

## Studies in the Book of Acts – Part 1

**“The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” – Acts 1.1-3**

Luke opens with a reference to **“the former account”** – we know that Luke is the author of Acts for several reasons, but mainly because of this expression and the fact that the book is addressed to **“Theophilus”** and if we go back to the Gospel of **Luke 1.1-4** we find these words: **“Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.”** In various translations, the word “account” is also given as book, relation, treatise, narrative, record, volume, and history – and that is how we ought to approach these works. Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are called “history” by their author – not fairy tales, or devotional literature; not allegories or poems, but history of real people, real places, and real events. I believe as we study, we will find that Acts upholds that claim against the most intense scrutiny. “Theophilus,” to whom the books is addressed, was likely a Gentile Christian and many believe he was a patron to Luke who financially supported him in his labors as an evangelist and historian. Luke says that in his Gospel, he recorded, **“all that Jesus began both to do and teach,”** that is, all the pertinent miracles,

works of benevolence, meaningful excursions and acts of obedience to God and the sermons, and teachings, and words of wisdom and comfort that He spoke. The ministry of Jesus, as amazing and wonderful as it was, filled with some of the most remarkable events and happenings in the history of the earth, lasted only three and a half years; and the Gospel of Luke concludes with Jesus being **“taken up”** (Acts 1.2). **Luke** 24.50-53 reads, **“And [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen.”** But Luke reminds Theophilus that this was **“after”** some meaningful interactions between Jesus and the Apostles - interactions that forecast that the work of the Gospel was not finished, it was only just beginning! Luke mentions three things that Jesus did with His Apostles before He left this world: 1) **“through the Holy Spirit [He] had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen.”** The commandments to which Luke here refers are what we often call, “The Great Commission” or “the Apostolic Commission” – we might also call them “the marching orders of the Kingdom of God.” These “commandments” are mentioned in the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and I think it is worth our time to read each of those accounts:

**“Then the eleven disciples (that is, the apostles minus Judas) went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen”** (Matthew 28.16-20)

**“Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not**

believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16.14-16).

“**Then** He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24.44-48).

**J.W.** McGarvey said, “We shall find that this commission is the key to the whole narrative before us; that the acts of the apostles here recorded are the counterpart of its terms, and the best exposition of its meaning.” I believe we will find this a true assessment: the Great Commission is the key to the book of Acts, and Acts is a Text Book on how to accomplish the great commission. Luke says that Jesus issued these commandments: “**through the Holy Spirit**” and it is possible to interpret this phrase as also governing the verb “**he had chosen**” thus meaning that he *selected and instructed* His apostles “**through, or by the Holy Spirit.**” I believe that is correct, in fact, I believe Luke mentions this to remind Theophilus of something he would have learned in the Gospel: *all* that Jesus did, and taught, and commanded was “**by the Holy Spirit.**” This is one of the great mysteries of the gospel, but it is a beautiful mystery and one that should fill our hearts with love and thanksgiving to Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us that before Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, He was in heaven, “**in the form of God**” and that He had equality in the Godhead – He had the same divine nature as God the Father, the same knowledge, the same abilities, and the same power – but in the work of redemption, Jesus “**emptied Himself and made Himself of no reputation**” (Philippians 2.2-4). I don’t believe that means that He ever lost His divine

nature, but somehow, Jesus submitted and limited Himself during His earth life so that He would fully experience humanity – the **“Word became flesh and dwelt among us”** (John 1.14). And as a part of this submission, while Jesus was ministering on the earth, all that He did, all that He taught, and all that He commanded, was not by His own authority (John 12.49), but it was by the Holy Spirit. We may not fully understand that, but we thank God that Jesus was willing to come down from His glory and **“take the form of a servant”** for us. Acts 10.38 says that when Jesus was baptized, He was anointed with the Holy Spirit – you remember that the Spirit descended like a dove and remained upon Him, and in the Gospels, we read the Spirit led Jesus around and empowered Him to preach and work miracles (Luke 4.1, 18). In Luke 11.20, Jesus said that He cast out demons, **“by the finger of God”** which was figure of speech for the power granted by God, but in Matthew’s account Jesus says it was **“by the Spirit of God.”** The Spirit is the one who gave Jesus the power. All through the Gospels this idea is affirmed that Jesus worked **“by the Holy Spirit”** and that’s very important for the Book of Acts, because Luke wants us to know that although Jesus is going to return to Heaven, He is going to send the Holy Spirit down to earth to continue working through the Apostles and in the Church – and that means that the authority and power of God as seen in ministry of Christ loses nothing by Jesus no longer being physically present on the earth. Luke **continues**, **“to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days...”** Luke reminds us of the torturous suffering and death of Jesus to accentuate the marvel that Jesus **“presented Himself alive!”** We’ve already noticed a few of the occasions Luke had in mind in the accounts of the Great Commission, but there were several over a period of 40 days! On the day of Christ’s resurrection, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16.9-11; John 20.11-18); then the women (Matthew 28.9-10); then the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13-22); then Peter (1 Corinthians 15.5; Luke 24.36-43; John 20.19); and finally, ten of the Apostles (Mark 16.14; Luke 25.36; John 20.19). One week later, on the next Lord’s Day, Jesus appeared to the eleven (John 20.26-31). In the following days, Jesus continued to “show himself” to seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee (John

21.1-23); then to more than 500 disciples at once (1 Corinthians 15.6; Matthew 28.16-17); then in Jerusalem (Mark 16.15-18); then to James His brother (1 Corinthians 15.7); then again to the disciples in incidents mentioned later in Acts 1 and in Luke 24.44-49. And these appearances involved opportunities for investigation in which Jesus proved that He had risen bodily from the grave by “infallible or incontrovertible evidences”: those who Jesus chose as eyewitnesses of His greatest miracle were not gullible or delusional – they were skeptical to the point that Jesus had to, on several occasions, rebuke them for their foolish unbelief! The carefully and meticulously examined His empty tomb, the emptiness of which was not challenged, even by the unbelieving crowd! He ate with them, talked with them, met with them at various times of the day and in various locations, they touched Him and handled His body and examined the marks of crucifixion to validate that He was the very one who had been nailed to the cross. It is no wonder that these encounters with Jesus caused the disciples to cease their 1500-year-old Sabbath keeping tradition and begin worshiping on the first day of the week, a day that was now hallowed by the resurrection event! It is no wonder that these disciples ever afterward dedicated themselves to observing the Lord’s Supper, and were willing to preach the risen Christ even in the face of violent persecution, torture, imprisonment, and death! They were convinced that Jesus is alive! Sometimes we sing songs about the resurrection of Jesus and we say, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!” And I believe that Jesus abides in us, but the truth is that I know Jesus is alive because He proved it physically, visibly, incontestably to many eyewitnesses! Finally, Luke informs that during these final interviews between Jesus and the Apostles, He was **“speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”** Dr. Phillip Doddridge gave this definition for the phrase “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of Heaven” as it is also sometimes called, and I think that it cannot be improved upon: **“{The phrase “kingdom of heaven” or “kingdom of God”} properly signifies the gospel dispensation, in which subjects were to be gathered to God, by His Son, and a society to be formed, which was to subsist first in more imperfect circumstances on earth, but afterwards was to appear complete in the world of glory”**

*(Exposition of the Gospels)*. I want us to consider each part of this definition carefully: 1) **“The kingdom of God properly signifies the gospel dispensation...”** This means that the Kingdom of God, as Jesus describes it, did not begin in the Old Testament, nor even in the days of Jesus personal ministry, when the Law of Moses was still in effect (Galatians 4.4; Hebrews 9.16-17). It is true that in some sense God has always exercised universal rule over all creation, and in the former dispensations He had a people on earth, such as the Kingdom of Israel, but through the Prophet Daniel, God foretold His plans to set up a different kind of Kingdom – a spiritual kingdom, in the world, but not of the world (John 18.36) – a kingdom that increased and conquered by grace and mercy, rather than violence and war. Dr. Doddridge says, 2) that this kingdom is one **“in which subjects were to be gathered to God, by His Son”** that is, the Kingdom grows by the salvation of souls through the preaching of the good news of Christ and obedience to the same. That’s why we can call the “Great Commission” the marching orders of the Kingdom! When Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations and preach the gospel to every creature,” He was saying, Extend my rule to the furthest parts of the earth! 3) Dr. Doddridge says that the Kingdom included, **“a society to be formed, which was to subsist first in more imperfect circumstances on earth, but afterwards was to appear complete in the world of glory”** This society is the church, the congregation of Christ – the people of Jesus. In Matthew 16.18-19, Jesus spoke of His Church and the Kingdom of Heaven interchangeably – as equivalent institutions. But the concept of the Kingdom is broader than *merely* the church, because the Kingdom does not consist of a society only. A kingdom is a rule (the power to exercise authority), a reign (the duration of authority) and a realm (the territory over which the authority is exercised). When we talk about the Kingdom of God, in particular the Kingdom of the Messiah – the rule is the authority given to Jesus by God the Father, “all authority in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28.18); the reign is the dispensation of the Gospel which began when Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God (in the coming chapter, the Book of Acts will discuss that event in detail); and the realm is the church, the congregation of redeemed sinners gathered to serve God in

holiness by the work of Jesus. And here on this earth, the circumstances of our existence are “imperfect.” It will not always appear that we are the special treasure of the King of the Universe! Sometimes we may wonder how the righteous can suffer so much and the wicked prevail and seem so strong if Jesus is on His throne, but He is – and sooner or later, the community of the redeemed will appear complete in the world of glory. This definition of the Kingdom of God is confirmed, explored, and illustrated throughout the wonderful history of the Acts of the Apostles.