

The Church Alive – Introduction to the book of Acts

Acts 1:1-3

1 The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. 3 To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

We live in a culture obsessed with sequels. We always want to know what will happen next; what could happen next; or at least what might have happened next. Never content to let the story lie, authors, playwrights, screenwriters and Hollywood filmmakers are always exploring the lives and questions that follow the characters of our favorite stories.

So obsessed with sequels, I read an article this past week that said as of February 2010, so just over a year ago, over 85 sequels either in planning or production. Like or it not, titles included Avatar 2, The Blair Witch Project 3, Cars 2, Ghostbusters 3, Gremlins 3D, Indiana Jones 5, Jurassic Park 4, Mamma Mia 2, Men in Black 3, Monsters Inc 2, National Treasure 3, Star Trek 2 (or 12 depending on your preference), Twister 2, and Who Framed Roger Rabbit 2, just to name a few. Let me be clear, I am not endorsing or encouraging anyone to see or not see such movies. And some of you might be wondering what all this has to do with the Word of God and our worship of Him this morning.

My point is simply this; we are a people who love sequels. With the close of one chapter of the story, we are often anxious to see what is next. This sense of anticipation is nothing new to our day and age. People of all generations have longed for the rest of the story. And, when considered in this light, we see that the New Testament, and particularly the author Luke, understood this well.

Consider with me for a moment the Gospel accounts. Therein we have what? We have the story, the true accounts of the life of Jesus. Of course, the Gospels end in a flurry of excitement and triumph. Jesus, the King of glory, God in the flesh, the Savior of the world is crucified, nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put to death (Acts 2:23); but God raised Him up again; Jesus is raised from the dead, never to die again! Jesus is raised from the dead and is seen on a number of occasions consoling, conversing and teaching others. What a climax! What an ending! We might ask the question, "What else is needed?"

In Matthew 28 Jesus is last seen challenging and charging His disciples to take His teachings into all the nations in order to make disciples, followers Him. And in Mark 16 and Luke 24, Jesus is seen being carried up into heaven to sit at the right hand of God in triumph, glory and honor. From an emotional and from a literary point of view; that is it! Jesus came down from heaven, He lived on this earth, He died on the cross, He rose from the dead and He went back to heaven to be with the Father. End of the story.

But Luke tells us something wonderful; something shocking; something most glorious. I would like to call your attention back to one little phrase found in the first verse of Acts 1, something that can be easily missed; something that sets the stage for the need and for wonder of the most extraordinary sequel ever; we might call this the ultimate sequel. Follow along in verse one where we read:

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"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach...

Luke first refers to his Gospel account, the first account that he composed. But notice after addressing Theophilus, what he says about this first account that infers the need for the sequel. Luke writes, "**about all that Jesus began to do and teach...**" Notice that Luke did not say that the first account was about all that Jesus had done and taught, but that it was only the beginning. The word "began" is in the emphatic or primary position in the Greek text, meaning that Luke wants Theophilus and the Holy Spirit wants all readers to know that the ascension of Jesus into heaven was not the end of the story. It might have ended a glorious chapter, but it was not the end of the story as now, with the book of Acts, we have before us the continuation of all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

Allow me to demonstrate this with a series of statements that are true concerning Luke's first work, the Gospel of Luke in connection with Luke's second work, the book of Acts. In the Gospel of Luke, we have the ministry of Jesus as He was on the earth. In the book of Acts, we have the ministry of Jesus as He is in heaven. In Luke, we have the teachings of Jesus from Himself. In Acts, we have the teachings of Jesus from the apostles. In Luke, we have the foundation of the gospel message; in Acts, we have the progress of the gospel message. In Luke, we see Christ with us and in Acts, we have Christ in us. In Luke, the story begins with the coming of Jesus to earth as a baby. In Acts, the story begins with Jesus, the risen Savior, being carried up into heaven. And finally, in Luke the story ends in an upper room in Jerusalem on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire. But in Acts the story ends with the apostle Paul preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered (Acts 28:31).

Now, I do not know if I can stand here and tell you which of these two books, the Gospel of Luke or the book of Acts is the most exciting; but one thing I can tell you is that Luke, who with these two books is responsible for nearly 1/3rd of the entire New Testament, have given us plenty to think about; plenty to contemplate; and plenty to apply to our lives.

And as we begin our study in the book of Acts that is one place where I would like to begin my charge to you by asking and then answering the question as to how do we apply the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ to our lives? What is supposed to happen to lives so changed by the grace of the gospel? Luke sets out to answer that question in this sequel of sequels, the book of Acts.

What we find in Acts is not some cookie-cutter tracks; or some fact filled discipleship workbooks. Sometimes we are guilty of reducing life in Christ down to quoting the books of the bible and some key verses along with knowing some basic theological terms. Believe me, I think each of us needs to know such things, but the Christian life is not about regurgitating some factual tidbits of truth but rather *the Christian life is about being recreated by God to become a vibrant, vocal and bold witness of the grace of God as realized in Jesus Christ.* Let us never be content with simply knowing the definitions of grace or of justification. The real issue is this, is your life a testimony of living in grace and in light of your justification. The book of Acts shows us how the gospel of Jesus transforms people into witnesses for Him.

Allow me to demonstrate this to you by taking a very broad stroke to paint the overall picture of this book. In the first half of the book, Acts 1-10 is about Peter, a once rash, sometimes

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cocky, yet also scared man who, by the transforming power of the gospel becomes the spokesman for God at the start of the church. Then beginning in Acts 11 and running through chapter 28, we have Paul, once named Saul, the persecutor of God’s people. He too is transformed from antagonist of the church to the great apologist and defender of the faith. In the lives of these two men and subsequently through the lives they affected, we see that the church is alive; it is the vehicle through which our Lord Jesus Christ continues to do and to teach His truth. The book of Acts is more than simply the early history of the church, but rather it is “His” story of His working through the church.

As we work through this book, let me tell you what the book of Acts is not. The book of Acts is not a “how to” book. It does not tell us to speak in tongues or how to heal and perform miracles. As we read through its pages, we do not find a formula for evangelism or directions on how to plant churches. To be sure, there are principles for some things, but not step-by-step directions. The book of Acts is worthy of our study and is not to be regarded as some long, irrelevant history that bridges the gap between the excitement of the Gospel accounts and the meat of Paul’s writings. The book of Acts does not belong merely to the realm of the Pentecostals who use this book to justify otherwise unbiblical and edgy practices. Nor does it belong to those who use it to suggest that we ought to do church only by the means presented in the opening chapters of this book.

This book is for all Christians who from history can learn how God works in and among His people. From this book, some great teachings and practices of our Lord Jesus Christ are applied and their connection to Old Testament prophecies are made. From this book, some of the great themes of Paul’s letters are illustrated. We need to know this book for it presents to us all that Jesus began to do and teach and what He continues to do and teach through the church to this day.

Let me move my attention now to some background concerning this book. I have alluded to some of this, but I want you to know the makeup of this book.

To begin with, let us look at this book’s author, the man named Luke. Please turn to the Gospel of Luke. Let me read verses 1-4:

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

In Luke 1:1, we are told that Luke is undertaking a project that many others had also undertaken. Luke is not claiming any special knowledge or of having the only knowledge of the life of Jesus. In Luke 1, we are told that his purpose was merely to give a carefully investigated accounting of the life of Jesus to aid a man by the name of Theophilus. Notice that Luke states that his account has been “handed down” to him. This phrase, “handed down” speaks of truth communicated by the rabbis as authoritative and instructive for others. What is the point? Luke is saying in effect that what he writes in not fiction; he is not a storyteller composing a fairy tale.

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That Luke is speaking of true events and people is made even more clear as he notes at the end of verse 2 that what he has compiled found their source where? In “eyewitnesses and servants of the word.” Luke is the careful historian, using the best sources to present to all who read this a chronological and accurate accounting of the life of Christ and, as we come to Acts, the life of His church. Luke’s intent is not to win a literary award, but to record the life of Christ.

Notice that Luke ends in verse 4 saying in effect, “I want you to be encouraged by this report that it is consistent with what you have been taught.” The Greek word for “taught” there in verse 4 is “catechesis” – from where we get our word “catechism” – meaning to be formally taught and instructed. To catechize someone in Luke’s sense is to present an accurate accounting of the life of Jesus, not as a dispassionate commentator, but in a manner that would encourage and stimulate his reader in the faith.

Oh that we would learn this lesson in our presentation of Christ. We can so quickly condemn a sin or cite a verse, but the question remains, are we vibrant, vocal and bold witnesses to the person and work of Jesus! “Christianity is not a teaching - it is a person” – the Lord Jesus! (DMLJ).

Now then, in both Luke 1 and Acts 1, we are present with the primary recipient of these works, this man named Theophilus. His name literally means, “lover of God” or “loved by God.” Some have taken this to mean that Luke really has no one person in mind, but rather is writing to anyone who loves or is loved by God. I do not think this is the case because in Luke 1 he is called, “most excellent” – a term Luke uses in the book of Acts for those of either high social standing or of rulers and the like. For example, in Acts 23, the governor Felix is called “most excellent” and again, in Acts 26, the governor Festus was also called “most excellent.” Theophilus seems to have been a man of standing who either was being given Luke/Acts as a defense for the faith, or he was a disciple of Luke, someone Luke was instructing in the life of Christ and the church. But this is only an educated guess.

Last week we spoke a bit about who Luke is so I will not go in depth this morning except to say that Luke was a trusted companion of Paul who comes on the scene in Acts 16. In Acts 16:9-10 there is a transition from everything being reported in the third person to then being reported in the first person. Let me show you. Turn to Acts 16. In verse one we are told that Paul came to Derbe and to Lystra where he picked up a disciple named Timothy. Notice the third person pronouns throughout the text. In verse 4, “*Now while they were passing through the cities...*” and in verse 6, “*They passed through...*” Then coming to verse 10 we read, “*When he [Paul] had seen the vision, immediately we [Paul, Luke and others] sought to go into Macedonia...*” Luke becomes a part of the story joining Paul’s team and reporting now as an eyewitness to the events. As a traveling companion of Paul and coming in contact with other apostles and disciples, Luke began to interview them and to investigate the claims and truths concerning Christ for his project.

This brings us back to Acts 1 and why we are seeking to study this book. While I did call this book a sequel, Luke part 2 as it were, I do not believe that Luke ever intended it to be a sequel per say. It was not as though Luke wrote his gospel and it spent a certain number of weeks on Rome’s best-seller list and so he decided to write the rest. I believe the only reason why we have Luke and Act separated is because ancient books were written on papyrus scrolls that had to be unrolled to be read and then rerolled to be carried and stored. Such rolls would

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rarely be over 35 ft in length otherwise they would be hard to handle and carry. The length of the Gospel of Luke would fit in one scroll and so a second scroll would be needed for Acts.

And so, while I am calling the book of Acts the ultimate sequel to the Gospel of Luke, it is at the same time not simply part two, but in truth the continuation of the Gospel working through the church.

I would draw your attention back to Acts 1 and consider with me again for a moment the end of verse 1, **“about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.”** We are immediately reminded that this is a book about Jesus and what He is doing and teaching. The word “began” tells us that the work is not finished, that there is more that Jesus intends to be done. Let us be clear here. The work of salvation is finished. In John 19:30, while upon the cross, Jesus said, **“It is finished!”** meaning everything necessary to bring those who believe into right fellowship with God has been completed. The debt of sin has been paid, the wrath of God removed. But in the book of Acts we are not looking at the atoning work of Jesus on the cross for our sins, but the grace applying work of the Spirit of Jesus being accomplished through the efforts of the people of Jesus. Think of it this way, in the Gospels we have as the focus the accomplishment of redemption; in the book of Acts we have the application of the redemption. In the Gospels we see the purchase of our salvation by Jesus and in the book of Acts we have the practical outworking of our salvation.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, it was not the end of anything but the beginning of Christ in us, continuing His work of making known what is eternal life; that is the knowing of God and of Jesus Christ sent by God. Remember in Matthew 16:18 what Jesus said to Peter, **“I also say to you that you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church...”** The book of Acts is Jesus building His church, but using ordinary people like you and me do to it! Until Jesus returns, we have no other mandate but to continue to proclaim all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

And this leads me to have you consider the very name of the book. We call it the “book of Acts” which is really shorthand for “The Acts of the Apostles”. But such a title is man-given and I think puts too much emphasis upon man. Some call the book “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” but there is actually something missing in this, for the Holy Spirit uses men. Some have more rightly called it, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles” but even that might not be accurate enough. For if we want to encapsulate the point of the book in its title, we would have to call it, “The Continuing Acts and Teachings of Jesus by Means of His Holy Spirit Through the Apostles and the Church.” Notice that with such a title, Jesus is the focus, the works and words of Jesus our concern; the ministry and necessity of the Spirit is realized, the priority of the apostles and their efforts established, but also then noting that this is a book about the work of Jesus and His Spirit in the church. But then, that is getting rather long, so we will call it Acts.

Needing to wrap things up here, let me spend just a moment then upon what we need to see and learn from the book of Acts. What is the big picture? What do you need to take home with you and mediate on? Beloved, let me tell you just two things, both of which are summed up in the word “grows”. The book of Acts tells us how the church, how you and I should expect the church to grow.

First of all, the we see in the book of Acts that the church only truly grows by the power or working of God. We speak a lot in our church of the sovereignty of God; that is God is working all things together to accomplish His own purposes. Such a teaching is explained repeatedly in the

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writings of Paul. But we get to see a living example of such care and control through the pages of Acts and God is working through the church. That the church began, that it was protected, that it flourished was not a fluke, it was not a chance "perfect storm" that just the right elements happened to come together. The church was in the heart and plan of God, even when the Old Testament prophets could not see it or understand it. We see this in how many times Luke appeals to the Old Testament to prove that what was happening was in fact happening according to God's plan.

For example, in Acts 1 we see how the Old Testament, from Psalms 69 and 109, prophesied the death of Judas and how God was involved in selecting a man to fill Judas's place. This was no accident or surprise.

In Act 2, the very outpouring of the Spirit of God, while it surprised and shocked many, was foretold in Joel 2:28-32. Additionally, Peter, in his first sermon on Pentecost, repeatedly appeals to the Scriptures as revealing all that took place, even stating that the crucifixion of Jesus itself was according to **"the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God"** (Acts 2:23). But as God is involved, the result is sure as recorded in Acts 2:47, **"the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."**

In Acts 10, the gospel is responded to by gentiles, an unthinkable and repulsive thought to Jews and yet this was accomplished by the direct intervention of God working upon the hearts of Cornelius, the gentile, and upon Peter the Jew.

And when considering all the missionary journeys of Paul, one cannot help but see the hand of God guiding, directing, moving and influencing the progress of the gospel. The point? The church truly grows only by the power God. Churches can grow apart from the power of God, but it will not be rightly related to God when it does so. What Jesus began to do and teach in the book of Acts are the same things we need to do and teach today. The same Spirit that empowered the early church for vibrant, vocal and bold proclamation of the gospel is ready to empower us to do the same.

But not only must we learn that the church grows by the power of God; the book of Acts also shows us that the church grows through God's people; through people just like you and me. For while we say the church grows by the power of God, God just happens to use His people. What do I mean then when I say that the church grows through God's people? Two things.

First, we must see that the church grows through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, a form of which each one of us is to be engaged in. While not all are called to be pastors and teachers in the formal sense, we are all called to be witnesses and to teach others the reality of Jesus by allowing Him continually to transform our lives. But all of this begins with biblical preaching and teaching. As we read through the Book of Acts, one thing is clearly stated - the core message of

Christianity. The book gives many accounts of people's statements about Jesus. Acts has 42 "testimonies" to the gospel. We have at least ten sermons - Peter preaches five sermons, Paul preaches four and Stephen preaches one. There are thirty preaching summaries. Throughout the book, Luke always re-enforces the idea that the Apostles continue to testify to the Lord Jesus and His resurrection from the dead. In short, Acts is all about Jesus. The Christian message is all about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The main emphasis is on His death and resurrection. In Acts, there are no specific details about Jesus' life because Luke assumed people would read his first book. Jesus' death for our sins, resurrection unto life, and the subsequent transformation that

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occurs to those who believe such truths are what the Apostles preach about, talk about, and continually discuss in Acts. Our preaching and our lives must also be so Christ-centered and Scripturally framed.

As the apostles focused on the true message of Christianity, namely the life, death and resurrection of Christ, growth not only in the knowledge of God and His Word take place, but also phenomenal numerical growth as well. Numerical growth is not always an indicator of spiritual growth, but God has chosen at times to link the two together. Consider the following:

- **Acts 2:47** *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*
- **Acts 4:4** *But many of those who heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.*
- **Acts 5:14** *And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.*
- **Acts 6:7** *The Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*
- **Acts 11:21** *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.*
- **Acts 14:21** *After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,*
- **Acts 17:12** *Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.*

So we see a connection between God's sovereign working through His people in order to draw people to Himself. We see something else about how the gospel works in Acts that does not always line up with what we see in the church today. Typically, when we think of evangelistic preaching in the church, what do we envision at the end of such preaching? We envision an invitation, an altar call. In fact, after the Great Awakening in the 1700's (not a part of it), the use of invitations and altar calls has been the standard format of gospel presentations. Yet what do we see in the book of Acts? The gospel is preached and then who is it that generally initiates the question? Let us note this.

In Acts 2, after the first sermon of Pentecost by Peter, we see God drawing those who are His to ask the question. We read in Acts 2:37:

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

Effective, Spirit-filled preaching and proclaiming of the gospel pierces the heart and will invoke in those who are being drawn the drive to ask, "what shall we do?" We see this again in Acts 8 as Philip, a waiter of tables or early deacon explains Isaiah 53 and the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch. Who initiates the question? The Ethiopian who asked in Acts 8:36, "What prevents me from being baptized?" [of trusting in Christ]. And one more example is found in Acts 16 and the Philippian jailer who upon hearing the hymns of praise to God and of the faith of Paul and Silas comes to them asking in verse 30, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

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Beloved, God works through His people. Our preaching or proclamation of Christ is not to be cold, calculated, dispassionate or even condemning, but rather is to present simply who Jesus is and what He has done; He is the Son of the Living God, come to pay our debt of sin; come to turn away the wrath of God we deserve and did so by dying in the place of those who believe on His name.

God works through is people. From the very beginning of the church, from the first sermon on through the rest of the book of Acts, what is the church? The church is a community, a people constantly seeking opportunity to gather together for learning, encouragement, accountability and worship. After the first sermon preach by Peter, what did this new community set out to do? We read of it in Acts 2:42 and 46:

Acts 2:42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2:46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart...

The point is that the church alive is a church of community, a gathering people devoted to God's Word, devoted to one another, devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the work that Jesus began to do and teach and continues to do and teach through gathering such as ours this morning and every time we commit ourselves to meeting with one another.

Of course there is much more to say, but we have run out of time. Let me close by saying that it would appear that Luke may have intended to write yet another sequel to Acts. For the book of Acts ends rather abruptly with Paul arriving at Rome for his first imprisonment. But maybe it is better for us that it does end with a sense of incompleteness, for it reminds us that we have work to do; that we have been called, like these first church members, to be vibrant, vocal and bold witnesses of Jesus Christ, proclaiming His death for our sins; His resurrection as our life and His grace as that which transforms us into Christlikeness. May God bless our study of His church and cause us to become all He desires for His glory and the exaltation of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

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