

What Shall We Call It?

Text:

Acts 1:1-5

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Introduction:

What we have just read is the opening paragraph of the fifth book of the New Testament which in the English Bible bears the title, The Acts of the Apostles. It is unique among the books of the New Testament. There are four Gospels, but only one Book of Acts. It is of inestimable value as it is our primary source of knowledge for what happened in the Christian movement during its first thirty years of existence. There is much to be learned from it as we will discover as we make our way through it.

In this first study, I want us to think about what it is. I want us to ask the question: "When reading this book, what exactly am I reading?" The Bible is one book inasmuch as it is a single story of God's revelation of himself. But the one book is in the form of a collection of 66 different books. In this sense it is more like a library. Not all of the books on the shelves of the biblical library are the same type of book. So the first question we must ask about any biblical book is: "What kind of book is this, what exactly am I reading?"

Titles are our first clue to answering that question, but for titles to help they must be accurate, and we must understand what they mean. We are not clear when the New Testament books first began to bear the titles that they now bear. For some like Paul's Epistles, the titles are obvious, for others like the book of Acts they are less obvious. What we do know about what we call the Acts of the Apostles is that from the late second century it was known by this name, but with a variation. Some MSS have the title *The Acts of the Apostles*, but others leave off the articles and call it simply *Acts of Apostles* or *Acts of Apostolic Men*. The second is the more correct of the two. Outside of the first chapter which lists all of the twelve apostles when they choose Mathias to replace Judas Iscariot, other than Peter they are never mentioned again except one mention of John in chapter three, and James in chapter 12 where we are told that "About that time Herod the king (Herod Agrippa I) laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword."

In reality, Acts contains acts or deeds of only two apostles, Peter and Paul, and even Paul is never referred to as an apostle in Acts. In fact, we can divide the book into two parts based on these two men. In the first 12 chapters Peter is mentioned 53 times, but in chapters 15-28 only once in chapter fifteen when he gives his consent to Paul's Gentile mission at the Jerusalem Council. Paul first comes on the scene, not as Paul, but as Saul of Tarsus in chapter 7 at the stoning of Steven. Chapter 9 contains the story of his conversion. We first know him as Paul in Acts 13:9 in the first act of the first missionary journey, the confrontation with Elymas the magician where Luke says: "But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him." After this he is referred to as Paul 130 times and the name "Saul" only occurs in the passages where he recounts his conversion experience in chapters 22 and 26.

We know from other sources that the other Apostles did have active careers and did take the good news of Jesus Christ to many other places. If Luke had recorded all of their Acts there would have been many volumes to his account, but there is only one, and in that volume Peter is predominant in the first part and Paul in the second.

So if *The Acts of the Apostles* does not fully express what this books is all about, what might we call it? Let me suggest two other possible titles; not because I want to change the title, but in order to help us understand more clearly what this book is all about; what Luke was trying to communicate when he wrote it.

I. The Rest of the Story

Notice how the book begins. “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2). By speaking of a first book Luke is implying that what he is now writing is a second volume of an ongoing work. We know that the first book was what we call the Gospel of Luke which begins with these words:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4).

What Luke is doing, that the other Evangelists did not do, is continuing the story that begins in the Gospels beyond the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. By saying that in the first volume, or on his first scroll, he wrote about what Jesus began to and to teach at the beginning of the second scroll in the way that he does he is implying that in this second volume he is going to write about what Jesus continued to do and to teach by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.

This is an important point. As I said at the beginning, the Bible is one Story. We might say that the story is in three major parts. The first part is in the Old Testament. It is the story of God calling a man Abraham, and out of him creating a nation, Israel, through whom he would bring a Savior Messiah. The second part

of the story is the account of how that Savior Messiah came, what he taught us and what he did for us. His name was Jesus, and his story is contained in the four Gospels, but the story doesn't end there. God's goal in sending his Son, Jesus Christ into the world was, not just to redeem the nation Israel, but to save the world. His way of saving the world was to send out witnesses who would bear witness to what Jesus had said and done, who would tell his story in the power of the Holy Spirit so that individuals from all the nations and peoples of the earth might come to know him. He would form them into a people that would come to be known as His Church. So, simply put, the Old Testament is the story of God at work to save the world in the nation of Israel, the Gospels are the account of God at work saving the world through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and Acts is the beginning of the rest of the story, the account of how God is at work in the world bringing the nations to the knowledge of salvation through Jesus Christ through Holy Spirit empowered witnesses.

II. How the Good News Travelled from Jerusalem to Rome

This brings us to a second alternative title, the one, which in my opinion, most exactly expresses Luke's intentions: "How the Good News Travelled from Jerusalem to Rome". When we pay careful attention to how Luke has structured the entire book this is the title that best describes it. There are two key elements that we need to note in the structure of the book of Acts: first, the key verse which establishes the work that Jesus left for his apostles or witnesses, and secondly, six strategically located progress reports that trace the progress of the gospel as it makes its way from Jerusalem to Rome. Jerusalem is important because it is where everything had begun. Rome is important because it is the capital city of the Roman Empire and the most important city in the world at the time.

Everyone agrees that the key verse of Acts is chapter 1 verse 8. To get the full context we will read 6-8:

“So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This passage establishes two facts that are essential to understanding the book of Acts. First, God would continue his work of salvation on earth by sending the Holy Spirit to empower his people once Jesus had ascended into heaven. Once the Holy Spirit had come, he would empower, first the Apostles, then the entire Church to bear witness to Christ. This witness would begin in Jerusalem, progress to the surrounding areas, and continue to the uttermost parts of the earth. The book of Act will tell a part of the story of how this happened in the first thirty years immediately after the ascension of Christ.

Luke has indicated the stages in the progression of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome by placing brief progress reports at the end of each stage. The book divides up as follows:

- (a) 1:1—6:7; recounts the beginning of the Gospel in Jerusalem and the founding of the Jerusalem Church. It focuses on the preaching of Peter and concludes with these words: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).
- (b) 6:8—9:31; describes the spread of the faith throughout Judea following the martyrdom of Steven, followed by preaching in Samaria. It concludes with this summary: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied” (Acts 9:31).
- (c) 9:32—12:24; includes the conversion of the Saul of Tarsus who will become the key figure in the next stage of the book, the preaching of

- the gospel to the Gentiles, the extension of the Church to Antioch from which the mission to the Gentiles will be launched, and the conversion of Cornelius the Gentile through the preaching of Peter which will convince all of the Apostles that God has opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles. It concludes with this summary: “But the word of God increased and multiplied” (Acts 12:24).
- (d) 12:25 –16:5; tells how the Gospel extended into Asia Minor through Paul and Barnabas’ preaching tour through the province of Galatia. It concludes with the summary: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5).
- (e) 16:6—19:20; is the account of the further extension of the gospel into Europe with Paul preaching and planting churches in major Gentile cities such as Corinth and Ephesus. This section is summarized thus: “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20).
- (f) 19:21—28:31; is a long account of how Paul is arrested in Jerusalem, but eventually is taken to Rome where, although a prisoner, he preaches the gospel freely. The section, the entire book, and Luke’s two volume work conclude with this picture: “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31. (based on William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible, Acts*, pp. xvii, xviii).

Once we see this overall pattern to the book, we understand why it concludes the way it does. Some have asked why Luke does not record the death of Paul. There is no doubt that Luke has great respect for Paul. He had travelled and worked with him and loved him dearly, but in writing Acts he is not so much concerned with the messengers as he is with the message. His goal was to tell how the good news about Jesus Christ travelled from Jerusalem, an obscure corner of the Roman Empire, to the very center of the Empire, the city of Rome. With the gospel being preached freely in Rome and people responding to it his goal has been achieved. There are other important sub-themes in the book that we will

point out and develop as we make our way through it, but this is the main storyline, the one that we will need to be constantly aware of.

One final thing needs to be said. Your reaction to what has been said might be that this is all very interesting, but what interest does it have for us? For what reasons other than to know how the Christian Faith began should we read and study this book? The answer to that question is multifaceted and hopefully will become more transparent as we study the book, but the short answer for now is simply that the commission given the Apostles in Acts 1:8 to bear witness to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to all people everywhere applies to us just as much as it did to them. Seeing how they fulfilled their mission in the 1st century will help us understand how we can fulfill ours in the 21st.

