

*“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:7*

For several reasons I believe this is a good time for us to study *The Book of Acts*. First of all, *Acts* offers an important complement to our recent study of *The Book of Revelation*. John Stott encourages believers who want a full understanding of the early church to read *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Book of Revelation* side by side.

“Both tell much the same tale of the church and its experience of conflict, but from a different perspective. Luke in *Acts* chronicles what unfolded on the stage of history before observers; John in the *Revelation* enables us to see the hidden forces at work. In *Acts* human beings oppose and undermine the church; in *Revelation* the curtain is lifted and we see the hostility of the devil, himself, depicted as an enormous red dragon, aided and abetted by two grotesque monsters and a lewd prostitute. Indeed the *Revelation* is a vision of the age-long battle between the Lamb and the dragon, Christ and Satan, Jerusalem the holy city and Babylon the great city, the church and the world. Moreover, it can hardly be a coincidence that the symbolism of the dragon’s three allies in *Revelation* corresponds to the devil’s three weapons wielded against the church in the early chapters of the *Acts*, that is persecution, moral compromising, and the danger of exposure to false teaching when the apostles became distracted from their chief responsibility, namely ‘the ministry of the Word and prayer’” (John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church & The World*, 88).

Second, *Acts* focuses our attention on the work that Jesus *began* to do, and that now *continues* through the Holy Spirit and the Body of Christ, the Church. Instead of seeing Luke’s Gospel as telling the story of Jesus and Luke’s second volume, the Book of *Acts* telling the story of the Church, it is best to see the ministry of Christ described in two stages. In *Acts*, Jesus continues his ministry from heaven through the Holy Spirit by the Church. The Gospel of Luke describes his earthly ministry and *Acts* describes the beginning of his heavenly ministry, which continues today, even in the life and ministry of this church. Jesus did not complete his work after his resurrection, ascension and gift of the Holy Spirit, he continued it. We believe in both the historical Jesus and the contemporary Jesus.

Third, *Acts* emphasizes the practical challenges facing a dynamic Church. These challenges include choosing leaders, living under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, preaching the gospel, overcoming ethnic and cultural barriers in Christ, becoming the church in teaching, fellowship, worship and prayer, and engaging in world mission. The Greek word for *Acts* is *praxis*, meaning action or practice. Faith in Christ is neither static nor theoretical, but instead dynamic and practical. In the life of our church it is a good time to see how the early church dealt with these challenges and experienced growth.

Fourth, *Acts* reminds us of the close and dynamic interplay between the human element and the divine in the life of the Church. The traditional title of the book is *The Acts of the Apostles*,

which is descriptive of its contents. Luke groups his material around the apostles: first, Peter and John (1-8), then Peter on his own (10-12), followed by James and the Jerusalem Council (15), and finally a special focus on Paul (9, 13-28). But the title, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, is also appropriate, because the Book of Acts focuses on the promise, gift, outpouring, baptism, fullness, power, witness and guidance of the Holy Spirit (Stott, 33). It is important that both the human and divine dimensions are seen clearly, for to stress the one at the expense of the other is to misinterpret the finely tuned relationship between human action and divine action. In essence, Luke's second volume is about the *Acts of Jesus by his Spirit through the apostles and the church*.

Fifth, Acts describes the beginning of the early church, but it remains the "beginning" that the church never outgrows or moves beyond. The Church today is measured, evaluated and compared to the First Church of Acts. If we do not see ourselves in this dynamic description of cross-cultural ministry, persecution, worship, evangelism and church growth then we are out of sync with the will of God, the testimony of the Lord Jesus, and the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

A sixth reason for studying Acts is personal, but it may stimulate your own praying mind to become aware of your personal reasons for studying Acts at this time. This study is timely for me because I have just returned from Ghana, which qualifies from my experience as one of the ends of the earth, and I have seen the First Church of Acts planted in the northern region of Ghana. I have been reminded once again of the powerful dynamic of the Holy Spirit transcending language and cultural barriers, national borders, tribal customs, ethnic divisions, spiritual powers, inherent sinfulness and systemic evil to give rise to the Body of Christ, the Church. Andrew and I had a wonderful time and I think he would agree with me that by the grace of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit he experienced a deep bond in Christ with his African brothers and sisters. In working alongside of them, he experienced the Spirit's gift of cross-cultural ministry and service. I can honestly say that Andrew's ability to relate and befriend the Ghanians, understand their culture, work with their language and customs, and be an encouragement to David Mensah exceeded anything I could do.

I had the privilege of teaching 32 Ghanaian lay pastors. These are farmers and fishermen who are devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ who lead village congregations scattered throughout the region. We spent five hours a day for five days studying the books of Revelation and Hebrews. I am confident in the Spirit that the teaching will not be forgotten by these pastors, but it is Andrew who will be missed the most by David and some of the workers in Carpenter.

A seventh reason for studying Acts applies to our particular church. The church in Acts underwent constant change and transition. Some of that pressure for change was due to persecution, some of it was due to opportunities for advancing the Gospel. But the church in Acts did not have time to sit back and rest on its laurels. Acts describes a vital, dynamic, highly participatory church. The apostles were on the move and the churches faced constant pressures. Our local church is also in transition. Kevin Womack is preaching today at Fletcher Hills

Presbyterian Church and the congregation there will vote to confirm his call as their designated pastor. Kevin has served us well and this is an opportunity to extend and stretch his ministry. He has considered this possibility with the blessing and encouragement of many, including myself. Jim Metts is retiring from his position as Church Administrator next week. He has been a tremendous help to us all and to me personally. He has fulfilled all his responsibilities as a true and exemplary servant leader. In Jim's absence the Lord has led us to Riley McRae, a mature and gifted believer, who is well-qualified to assume this position. Riley has enthusiastically accepted this responsibility as the call of God and we look forward to working with him. We continue to face great challenges as a congregation and great opportunities, making the book of Acts important for us to study.

I was impressed at this week long pastor's conference in Ghana that I never saw anybody real frustrated or hurt or angry. People served each other willingly, readily and effectively. They gave each other a lot of patience. It was hot even for them but they never lost their cool. I was struck by how long their fuses were and by contrast how short our fuses are! Can you imagine a seven day conference of 40 pastors and workers with no evident sign of tension or disgruntled behavior? It certainly provided me a goal to work for in the fellowship of believers I serve.

Luke's preface for his gospel serves as a preface for Acts as well (Lk 1:1-4). Both volumes are dedicated to Theophilus and written in Luke's Greek literary style. Luke was an educated doctor, who had undergone a thorough education (Col 4:14). He was also the traveling companion of Paul and had lived in Palestine for at least two years, so he had sufficient time to research his two volumes. He wrote as an historian, careful to give an accurate account by drawing on eyewitness testimony. He also wrote as a diplomat, commending the church to the Roman authorities. The followers of Jesus Christ were not forming a new subversive religion but were in fact "the purest form of Judaism" (Stott, 27). Christ came in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Finally, he wrote as a theologian-evangelist, proclaiming a theology of salvation prepared by God the Father from all eternity, given by Christ through his life, death and resurrection and offered to all people by the Holy Spirit.

Luke's introduction is framed by two promises: the promise of the Holy Spirit and the promise of the second coming of Christ. It consists of two commands: wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit and witness to the ends of the earth. And it includes two questions. The first question is asked by the apostles, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" and the second question is asked of the apostles, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?" These two promises, two commands, and two questions, provide an excellent introduction to the Book of Acts.

## **Two Promises**

It is clear that Luke never would have been satisfied with a Gandhi-style, parable-telling, nonconformist Rabbi. Writing as an historian, Luke presented the risen Lord Jesus Christ who gave "many convincing proofs that he was alive" (1:3). There was no separation in his mind between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith. They were one in the same with a continuous incarnational ministry. Jesus, the Man of the

Spirit, became the giver of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing less historical or real about these developments than Jesus walking the streets of Jerusalem or teaching in the town of Galilee. The Holy Spirit takes what was begun in the womb of Mary and continues the Gospel of New Birth to the ends of the earth. All of us who have been moved by the passion of Christ, and who have been impressed with Jesus' soul-searching, life-transforming strategy, must see how the work of Christ is carried forward into a new global community with a world-wide mission.

Luke says that Jesus appeared to the apostles over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. It is conceivable that what Jesus said before his suffering in the upper room was shared again in preparation for the coming Spirit of God.

"I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because people do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. . . . When he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (Jn 16:7-15).

It is important for all those who follow Jesus to consider carefully his words commending the Holy Spirit. How could it be for our good that Jesus should go away? In what sense are we "better off" because Jesus ascended and gave the Spirit? Those who have a nostalgic longing for Jesus' intimacy with the twelve disciples and a nurtured rejection of the church ought to reconsider the work of the Spirit in the life of the church. We will study, in greater detail and insight, the life of the Spirit, but it is important to emphasize that the same Jesus who worked with the twelve is the Jesus who walks among the "seven golden lampstands." The Holy Spirit universalizes the presence and power of the ascended Lord. As Gordon Fee writes,

"The church is the arena in which that 'heavenly invasion' plays itself out. Because the Spirit has 'invaded' and brought a new, forward-looking orientation to the empowered church, because its redemption is sealed and guaranteed, because God's nature has 'infected' human hearts, and because the very power that raised Jesus from the dead is accessible, the church should live differently—as 'a colony of heaven.' We throw ourselves into the present, precisely because the future is already secured."

The coming of the Spirit is God's promise fulfilled: his presence returned to his people. The Gift of the Spirit is received by the entire church and universalizes the mission of the church to the entire world. The Spirit's ministry includes both fruit and gifts. Christ's nature and ministry must be recreated in character (fruit) and in service (gifts) and both are intended for the benefit of the believing community and serve to commend the gospel to a needy world.

The second promise that frames the introduction is the promise of the return of Jesus: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go to heaven" (1:11). The bodily ascension of Jesus is consistent with the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It is not

without purpose that Jesus' physical appearances are described, and that he ate with the disciples and that he was literally touched. The reality of his on-going full humanity is given as proof of the resurrection. We have a tendency to feel that the world beyond our present experience is more ethereal and unreal, that heaven is only a state of mind, but what if it is, as the Bible suggests, more real than our present existence? We have trouble grasping that the new nature, exemplified by Jesus' glorified, resurrected body, is the actual fulfillment of what God-intended bodily existence to be. Jesus resurrected body is the first sign of the new creation. The literal space, time, forty day appearances of Jesus ended with a literal ascension. Jesus might have transitioned from his earthly state to his heavenly state by vanishing from the scene as he did on previous occasions, but the fact that "he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight" served two important purposes. First, it indicated that "he had gone for good. . . . This time his departure was final. So they were not to wait around for his next resurrection appearance" (Stott, 49). Second, the bodily ascension was indicative of a new nature. C. S. Lewis comments, "Perhaps mere instantaneous vanishing would make us most comfortable. A sudden break between the perceptible and the imperceptible would worry us less than an kind of joint" (Miracles, 160). What bothers us is this talk of "vertical movement" as if Jesus was rising up into space. However, while the bodily ascension did not imply that heaven was somewhere up in space, it did imply that the new nature represented by Jesus was as real as the old nature—only more so and as human as the old nature—only now in a new, glorified self. If the old nature could be said to be made in the image of God, how much more the new nature? It should not surprise us that the God who made the world and called it good promised to make a place for us. As Jesus said, "I am going there to prepare a place for you" (Jn 14:2). "Christian teaching," writes Lewis, "teaches that Heaven is not merely a state of the spirit but a state of the body as well: and therefore a state of Nature as a whole" (165). The angelic announcement stresses the continuity between the historical Jesus and the coming Jesus—the resurrected Jesus and the returning Jesus: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

## **Two Commands**

Like the two promises, the two commands have an immediate horizon and a future horizon. The first command applied specifically to this transitional period. It was a temporal, occasional command, given while Jesus was eating with the apostles: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about" (1:4). The command was in effect during this pre-Pentecost period, but the principle that God's will and work proceeds our efforts ought to continue to impact the life of the church. If we do not wait upon God for the power, wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit we will never advance the cause of Christ. We must be careful not to deceive ourselves or others into thinking that the initiative lies with us or that it is left to us to come up with our own peculiar visions of the church.

The second command is phrased more as an order, "you will do this," than as commission, "you are authorized to do this." Clearly, Jesus intended it to be the non-negotiable, as-good-as-done directive that it was. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The concise mandate to mission provides "a kind of 'Table of Contents' for the book. Chapters 1-7 describe events in Jerusalem, chapter 8 mentions the scattering of the disciples 'throughout

Judea and Samaria' (8:1), and goes on to record the evangelization of a Samaritan city by Philip (8:5-24) and of 'many Samaritan villages' by the apostles Peter and John (8:25), while the conversion of Saul in chapter 9 leads on in the rest of the book to his missionary expeditions, and finally to his journey to Rome" (Stott, 43).

When Jesus issued this command he was addressing the apostles, but the obligation and responsibility of the command extends to all those who receive the power of the Holy Spirit. It was not only the apostles who were to be witnesses "to the ends of the earth," but all of us who are in Christ. As we study Acts we want to pay particular attention to the ways this witness takes place in the life of the church. We will see many ways that God turns ordinary believers into powerful witnesses. Missions, both close to home and to the ends of the earth, remains a priority for this congregation. I was very grateful for the church's support in my recent visit to Ghana. On the last night at the conclusion of the pastor's conference, David Mensah presented a bicycle to each of the 30 pastors. He announced that the bicycles had been provided by money sent from our church and that the costs for the entire week had been covered by money raised at our Bethlehem Bazaar. I don't think I have ever been in a place where a relatively small amount of money has gone so far and done so much. Nor have I been in a place where the gifts were more gratefully received. Several from our congregation have also contributed to buying an extended cab pick up truck and two motorcycles. These vehicles are great assets for the ministry and will be well used.

## **Two Questions**

Framed by the two promises and in the context of the two commands, Luke cites two questions. The first question was directed to Jesus by the apostles and the second question was asked of the apostles by the angels at the ascension. Both questions, the one the apostles asked and the one they were asked, reveal their lack of perception and their slowness to grasp what Jesus was about and what Jesus wanted them to do. If Jesus had not known his disciples better, surely his heart would have been dismayed when they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" John Calvin commented, "there are as many errors in this question as words" (Stott, 41). After all that Jesus had said, they still were operating under the old illusion of a political kingdom contained in territorial boundaries and defined by nationalism. They were still dreaming of ethnic superiority, political dominion and military power. Their vision of what they hoped Jesus would do amounted to spiritualizing secular power and exposed an understanding of success diametrically opposed to what Jesus envisioned. He chose to answer their question by challenging their notion of time, power and nationalism. He countered their notion of an immediate temporal kingdom by telling them, "It is not for you to know the times (chronoi) or dates (kairoi) the Father has set by his own authority." He countered their understanding of political power by telling them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." Jesus dismissed their notion of passivity. It was not a matter of what would be done to them or for them, but what would be done through them by the power of the Holy Spirit. He countered their understanding of nationalism by telling them, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." He replaced militancy and

outward coercion with missions and inner transformation. He replaced patriotism with evangelism and narrow nationalistic aspirations with transcultural, global missions. Instead of defining ourselves by ethnicity, race, gender and tribe, Jesus envisioned our identity shaped by the world-wide body of Christ.

The second question may appear to challenge only the apostles in the immediate moments following the ascension, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?” But in fact, the question challenges every follower of the Lord Jesus from the ascension to the second coming of Christ. If the first question, which was asked of Jesus, ignorantly presumed a false vision of the kingdom of God, the second question, rightly challenged every mission distracting debate, every self-gratifying wish-dream, every form of self-absorbed piety, every fascination with the next thing, and every nostalgic hankering for the way things were. Gazing up, no matter how pious or well-intentioned, serves as a substitute for going to the ends of the earth. No such contemplation excuses a lack of compassion for a lost world in need of Christ. Whether it is “unprofitable spiritual stargazing” or fixating on church growth market trends, the Holy Spirit challenges every diversion from the real work of serving Christ in a lost world.