

Acts

Preparing the understanding for mission

Study 1 | Acts 1:1-8

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

The book of Acts was written by Luke, one of the companions of Paul. Most scholars believe he wrote the book no later than about 60 A.D., since there is no mention of the Neronian persecution of Christians (64 A.D.) in which Paul and Peter were executed. So Luke wrote about 30 years after the death of Jesus. Luke wrote the account for "*Theophilus*", who we guess by his title ("*most excellent*") was a Roman official and a convert ("*what you have been taught*").

The Bible gives us four different descriptions of Jesus' life, but only one of the early church. But the author, Luke, was more than a historian. He was also a teacher. His great theme is not simply the history of the early church, but the history of the *mission* of the early church. He does not give us a complete description of all the dimensions of the life of the primitive church. He is primarily interested in showing us the spread of Christianity — how it broke through barriers of all sorts to change lives, families, cities, peoples. So Luke a) uses real history, to b) teach us about being men and women *in mission*. Therefore, when we look at the introductory words of Acts, we should study these two issues. First, Luke claims to be giving a historical account — not a fabricated or fanciful series of stories. Second, Luke immediately shows us how Jesus prepared the first disciples for mission before he sent them out. No one doubts that the "*former book*" of Acts 1:1 is the gospel according to Luke. They are so closely tied that some have called them "Luke-Acts". In order to understand their character and purpose, it is important to read the two introductions together.

1. Read Luke 1:1-4. How do these words help assure us of the historical accuracy of the events of the book of Acts (and the gospel of Luke)?

Luke 1:1-4 is a remarkable claim of careful historical research. How did Luke come to know the events of Jesus' life ("the things that have been fulfilled among us") Luke 1:1 and "*all that Jesus began to do and teach*" Acts 1:1). He says there were three stages. First, there were "*eyewitnesses*" who carefully guarded and "*handed down*" (Luke 1:2) the accounts. So here Luke acknowledges his dependence on eyewitnesses (as any historian would). Second, Luke was not the only one to make an orderly *account* from this eyewitness material. He says that "*many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things*" (Luke 1:1). So by the time Luke was writing, 25-30 years after Jesus' death, there were already other written records of Jesus' life. Third, Luke claims that "*I myself carefully investigated everything from the beginning... that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*" (Luke 1:3-4). Luke is here claiming that he did not rely on one eyewitness (say, the account of one of the apostles), but that he compared all his sources and "*carefully investigated*" them. This would have been quite

possible for Luke, who personally knew many of the apostles and hundreds of other eyewitnesses. He would have been in a position to check the accounts through interviews with many others. Also, as a doctor, he was an educated person. The Greek of the book of Acts is stylish and that of a cultured person of the time.

Luke here tells us his method. He used both historical accounts and eyewitness material, which he carefully compared with one another and investigated with his own personal research. His goal was so that readers would “*know the certainty*” of the events they had learned about. Luke is then making a very direct claim to painstaking historical accuracy in both his account of Jesus’ life, and of the early church.

This puts the reader in a very interesting bind. It means that we cannot read Luke or Acts and say, “these are legends that grew up about Jesus and the apostles — some of them are true, but many of them are embellished.” Luke’s claim means that we must either assume he is writing accurate history or that he is writing an extremely deliberate set of lies, foisted on the public to promote this religion. Luke’s language is not that of a compiler of stories and myths. He most emphatically denies that he was doing that. He says he wrote nothing down unless it was historically checked and certain. So if the incidents he described never happened, then he is very deliberately lying about them. In that case, we should not believe anything he says at all. But if Luke and Acts were really deliberate lies, written just 30 years after the events, how could Christianity have made such progress when literally thousands of people were still alive who had seen and heard Jesus speak and do miracles? And how do we account for the remarkable accuracy (as we will see as the weeks go by) of Luke’s knowledge of geography and the culture of the towns that he says he visited with Paul. Such knowledge indicates that he really was along on these trips and that he really saw personally many of the things that transpired.

So the introductions of Luke give us a lot of confidence that we can believe what we are reading.

2. 1:1. What does v.1 tell us about Luke’s theme or subject for the Book of Acts? How does this theme contrast Christianity from other faiths?

The purpose of Acts’ composition is revealed when Luke describes his gospel, his first volume, as “*about all that Jesus began to do and to teach*” (Acts 1:1). If we reflect we will see that, if “Luke” is about what Jesus began to do and teach, then “Acts” is about what Jesus continues to do and teach. Therefore, Luke does not think of “Luke” as about Jesus and “Acts” as about the church. Both books are about Jesus — first his ministry on earth, exercised personally, and second his ministry from heaven, exercised through his representatives.

Supporting this view is the fact that Luke repeats the Ascension. In his gospel, it ends the book (Lukd 24:51), but it begins the book of Acts. The ascended Christ now continues his ministry in the world through his church. So, some think that the best title for Acts would be "The Ministry of the Ascended Christ through His Church".

"Luke's first two verses are, therefore, extremely significant. It is no exaggeration to say that they set Christianity apart from all other religions. These regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime; Luke says Jesus only began his... after his resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Spirit he continued his work, first and foremost through the the ministry of his chosen apostles and subsequently through the post-apostolic church of every period and place. This then is the kind of Jesus Christ we believe in: he is both the historical Jesus who lived and the contemporary Jesus who lives."

– John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (The Bible Speaks Today) IVP Press, 1990.

3. 1:3-8. Why do you think Jesus prepares the apostles' minds (v.3) before he sends them power (v.4)? What was it about (cf. Luke 24:44-49)? What does the apostles' question reveal about their understanding of the kingdom? How does Jesus correct and inform their understanding?

We are told here that Jesus put the apostles through a period of training and instruction (v.3) before he sent them the power of the Spirit (v.8). It is often forgotten that the intensive training occurred before the power of Pentacost arrived. Many people think that all the church needs is more of the Spirit, but the Bible never pits learning against power, truth against the spirit. Worship is always in spirit and truth (John 4:24). In fact, there is no Spirit power without truth, for the job of the Spirit is to take truths about Jesus and make them vivid, glorious and affecting to our hearts. ("The Spirit of truth... will glorify me by taking of mine and making it known to you." John 16:13-14). The Spirit gives us power by making the truth of God shine and empower us. ("He may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope... the power..." Eph.1:17-19. "He may strengthen you with power through his Spirit... that you may have power to grasp...how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." Eph.3:16-18). We can think of the Spirit as "fire", but the truth of God's word as "firewood". Without both wood and fire, you don't have a fire!

This principle is particularly obvious in Paul's statement that the gospel is the power of God (Rom.1:17). It does not just bring the power of God; it is the power of God. The Spirit's power does not work apart from the truth. It is only as the truth "enlightens" the heart and as it "grasps" us that the Spirit gives us the power and love and confidence for being witnesses. One of the pre-requisites for dynamic mission, then, is a deep and rich understanding of the Scripture.

What did this instruction consist of? What was this advanced training, done now so the disciples could understand the big picture? We get a glimpse of this advanced training in Luke 24:44-49, and it is tantalizing. First he showed them how all the Bible was really about him — the Law, Prophets, and Psalms (Luke 24:44-45). In other words, he gave them the ultimate “Bible survey” and showed them the interpretive key to all the Scriptures. He *“opened their mind to understand the Scripture”*. That is amazing. It cannot mean that they simply surveyed the contents of each book and learned all the stories in a mechanical way. It means they learned what every part of the Bible *means*, how every part points to Christ. Second, Jesus showed them how to preach the gospel out of the Bible (Luke 24:46-49), how to call people to repentance and grace. He showed them how exactly *“to be witnesses to these things”* so that people find *“forgiveness.”* He showed them how to present and apply the truth of the Bible. In other words, Jesus gave the disciples the definitive training in Bible, theology, and ministry!

However, one theme of Jesus that Luke mentions here in Acts is that Jesus taught them about *“the kingdom of God”* (v.3). It was obviously very important for them to understand the nature of the kingdom. This must not have been an easy lesson to grasp. The question in v.6 reveals that the apostles were rather confused about it until the end. John Calvin points out that *“there are as many errors in this question as words”*! There are at least three mistakes: a) The verb *“restore”* shows that they think they are still expecting Jesus to bring a political, earthly kingdom, a powerful nation that would stand for righteousness against the unrighteousness of the other nations. b) The noun *“Israel”* showed they were expecting Christ’s salvation to belong primarily to one race and culture. They were still thinking about how God established his kingdom in the Old Testament — as a distinct culture and nation-state. c) The phrase *“at this time”* shows that they did not understand that the kingdom was coming in two stages — one at Jesus’ first coming, and the second at Jesus’ second coming.

4. 1:2-8. What things are given to the apostles uniquely and what things are given to the us along with the apostles?

v.2 shows us that Jesus did not go to heaven until he had concluded a specific ministry to his apostles.

a) What is unique about the apostles? The first three things that Jesus gives them in this passage are unique gifts.

First, they were *“chosen”* apostles (v.2). This word means that they were “appointed” or “designated” to their office. Later in 1:24 the word is used again to when they choose a successor to Judas *“Lord... show us which of these two you have chosen”*. So an apostle was not an officer elected by the

people (as in Acts 6:1-16) or appointed by any human being (as in I Tim.3:1ff.) or self-appointed by any person. Elders, deacons, teachers, even prophets are either elected or appointed (or the person becomes 'aware' of a prophetic gift and begins to exercise it — see I Cor.14:37). But the apostolic office is unique. Apostles are directly appointed by Christ — personally, visibly.

Second, Jesus *"showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive"*. (v.3). Jesus appeared to others after his resurrection, but he appeared far more often to the apostles. They received a massive set of immediate and powerful *"proofs"* of Jesus' reality. They clearly had *"advantages"* that no other Christian has ever had. They were being prepared to face terrible odds and persecutions, and they had to be rock solid in their confidence that Jesus was risen. And so they received this amazing input.

Third, Jesus *"gave them instructions through the Holy Spirit"* (v.2). For forty days Jesus was giving them instruction. All the teachings we have from Jesus in the gospels was given when the apostles were somewhat clueless to Jesus' mission! Now he gives them this advanced training — which we discussed above under the last question. We today have no other sources of that 40-Day training material except what we have in the New Testament from the apostles and their followers. That is why the authority of the Bible is unique. The apostolic teachings in the New Testament are based on that amazing, ultimate course of study.

It is important to read Galatians 1 and 2 in light of Acts 1:2-3. Paul was also made an apostle, and in order to make good his right to the title, Paul shows how a) The risen Christ directly designated him through a visible visit to him, b) he got the same visible proof that Jesus was alive through that visit, and c) the gospel he preached was given directly to him from Jesus.

b) The last thing two things that Jesus gave to the apostles are given to those around them.

First, they are given the *"Great Commission"* to *"be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (v.8). In light of the first three *"unique"* gifts, we must conclude that the apostles were able to fulfill this commission at a level that the rest of us could not. But it is clear from the rest of the book of Acts that this commission is given to all Christians. See for example Acts 8:4 — *"Those who were scattered [all except the apostles — see v.2] preached the word wherever they went."* So Jesus Christ makes his church a people-in-mission. The Latin word *missio* means *"sent"*. Mission and witness is not an aspect of our existence as the church. We exist to be witnesses.

Second, he promises that they will *“be baptized with the Holy Spirit”* (v.5). When this baptism of the Spirit did come, we see that it fell not just on the apostles but on every believer (at that time, all 120 Christians — v.15). This is expected, if we look carefully at the Great Commission. All those bearing witness for Christ must first *“receive power when the Holy Spirit comes...”* (v.8). So if all Christians are commissioned as witnesses, then all of them would have to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The reverse would be true as well — the fact that the Spirit falls on every Christian in Acts 2 proves that the commission of Acts 1:6-8 was given to all believers.

5. In what way is the apostolic ministry continuing in the church and in what way is it not? In what ways does this distinction influence the way we apply the book of Acts to ourselves today?

The gifts we do not share with the apostles have to do with the unquestioned, unconditioned authority of their teaching. Paul the apostle makes a telling statement in I Corinthians. *“If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing is the Lord’s command. If he ignored this, he himself will be ignored.”* (I Cor. 14:37-38) Immediately before this statement he is telling the church that they must “judge (evaluate) the prophets.” That is, when anyone speaks or prophecies in their worship services or assemblies, the church must decide if their words are true or not. How? Paul says that his apostolic teaching is the standard. It is interesting that he insists that he is not to be evaluated! His teaching is not checked, for it is received as if it is *“the Lord’s command.”* But anyone else at all — even a prophet — is not to be accepted without being judged according to apostolic truth. Paul does this again in a letter to the Thessalonians. *“If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”* (II Thess.3:14-15)

This means that the teaching authority of the apostles was unique. Their teaching now is only available in the Scripture. No one else can possibly contradict it, or even add to it, for no one else has ever had these three unique gifts. Anyone for example, who says, “well, the Bible teaches this, but now we know better” is assuming an apostolic ministry that they have no right to. If fact, if someone even begins to insist they have revelations of God that are to be unquestioned — even if they don’t contradict the Scripture — they are assuming an apostolic ministry that they have no right to. For example, if a Christian says to you, “God told me that you must marry Ms. or Mr. X.”, and if that Christian regards this as not advice or wisdom to be weighed, but a command from God, then they are taking on themselves the kind of authority Paul and the other apostles exercised (I Cor.14:37-38). But they don’t have the three unique gifts that go with that authority. They did not have 40 days of direct instruction by the risen Lord. So today, the Bible must stand in judgement over any insights and knowledge of spiritual things that we have. Their writings are the foundation of the church (Eph.2:20). The apostolic teaching ministry still continues, but through the Scriptures, not through authoritative individuals.

On the other hand, the gifts we do share with the apostles have to do with the power and effectiveness of their evangelism, through word and deed. As we go through the book of Acts, we will see that usually the name “apostle” is reserved for the Twelve, as opposed to the rest of us, but sometimes the name “apostle” is given to others, such as Barnabus (Acts 14:14). Why? The word “apostle” means “the sent ones”. The apostolic ministry as power-filled witnesses and representatives of Christ is given to all of us along with the apostles, for while the three gifts equipping the apostles for a teaching ministry were given to them alone, the two gifts equipping the apostles for an evangelistic ministry were given to all those around them.

We must remember that these two ministries overlap in the lives of the Twelve, and therefore we do not necessarily expect visible tongues of flame, etc., when we seek power to be witnesses. But the fact remains that we are all called as “apostles” (as some say — not with a capital ‘A’, but with a lower case ‘a’.) We are all called to be men and women-in-mission, empowered for witness.

This distinction (between how the apostolic ministry does yet does not continue in the church) means that applying the book of Acts to our own time can be tricky at points. We cannot simply read anything the early church did (since its elders were apostles) and just assume we should do it the exact same way. Our own churches are not led by apostles, and therefore we have to be careful not to simply try to copy everything the early church did.

It will be important to keep a balance in mind. On the one hand, the apostolic ministry of teaching and authority no longer resides in individual leaders of the church, on the other hand the command of witness and the promise of the Spirit was sent to all Christians. This means that there are two opposite dangers to avoid in reading the book of Acts. On the one hand, we must not forget that there is some distance between us and them. On the other hand, we must not put too much distance between ourselves and them. Let me be specific. Many in the charismatic movement have read Acts as if the apostles’ ministry was not unique, and as a result they assume that we must copy everything they did exactly. On the other hand, many people who dislike the charismatic movement have overreacted to their emphasis on experience and power. They do not want to see that the power of the Spirit and the barrier-breaking effectiveness of witness is still available to us. Indeed, we should be convicted if we do not see people coming to Christ constantly, and if we don’t see the power of the Spirit in our assemblies, and if we don’t find our hearts bound together in supernatural love, and so on.

So how should we interpret the book of Acts? With humility. We must not use it to bludgeon people with: “this church isn’t Spirit-filled unless we have all the miracles we see in the book of Acts!” On the other hand, we must not avoid the clear picture of a vital, living church. We must measure ourselves by it and seek God’s help to be all he wants the church to be.