of William Carey, a little over a century ago, he could not stir his congregation to take an interest in missions, nor could he even arouse an interest among the ministers of the Gospel in his community in this great work. When he preached his great sermon on the second verse of the fifty fourth chapter of Isaiah the people were not moved. One who writes of that memorable occasion says, he would have thought the congregation would have wept. But they did not weep, they did not even wait after the sermon. They started to go out as usual.

But Mr. Carey stepping down from the pulpit grasped Andrew Fuller by the hand and said, “Fuller, call them back! Are we going to do nothing today?” The result was that some of them did come back, they were interested and the foreign missionary society was organized which sent Carey out as pioneer missionary. Does it not seem pathetic that seventeen centuries after the Book of Acts was written there should still be the need of pioneer work in the foreign missionary enterprise? We pride ourselves on our interest in missions and in the world today. But pick up the Book of Acts and read again the final commission of Jesus; read again almost any place in the Book of the fire of the early church, and you will surely conclude that their energy, their sacrifice and their successes puts us to shame.

We should read again the final commission of Jesus! We should hear again the call that beginning at home we should carry the Gospel message to the uttermost parts of the earth! We should awaken to a sense of our responsibility and in consecration, in work, in prayer, in giving and in witnessing give ourselves into the hands of the Holy Spirit to be used of the Lord when He will and where He will!

QUESTIONS

ACTS 1:1-8)

1. Who was the writer of the Acts? Why?
2. Of what had Luke told in “the former treatise?”
3. Of what does the Acts tell?
4. Who are the two principal characters in The Acts?
5. Name some other leading characters in The Acts?
6. Why was it not important that many volumes should have been written about the apostles?
7. How is the record of The Acts a miniature history of the whole church?
8. Give the significance of the name, Theophilus?
9. About what proportion of The Acts could Luke write from his own experience or what he might have learned from Paul or Philip?
10. Give evidence to show that the Lord Jesus continued to do and teach?
11. Give some of the proofs that Jesus arose from the dead?
12. Why had not the disciples been baptized with the Holy Spirit while Jesus was with them?
13. Why were the apostles to wait at Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension?
14. How do we know that the disciples could understand the Scriptures better after the ascension of Jesus?
15. What was the answer which Jesus gave to those who wanted to know when the kingdom would be restored to Israel?
16. What was essential for the disciples to receive before they should begin to witness?
17. What were the fields in which the early disciples were to witness?
18. How did their commission compare with ours?
19. How did their field compare with ours?
20. Is it a matter of indifference whether or not we shall witness?

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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