



BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

THE CHURCH of Jesus Christ began with one Man who first chose twelve men, and then later commissioned seventy others to go forth in ministry. After His ascension, the group gathered in the upper room. There, approximately 120 men and women were baptized in the Holy Spirit and received boldness and power to go forth and preach the good news of salvation through the blood of Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God.

The book of Acts is the historical account of the disciples who selflessly and sacrificially spread the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. It is the dynamic and vibrant link between the narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to the epistles

that follow. While the book is entitled “Acts of the Apostles,” it could more accurately be labeled “The Acts of Jesus as He worked through His followers by the Holy Spirit.”

It is widely accepted that Luke, a Gentile physician and writer of the book that bears his name, also authored this book. According to Bible History Online:

Scholars agree that Acts was written around 62 or 63 AD. It is interesting to note that Luke never intimated the event of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD within the book of Acts. Jerusalem is pictured as a currently thriving center of Judaism, with the temple service and sacrifices being carried out in a normal manner. After 70 AD everything changed and it would have been obvious if Luke had written Acts after 70 AD. Luke concludes Acts with Paul in Rome living in a hired house, and awaiting trial before Caesar (Acts 28:30). This would have been 61 or 62 AD obviously before the great persecution of Christians by Nero and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.²

Many also agree that Luke and Acts were meant to be

a two-volume endeavor, as the first verse of Acts closely links it to Luke:

I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up, after He had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen. (Acts 1:1–2 HCSB)

Some scholars surmise that Theophilus may have been an official of Rome with whom Luke wished to establish a credible foundation for his faith in Jesus Christ. Together, these two books of the New Testament written by Mark encompass about 30 percent of the biblical chronicle—more than that written by Paul.³ Acts is an eyewitness account of men and the might of the Holy Spirit working in and through them. Although Jesus had ascended into heaven, there was still work to be done—and He commissioned a group to carry on His mission. Those men faced unparalleled opposition while performing miracles and delivering—upon threat of death—the most important message the world would ever hear. Many of them did indeed die while assuming the task that God had called and anointed them to do.

Scottish Bible scholar and theologian Alexander MacLaren provided great insight into Luke's text:

It is the unfinished record of an incomplete work. The theme is the work of Christ through the ages, of which each successive depository of His energies can do but a small portion, and must leave that portion unfinished; the book does not so much end as stop. It is a fragment, because the work of which it tells is not yet a whole.

If, then, we put these two things—the beginning and the ending of the Acts—together, I think we get some thoughts about what Christ began to do and teach on earth; what He continues to do and teach in heaven; and how small and fragmentary a share in that work each individual servant of His has. . . . The book must be incomplete, because the work of which it is the record does not end until ‘He shall have delivered up the Kingdom to the Father, and God shall be all in all.’ So the work of each man is but a fragment of that great work. Every man inherits unfinished tasks from his predecessors, and leaves unfinished tasks to his successors.⁴

The one thread that links the first verse of Acts chapter one inexorably with the final verse in chapter twenty-eight is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and forgiveness of sin offered through His name alone. Perhaps in writing Acts, Luke was intent on convincing the multitudes of the authenticity of the ministry of the Messiah. Throughout the book, the apostles were used by the Holy Spirit to perform signs, wonders, and miracles during the time of transition from a ministry centered in Jerusalem to one with worldwide outreach. John Stott in his book *The Message of Acts* reveals how important was the preaching of God's Word through the sermons recorded in that text:

No fewer than nineteen significant Christian speeches occur in his second volume . . . there are eight by Peter (in chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11 and 15) . . . one each by Stephen and James . . . and nine by Paul (five sermons in chapters 13, 14, 17, 20, and 28, and four defense speeches in chapters 22 to 26). Approximately 20% of Luke's text is devoted to addresses by Peter and Paul; if Stephen's speech is added, the percentage rises to about 25%.⁵

What exactly, according to Acts 1:1–2, was the church

called to do? The work of Christ's disciples was to be one of spreading the good news—the story of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles were to take up the cross of Christ and engage in the pursuit of seeking and reconciling lost men and women to God the Father. Its message was, and still is, that of John 1:1, 14 (NKJV):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Before His departure, Jesus sat down with His disciples and imparted to them what has come to be known as the Great Commission:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with

you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20 NIV)

A walk through the book of Acts leaves the reader with the distinct impression that the disciples were determined to accept the charge given them. They were not walking the streets of Jerusalem, traversing dusty roads of Judea, or sailing the wide and dangerous seas of their own volition; they had a higher calling, a definite plan and purpose they were determined to fulfill. They were tools in the hands of God, employed to build His church.

Rather than write a biography on each of the twelve disciples, Luke included little about each of the inner circle. He could certainly have written at length about the lives of Peter, James, Paul, and John. He chose instead not to focus on the instrument but rather on the Master Builder. Peter fades from view in chapter 15; James upon his martyrdom in chapter 12. John finds a voice only in the first four chapters; Barnabas also drops from the narrative in chapter 15. Even Paul, the intrepid apostle, finds himself imprisoned in Rome in the final chapter of Luke’s missive. British evangelist, pastor, and Bible scholar G. Campbell Morgan commented on Acts:

When we come to the study of this book, therefore, we must understand that it is not merely a mechanical story of the journeying of Paul, or of the doings of Peter. It is intended to reveal to us the processes through which Christ proceeds in new power, consequent upon the things He began to do and teach, toward the ultimate and final victory, which we see symbolized in the mystic language of Revelation.⁶

Could it also be that Luke wanted readers in ages to come to know that the work of the church was accomplished by the hands of a group of men who fashioned their own doctrine? No, the gospel of Jesus Christ was carried forth by disciples who were hand-chosen to convey His message. They were not self-styled superstars with their own agendas and religious beliefs; they were the laborers sent forth into the harvest. They were eyewitnesses testifying to what they had experienced while walking the dusty Judean roads and hills with their Lord. They were the “called, chosen and faithful”⁷ servants of the Sovereign God.

The ministry of those men—and women—was productive and prolific—3,000 on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2); Phillip’s

witness to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8); Peter's ministry to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10); the conversion of Lydia and of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16). What produced this and many other conversion experiences in Acts? It was simply the obedience of dedicated men who responded to the urging of the Holy Spirit.

It was not, by any means, a calling devoid of suffering and harassment. Luke's account is as filled with tyranny as it is with transformation: Stephen was stoned; Peter and John were beaten and thrown into prison; James was killed with a sword; and later in his ministry, Paul was stoned, imprisoned, and beaten. It was a period fraught with danger and death. When Peter and John were released from prison to appear before the Sanhedrin, they vowed to continue to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Gamaliel, the leading Jewish teacher of his day and an unlikely champion, gave the following advice to the council members who were determined to kill the two apostles:

Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men! Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About 400 others joined him, but he was killed, and all his followers

went their various ways. The whole movement came to nothing. After him, at the time of the census, there was Judas of Galilee. He got people to follow him, but he was killed, too, and all his followers were scattered. So my advice is, leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God! (Acts 5:35–39 NLT)

Saul must have been incredulous! His mentor was actually defending the very people he had set out to destroy. Saul spewed forth threats; Gamaliel offered wisdom. Would the Sanhedrin succumb to such quiet guidance, or would its members stand and fight what Saul saw as a threat to the very existence of the Jews? Fortunately for the disciples—and eventually Saul himself—the group heeded Gamaliel’s wise words.

How did the men who faced imminent danger and martyrdom respond? Acts 5:41–42 reveals that the two disciples, Peter and John, rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to

suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (NKJV). With painful furrows sliced into their backs, the two moved again into the trenches and began to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who would listen.

The author of Hebrews provides additional insight into what those early believers endured:

Some were laughed at and their backs cut open with whips, and others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stoning and some by being sawed in two; others were promised freedom, if they would renounce their faith, then were killed with the sword. Some went about in skins of sheep and goats, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in dens and caves. They were hungry and sick and ill-treated—too good for this world. (Hebrews 11:36–38 TLB)

Before the day of Pentecost, these same individuals were frightened, cowering behind walls and locked doors. After baptism in the Holy Spirit a new boldness transformed them, a newfound confidence sustained them, and a previously unknown urgency to preach the kingdom of God and of His

Christ to the known world drove them. God knit together a diverse band of men and women from every social stratum and from every ethnicity to accomplish His work on earth. The Holy Spirit enlisted Barnabas (a rabbi), Simeon, who was called Niger (thought to have been a black man from Niger), Lucius (a Greek from a colony in Libya), Manaen (a foster brother of Herod), and Paul (a Pharisee and persecutor of the church). What an eclectic band of brothers, but what amazing feats they accomplished!

Early in the book, Luke makes clear what the purpose of the early church was to be. In Acts 6:4, he wrote, “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (NKJV). As a result, the church grew as the Word of God and the chronicle of the works of Jesus spread wherever the feet of those men touched the soil. Seeds were planted; lives were changed; “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47 NKJV).

The roots of today’s church are firmly embedded in the history of the early church in the book of Acts. Eusebius, the chronicler of the history of the church, wrote of the apostles:

Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Savior were scattered over the whole world. Thomas, tradition tells us, was chosen

for Parthia, Andrew for Scythia, John for Asia, where he remained till his death at Ephesus. Peter seems to have preached in Pontus, Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia, to the Jews of the Dispersion. (Cf. 1 Peter 1.1) Finally, he came to Rome where he was crucified, head downwards at his request. What need be said of Paul, who from Jerusalem as far as Illyricum preached in all the fullness the gospel of Christ (Romans 15:19), and later was martyred in Rome under Nero?⁸

Paul had written to the Ephesians that their faith was built upon the “foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20 NKJV). I’m reminded of the words of songwriter Edward Mote, who penned:

My hope is built on nothing less
 Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.
 I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
 But wholly trust in Jesus’ Name.⁹

When Luke laid down his stylus at the closing of his missive, he knew little of the deaths of those men who had

so faithfully served the early church. According to John Foxe, author of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, the twelve men who followed Jesus suffered immeasurable pain before being reunited with their Lord. Tradition indicates that Matthew was killed by the sword in Ethiopia; James, the brother of Jesus, refused to deny his faith and was thrown down from a pinnacle of the temple; Bartholomew (Nathanael) was flayed with a whip while preaching in Armenia; Andrew was hung from a cross with ropes where he remained for two days before succumbing; Thomas, while ministering in India, was stabbed to death with a spear; Matthias (Judas' replacement) was stoned and then beheaded. The other apostles died equally horrific deaths, except for John: he was boiled in oil and then dumped on the Isle of Patmos. From that barren and isolated spot, he recovered and wrote the book of Revelation. After he was freed, John returned to the area now known as Turkey. He died there of old age—the *only* disciple to die of natural causes.

Each of the apostles could have said, as did Paul:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished
the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there
is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,
which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give

to me on that Day, and not to me only but
also to all who have loved His appearing. (2
Timothy 4:7-8, NKJV)