

You are my witnesses

The message of
the Acts of the Apostles

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Preface

Christians have always found the book of Acts to be enjoyable, exciting and encouraging reading. Here, most personally and immediately, are our own 'roots' as the followers of Jesus. It is the history of the Christian's beloved country, the body of Christ, and the description of what it means to be a citizen of heaven while living upon the earth. Whereas the four Gospels expound the person and work of Jesus as the Saviour who came to save his people from their sins, the book of Acts recounts how the Holy Spirit came and savingly applied the message of the gospel to multitudes of people across the Roman world, through the ministry of the apostles and the newborn church of the New Testament era. If the Gospels focus on the accomplishment of redemption, Acts describes the application of redemption. If the Gospels tell us what the gospel *is*, Acts tells us what the gospel *does*.

Acts is unique in that it is pre-eminently the history of *the work of the Holy Spirit* in the church. The key to the meaning of Acts lies in two themes from Jesus' closing ministry among his disciples. The first, prior to his death on the cross, is his promise of 'another Counsellor', who would lead the disciples into 'all

truth' (John 14:16; 16:13). The second, from after his resurrection, is the promise of the 'Great Commission', in terms of which they were called to preach the gospel to the whole world in the assurance that he would be with them always, 'to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:18-20). These two great promises come together in Acts, as Luke tells the story of the first thirty years of the Christian church. These are the 'acts' of the Holy Spirit, the second Counsellor, who is as surely and objectively present with the people of God as was Jesus, their first Counsellor, in his ministry upon earth. Jesus goes; the Holy Spirit comes. And the result is that God's people are enabled to do 'even greater things' than he had done while with us in the flesh (John 14:12). The birth, growth and development of the New Testament church, including her ministry at the end of the second millennium since Christ, is unintelligible apart from these foundational truths. Acts, rightly understood, establishes that the normative condition of true churches is that of enjoying the poured-out presence of the Holy Spirit in her ministry and in the heart of every believer.

That this appears to be contradicted by the evident powerlessness and lifelessness of much of what is called the church is an argument, not for his non-existence or powerlessness, but for the need of reformation and revival by the Holy Spirit, and the vigorous proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not depend on how we handle the question of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is not a 'charismatic' issue. Even if, as is argued in these pages, the special gifts of the apostolic period have ceased, the church remains 'apostolic' in everything that is of the essence of being the church of Jesus Christ. We are not less apostolic on account of the closure of the canon of Scripture and the cessation of revelation-word gifts. The living presence of the Holy Spirit is the very heart of

the apostolic age, and that will mark the progress of the gospel church until the day the Lord returns.

Acts is also unique in that it sets out the New Testament's *doctrine of the church* in the practical context of the dynamics of a generation of church growth. Beginning, as it were, from a standing start, the church spreads as an organism, instituted and organized by the revealed Word of God. The ministry and government did not evolve, as men put their minds to the best practical way to run things. Rather, the Lord set apart men to serve him in the 'body of Christ'. The fact that we have multiplied so many conflicting forms of church government over the centuries is a testimony to how our itch for visibly grander organization so easily overpowers the simple structure with which God endowed the church at the beginning. The church of the apostles rebukes the ecclesiastical bureaucracies and hierarchies on both sides of the Reformation and calls for a return to the unadorned elegance of the New Testament way. Of this, more later. Suffice it to say that it is the conviction of this commentator that if the church of Acts is in any sense a model for us today—and there can be no doubt that it is—then it at least argues that the prelate- and committee-ridden churches of our day represent church government 'gone to seed'. They are, for the most part, unrecognizable in the pages of the New Testament.

Last, but not least, it is striking how the *evangelistic impulse* bursts from every page of Acts. The church marched across the ancient world on a powerful wave of enthusiasm for Jesus Christ. The recapture of this open-faced, unashamed and self-sacrificial love for Jesus and for lost men and women is surely the most pressing need for everyone who professes to be a Christian. Luke conveys a dynamic sense of the spiritual warfare in which the church was engaged. Acts is the record of costly

campaigning against a fiercely resistant enemy, over the eternal destiny of lost men and women. The sounds of battle echo from almost every scene. But so also does the scent of victory, as lives are changed and the light of Christ spreads from nation to nation! The message for our day could not be clearer. We too have a world to win for Christ! We too must reap, or our world will perish!

The following exposition is intended to be accurate, readable and practical. I have kept discussion of technical exegetical points to a minimum and indicate in the notes where help may be found on some of the more vexed questions. My hope and prayer is that something of the liveliness of the exultant spirit of the apostles and their church may shine afresh in our hearts and lift up our hearts to Jesus, our Saviour and our King!

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Part I
The Day of Pentecost
Acts 1–3

1

Prelude to Pentecost

Please read Acts 1

'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised' (Acts 1:4).

Had Jesus Christ never risen from the dead, it is most unlikely that we would ever have heard of him or his disciples. All would have melted into the oblivion of falsified prophecy and unfulfilled promise. How, then, did the shattered followers of Jesus become the vanguard of a faith which within three centuries would dominate the Roman world? The answer is that Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead! As the *risen* Saviour, he appeared to the eleven disciples and, over a period of forty days, gently ministered to them in their confusion and discouragement, rekindling their spiritual lives and welding them into an effective team for the preaching of the gospel message of salvation. During this time the watchword was 'Wait!' They were to 'wait for the gift [the] Father promised' (1:4). In four specific matters they had to be prepared for the

work they were to do: there was a message to proclaim (1:1-2), a promise to receive (1:3-5), a vision to grasp (1:6-11) and a leadership to be revived (1:12-26).

A message to proclaim (1:1-2)

The economy of Luke's introduction is breathtaking. In one sentence he outlines three basic characteristics of the apostolic church.

The continuity of the message (1:1)

The 'former book' is Luke's Gospel. Luke presents Acts as the sequel and, not least, the divinely inspired account of the birth and progress of Christ's body, the church. This is no mere collage of myths and legends, compiled and concocted by men who wished to provide a rationale for their preconceived faith. This is sober history, as is also the history of Jesus of Nazareth.

A Christ-centred message (1:1-2)

Luke, in his Gospel, 'wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up into heaven'. Christ both *did* and *taught*, the point being that Jesus' message was confirmed by his pattern of life and, not least, the miracles which he performed. He proved himself to be 'a teacher who has come from God' (John 3:2). Furthermore, the implication is that what Jesus *began* to do and teach will *continue* to be taught and done through the ministry of the apostles. It is one continuous work of revealing the fulness of gospel salvation in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:3).

Chosen and equipped (1:2)

Those who truly speak for Jesus do not appoint themselves. The apostles were *chosen* by the Lord and *instructed through the Holy Spirit*. 'We should be convinced of the divine calling of the apostles,' says John Calvin, 'so that we should learn to have regard, not to men, but to the Son of God from whom the call

comes ... that no one may claim the honour for himself.¹ We may also be confident of the message, because it is the work of the Holy Spirit as he leads Jesus' disciples to minister the gospel.

A promise to receive (1:3–5)

Jesus never leaves his followers to fend for themselves, without the necessary resources with which to serve him effectively. Thus it was, says Luke, that 'after his suffering', Jesus showed himself to the apostles and 'gave many convincing proofs that he was alive' (1:3). Over the period of 'forty days' prior to his ascension, the risen Jesus—living proof of the resurrection and his victory over sin and the grave—gave the Eleven a refresher course in all he had earlier taught them.² Luke sums up this teaching under two general headings: the kingdom of God and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The kingdom of God (1:3)

The kingdom of God is simply the rule of God. At its heart it is the acknowledgement of God as King. In the Old Testament period it had been manifested in and through Israel. The Davidic monarchy in particular, promised in Deuteronomy 17, afforded a picture of the better kingdom to come—that of the Messiah, who would be revealed in the fulness of time (Daniel 2:44; 7:13–14). Finally, with the advent of Christ, that kingdom was said to be 'near' (Mark 1:15). His life, death, resurrection and, as yet, future bodily return at the end of the age seal the coming of the kingdom (Acts 17:31; Philippians 2:10–11).

This kingdom has come into a world which largely resists its claims. It overlaps with the present age in which evil remains unvanquished. At Jesus' first coming, writes F. F. Bruce, 'the age to come invaded this present life; at his second coming the age to come will have altogether superseded this present age'³ (Fig. 1).

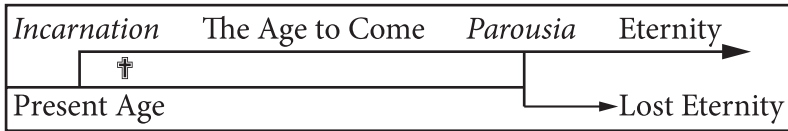


Figure 1: The overlap of God's kingdom and the present age

Christians belong to both kingdoms (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1–3)—having become citizens of God's kingdom by faith in Christ. 'The beginning of this kingdom,' says Calvin, 'is regeneration; the end and fulfilment of it is blessed immortality.'⁴ God's kingdom is not *of* this world, but is very definitely *in* this world and Christians are called to live here and now in terms of their higher allegiance to their true King, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is sovereignly in control of both—'head over everything for the church' (Ephesians 1:22).

The baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:4–5)

The release of the power of God's kingdom upon the apostles and the church was to come with the decisive endowment of a gift from God: 'in Jerusalem' and 'in a few days' they would be 'baptized with the Holy Spirit'. This had already been foreshadowed by the water-baptism of John (1:5; Luke 3:16). Jesus had spoken of the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39; 14:16, 26; 16:13) and had given a pledge of the as yet future Pentecost on the day of his resurrection (John 20:22). The significance of this event can hardly be overestimated. George Smeaton rightly called it 'the greatest event in all history, next to the incarnation and atonement',⁵ for it would be the official inauguration of the new order of history in Jesus Christ. For the apostles themselves, and for all believers ever after, it would mean experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in terms of an explicit personal manifestation of his presence in our innermost being and in a way never before known in the life of the people of God. The Holy Spirit, as the promised Comforter, took the

place of Christ's bodily presence.⁶ An unparalleled, irreversible transformation would take place in the way in which men and women would come to know God.

The fulness of God's light, shining in the face of Jesus Christ, would now be grasped by everyone who believes in the Saviour through the renewing and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in the heart.

A vision to grasp (1:6–11)

The apostles had a lot to learn. 'Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' they asked (1:6). They seemed to think that 'the kingdom' would be a restored theocracy—a revived Jewish state—like David's monarchy, only with greater glory under Jesus' kingship. But this betrayed a deficient grasp of the scope of the gospel.

A lack of vision (1:6)

They had no vision for the future *worldwide* extension of the kingdom. 'Israel' was as wide as they could see. Their eyes did not yet reach beyond the horizon to a world of many tongues and nations, which would be gathered in by the preaching of the gospel. This arose, of course, from a failure to understand the *spiritual* nature of the kingdom, which, in the coming age (the New Testament era), would be characterized by the rule of Christ in the hearts of believers, bringing every aspect of life and thought captive to Christ. To 'restore the kingdom to Israel' looked backwards to a national, temporal and discretely local manifestation of divine lordship. True restoration, however, was to be much more than turning back the clock, even to the best of the past. It was to mean nothing less than the universal manifestation of the age to come in the present age. It was to be heaven on earth in the hearts, lives, labours and societies of men, as these became transformed by the power of the gospel.

Jesus' programme for the church (1:7–8)

Jesus answered the apostles' question directly. There was to be *no date-setting* about the Day of the Lord. It would not be an 'at this time' kind of thing. The full establishment of the kingdom would take time—time in which they and others must serve the Lord in the world. Knowing the date would not have helped them anyway, especially if they had known it was thousands of years in the future. They must meanwhile focus on their commission. Scripture teaches clearly that the date of the consummation of the kingdom is hidden in the secret will of the absolutely sovereign God who foreordains all that comes to pass (1:7; Mark 13:32–33).⁷

Meanwhile, Christ's followers would be *equipped* for the task, for they would 'receive power' when the Holy Spirit came upon them (1:8). The implication, later to be confirmed in the experience of the church, is that, once come, the Holy Spirit would always remain to empower the true church while the world lasts. The church would never be left to act in her own strength, but would be enabled to follow the clear leading and working of the Spirit.

They were to be *witnesses* to Jesus to the ends of the earth (1:8). Spirit-filled power is not political, but evangelical. It is designed to 'bring salvation to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:6; Acts 13:47). They had work to do—as Calvin puts it, 'They must fight before they can hope to triumph.'⁸ The word 'witness' is the Greek *martur*—the origin of the English 'martyr'. Witnessing for Christ is costly and self-sacrificial. The geographic references anticipate the outline of Acts, from Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1–11:18) and the ends of the earth (Acts 11:19–28:31).

The ascension—confirmation and commission (1:9–11)

Jesus' resurrection appearances were all distinct visitations

from his place of exaltation in glory at the right hand of God. He did not hide away somewhere on earth in between these appearances. The ascension is the final 'disappearance' of Christ and marks the end of his forty days with the disciples. Pentecost would follow ten days later. Jesus therefore departed in a style designed to convey finality. Even then it was not 'Farewell', but 'Au revoir', for as the apostles stood gazing at the heavens, two angelic messengers appeared to tell them that Jesus would return from heaven in a similar manner to that in which he had just departed! What is most striking is the initial question of the angels. It sounds as if they are chiding the apostles for being amazed at what has happened: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?' This seems hardly fair. After all, if the pastor ascended through the church ceiling at the end of a service, we would all be inclined to look upward in amazement!

What, then, is the import of these words? It seems to me that this is the 'application' of which the ascension itself is the 'sermon'. The apostles have been confirmed in their calling to be Christ's witnesses in the world. Jesus' appearing to them cements the absolute truth of the gospel message. The ascension then signals their imminent entrance upon their great commission to preach Christ throughout the world. The angels' question says, 'Now you must be up and doing. You must prepare your hearts for the great work the Lord is giving you to do! Looking up into heaven is therefore inappropriate. He will indeed come back in the same way. But, being assured of that fact, you must not spend any time looking up into the sky in anticipation of the event. Rather, you must set your eyes upon the work he is giving you to do!'

This challenge ought to be ringing in our ears today as freshly as in that moment when it was first uttered. Yet it often finds modern Christians indulging in our versions of 'sky-watching'!

The date-setters and prophecy-mongers are sky-watching for the Second Coming, their enthusiasm apparently undiminished by the fact that Jesus has expressly forbidden such speculations, and the embarrassing reality that an expanding list of exploded false prophecies litters the past and brings a reproach on the gospel! The sermon-tasters and the seminar-hounds likewise gaze skywards for ever fresher 'insights', while the world perishes for lack of real Christian witness! In point of fact, we need neither wait nor look into the sky, because that for which the apostles waited—the Holy Spirit's outpouring—is a reality now! (1 Corinthians 12:13). We *are* witnesses for Jesus! Let us stop dreaming and get on with the job!

A leadership to be revived (1:12–26)

The disciples remained in Jerusalem and 'joined together constantly in prayer' (1:12–14).⁹ 'Before they were first sent forth,' writes Matthew Henry, 'Christ spent time in prayer for them, and now they spent time in prayer for themselves.'¹⁰ There were, of course, only eleven apostles, when there should have been twelve. The defection of Judas Iscariot still cast a shadow over the infant church and represented a breach in the completeness of the apostolate! This posed a question: how could the church enter upon her ministry in the world without some definitive restoration from the damage done by Judas?

Surely it was to address this problem—the need for the visible renewal of the leadership—that Peter convened the meeting recorded in 1:15–26. Peter's opening greeting, 'Brothers' (literally, 'brothers men'—*adelphoi andres*), indicates an all-male gathering, perhaps an *ad hoc* assembly of the leading disciples of Jesus, protoelders meeting in what looks very like a pre-run of the later mature 'Council of Jerusalem' (Acts 15).¹¹ Clearly the church had begun to function as an organism, with a body-life and a spiritual government and leadership, even before Pentecost.

The failure of Judas Iscariot (1:16–20)

Judas Iscariot is the archetypal traitor. What is often overlooked is that the tragedy of Judas is also the failure of *leadership*. As such it has the utmost relevance for the plague of moral failure among the leadership of churches in our own day. Judas was a disciple and one of the Twelve. For three years he had ‘shared in this ministry’, says Peter (1:17). He was *not* the kind of person one expects to go over to the opposition. Nevertheless, he apostatized from his calling and ministry and rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. ‘What will it avail us’, asks Matthew Henry, ‘to be added to the number of Christians, if we partake not of the spirit and nature of Christians?’

Luke records the details of Judas’ tragic death (1:18–19). According to Matthew’s account, Judas ‘hanged himself’ (Matthew 27:5). Luke adds the gruesome detail that as he fell, ‘His body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.’¹² Later on, Judas’ blood-money for betraying Jesus—the thirty pieces of silver—was put to the purchase of a field (the Potter’s Field) to be a cemetery (see Matthew 27:6–7). In this sense, ‘Judas bought a field.’ Appropriately enough, the local people were soon to call that field ‘Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood’—thereby fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy of the final rejection of the Messiah (Zechariah 11:12–13; Jeremiah 32:6–9; Matthew 27:9).¹³

Judas’ death itself, says Peter, was the fulfilment of Scripture prophecy: ‘Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas ...’ (1:16). Peter goes on to quote from two of the psalms to prove the point (1:20). Psalm 69:25 is applied to the *removal* of Judas from this earthly scene: ‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it.’ The immediate context in Psalm 69:22–29 is directed at the reprobate enemies of the Lord and calls for divine justice to be meted out. Psalm

109:8, on the other hand, is applied to the *replacement* of Judas by another in his office as one of the apostolate: 'May another take his place of leadership.' This reaches beyond the judgement upon Judas and provides the scriptural basis for the choice of a successor. We are reminded of the more general principle that God's purposes can never be frustrated—as Matthew Henry puts it, 'Christ's cause shall never be lost for want of witnesses.'¹⁴

A new apostle (1:21–26)

The number of apostles had been 'fixed by Jesus to correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Luke 22:30; Matthew 19:28)'.¹⁵ Filling the vacancy was therefore not a matter of administrative efficiency, but a specific requirement of God's purpose for the church as revealed in Scripture. 'Therefore it is necessary,' says Peter (1:21). The leadership of the apostolic church must be *complete*. Notice also that this reconstitution of the Twelve is a once-for-all action of the Holy Spirit in the church. This is not contradicted, but rather confirmed, by the later calling of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. This was also a once-for-all appointment and only serves to emphasize that all modern attempts to choose 'apostles' entirely ignore the unique conditions surrounding the true apostolate appointed by Christ.¹⁶ Notice that Judas' replacement had to be 'a witness with [them] of his resurrection'—a simple fact that both defines who may be an apostle and settles for ever the invalidity of any claim for a continuing office of apostle. We are very definitely in the post-apostolic period!

Matthias was chosen at the leading of the Holy Spirit. First, two men were selected as fulfilling the stated requirements for an apostle, possibly by common consent of the entire company present. Then, lots were cast to choose between them. The lot fell upon Matthias and was seen as conclusive as to the mind of God in the matter (Proverbs 16:33). This is the last occasion in

which this venerable Old Testament method of finding God's will was used, for hereafter the Holy Spirit would lead the church in the setting apart of her ordained leadership.¹⁷

Lessons for leadership

Allowing for the unique character of both the apostolic leadership and the choice of Matthias, we must still reckon with the fact that this affords us important lessons for the leadership of the New Testament church today. All Scripture is designed not merely to *inform* our intellect, but to *reform* our faith and practice. It would be a mistake to let the uniqueness of the event described here become a reason for failing to reflect on what does continue to apply to the church in succeeding generations. Consider the following points:

1. It is often assumed that nominal, lukewarm church members are the greatest hindrance to the progress of churches and the gospel. As great a problem as this is, Scripture suggests that the *failure of leadership*—‘the Judas factor’—is a greater enemy by far. Backsliding members can damage a church and eventually reduce it to impotence, but an apostate pastor, or ungodly elders and deacons, can destroy it in no time at all. Heresy, like Marxist revolution, is a movement of the élite, not the ordinary people. It is talented, but unbelieving, leaders who spearhead the decline of churches. Furthermore—and we saw this with the ‘tele-evangelist’ scandals in the USA in the 1980s—millions of people outside the church can be confirmed in their contempt for Christ and the gospel by the hypocrisy and immorality of his erstwhile servants. Beware of ‘false teachers’!

2. True leadership is exercised in response to the *call of Christ* and in *obedience to God's Word*. Judas had the former outwardly, but denied the latter inwardly. Judas stands for ever as the proof that a man may exercise leadership in the church and be

a dissembler and an unbeliever. Pray that the Lord would send men after God's own heart to be your pastors and elders!

3. True leadership is a matter of *heart-commitment* to the Lord, allied to God's call and God's gifts. Today, leadership is too often defined in terms of techniques which will produce success that is quantifiable. In churches this means numbers—programmes, buildings and the like. In Scripture, however, it is imitation that is at the heart of effective leadership—the imitation of godly leaders, who themselves are imitators of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 4:16). Leadership is from the heart and then from the front—by example as well as precept (Hebrews 13:7).

4. Leadership in churches is to be *collegiate*. There is to be no 'one-man band' ministry and no demagogic pulpiteering. A plurality of elders is to lead each local church. Decisions are to be collective—most significantly, they are to emerge from the concert of unified prayer and devotion to the Lord (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-7).

5. Leadership is *service*, not prestige and power. There is, to be sure, authority in church leadership that is powerful even to the extent of touching on eternal things (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5). Christ was the suffering Servant who was obedient to death, even death on a cross. His servants must lead in terms of the fellowship of his sufferings and in the giving of themselves for those within their charge and for whom they must give account (Hebrews 13:17).

The renewal of the apostolic leadership was the prelude to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It remains a continuing challenge to our own need for and practice of Spirit-filled leadership in the church.