

## Sermon 3, What Is the Church?, Acts 1:1-5

**Proposition:** The first paragraph of Acts introduces the church's foundation, identity, personnel, and methods.

- I. The Church's One Foundation: Jesus's Words and Deeds, v. 1
  - A. Recorded in Scripture
  - B. Recorded in Two Volumes, v. 1a
  - C. Delivered During the Forty Days, v. 3
    1. After the Resurrection, v. 3a
    2. Before the Ascension, v. 2a
- II. The Church's Twofold Identity, vv. 2-3
  - A. The Kingdom of God, v. 3
  - B. The People Who Obey Jesus with Spiritual Power, v. 2
- III. The Church's Agents, vv. 2-5
  - A. The Apostles (Chosen by Jesus), v. 2b
  - B. The Spirit (Promised by the Father), v. 4c
- IV. The Church's Methods
  - A. Word, v. 4a
  - B. Sacrament, v. 5

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we begin our study of the book of Acts proper this morning. We've seen two different overviews of the book in the last two weeks. Today, though, we are going to talk about what we see in the first sentence of the book. Luke manages to pack an astonishing amount of detail into this opening statement. He hits on pretty much all of the key themes and ideas of the entire book, right here in the first few lines. And the richness of this statement was only made more apparent by the attempts of the commentators to paraphrase it. Reading the paraphrases emphasized only how much was left out. So rather than paraphrase these lines this morning, I want instead to talk with you about how they describe the church. Here we have the church's foundation in Jesus' words and deeds; the church's identity as God's kingdom and God's people; the church's agents, represented here by the apostles and the Holy Ghost; and finally the church's methods, word and sacrament. Do you want to know what the church is, the identity of the body whose history Luke is going to share with us? Then read on.

#### **I. The Church's One Foundation: Jesus's Words and Deeds, v. 1**

The opening lines of the Acts of the Apostles, as we call this book today, tell us about the church's foundation. This foundation is squarely on Jesus, or better, Jesus' words and deeds are the foundation. Now, as some of the commentators pointed out, the interesting thing about this is that the words and deeds of Jesus, outside of His death and resurrection, are almost absent from

23 out of 27 books of the NT. Jesus' words and deeds are hardly mentioned outside the Gospels. Yet we know that His words and deeds are very important. Luke, however, by this statement makes it clear that Acts is just as much about Jesus' words and deeds as the Gospel of Luke was. Yet now, rather than recording what Jesus said and did personally, Luke records what Jesus said and did through His agents, particularly the apostles and the Holy Spirit but also through all the followers of the Way. The things Jesus began to do and teach are in the Gospel; the things He continued to do and teach are right here in Acts.

Before we go any farther, then, let me ask you this: do you believe that when you look around this perfectly ordinary building at the perfectly ordinary people here, when you listen to me read and preach, do you actually have the conviction that you are witnessing something Jesus is continuing to do and teach? Insofar as you have that conviction, you will love being at church and worshipping. Insofar as you lack that conviction, you will not be particularly interested in being here or in listening to Acts.

#### **A. Recorded in Scripture**

The first words of Acts mention a former book or treatise — the Gospel of Luke. This book is Scripture, and it is a book in which Jesus' doings and sayings are recording. Jesus did both. He taught, and He acted. His teachings and actions got Him killed. But it is important to see that we are not left guessing about what Jesus did and taught. Rather, we know what He said and did because we have the Scriptures, Luke and the other 3 Gospels.

#### **B. Recorded in Two Volumes, v. 1a**

But just as there is a former treatise, so there is also a latter treatise. That is this book, Acts. We are justified, then, in regarding it as Luke's intent to write a two-volume work, in which vol. 1 records what Jesus began to do and teach and vol. 2 records what Jesus continued to do and teach.

That's what the church is built on. We are here, and not in a synagogue or a pagan Temple this morning precisely because Jesus of Nazareth did and taught the things He did and taught. However, Luke makes one more crucial point about this.

#### **C. Delivered During the Forty Days, v. 3**

That is simply that many of Jesus' key teachings that make the difference between Christianity and Judaism were delivered during this period that is covered in just a couple of verses here and at the end of the Gospels. This is the forty-day period between the resurrection and the ascension. The Gospels make it very clear that Jesus lived and died as a Jew. He worshipped in the synagogue. He never made the slightest attempt to found an alternative way of worship during His lifetime (i.e., prior to the crucifixion). So how was it that the book of Acts records a gradual but nonetheless real and apparently permanent split between Jews and the newly christened Christians? The answer has to lie in the teaching that Jesus gave during these forty days. Yes, Jesus mentioned the church by name in the Gospel of Matthew — but Stephen refers to the Hebrews in the wilderness under Moses as a "church" too, in Acts 7.

### **1. After the Resurrection, v. 3a**

The forty post-resurrection days of teaching contained some powerful stuff. Jesus suffered death; then He presented Himself living. In between came the resurrection, an event that takes place offstage and has proven nearly impossible to depict in any way other than the gospels do — that is, by showing an empty tomb. Jesus was once dead, and then came back to life. And during that period when He was living a resurrection life on this earth, He taught the disciples the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. He taught them more openly, in other words, the Trinitarian proclamation that at the end of the day distinguishes Christians from Jews.

### **2. Before the Ascension, v. 2a**

And He also taught this message up until the time “when He was taken up,” as the beginning of v. 2 tells us. The first volume, Luke, covers events through the ascension. The next volume starts with the ascension (we’ll look at it together next week). And also, this second volume records the outworking of the teaching Jesus gave during the forty days. We know that teaching must have been even more revolutionary than what Jesus said during His pre-death ministry, because its effects have certainly been enormous. What themes did that teaching orbit around?

## **II. The Church’s Twofold Identity, vv. 2-3**

Luke gives us two major hints.

### **A. The Kingdom of God, v. 3**

The first of them is a direct statement that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. What is the Kingdom of God? It is His rule, particularly the part of it His rule that is capable of increase and diminution, of coming into conflict with Satan’s Kingdom and winning (or losing) in battle against it.

Now, this is not the totality of God’s reign. God reigns over everything; He is omnipotent, and His rule cannot fail to be omnipotent. But we also pray for His Kingdom to come, because in the beginning Adam and Satan worked together to take away dominion over this world from God. They did not succeed in limiting His omnipotence, of course. But they did in a certain sense carve out an autonomous zone within the larger realm of God’s omnipotence. Within this zone, things are not run or done God’s way. Rather, they are done according to the desires and actions of fallen men and angels. Here on earth, in other words, things are so rotten because sin and Satan calls the shots in a way they would never be allowed to do in Heaven. Thus, the mystery of evil is the flip side of the mystery of the kingdom. How can God be defeated? That is the question of evil, the problem of evil. The answer, of course, is that we have no idea. But He lets our evil defeat Him and keep Him out in a certain sense and for a certain time. The campaign that He is waging to bring us and the whole world back under full control such that things will again be done His way is what the Bible calls “the coming of the Kingdom.” Jesus taught them for forty days about His rule and how it is driving back Satan’s rule. What would we give to have that teaching written down? But God did not see fit to give it to us in words. Instead, He gave it to us in examples. As we saw, the book of Acts is framed with references to the Kingdom. We know, then, that everything in between describes that Kingdom further.

What is the relationship between the church and the Kingdom? The church is one subset of the kingdom. The Kingdom is the totality of the rule of Christ in its ability to grow and retreat. But the church is a particular subset where Christ rules. It is the citizens' assembly. The church is not the whole of the Kingdom; it is the people of the Kingdom. Christ's rule is for people, but it is also for animals, plants, planets, and everything else living and nonliving.

### **B. The People Who Obey Jesus with Spiritual Power, v. 2**

But let's talk just a little more about these citizens of the Kingdom. What characterizes them? What are they like? Well, Luke tells us that they receive commands from their Lord, who is Jesus. The church is the group of people who accept and carry out Jesus' commands. Here it is specifically represented by the apostles, but surely the description of them given here fits with every Kingdom citizen. Notice, too, that it's not just that the church receives commands from Jesus. It goes further than that: The church receives commands "through the Holy Spirit." What does that mean? It means that the Spirit delivers the commands and gives the power to carry them out. That's what the rest of the passage goes on to show, as it describes the apostles waiting in Jerusalem to receive the Spirit before they are allowed to spread the message beyond the group.

How does the Spirit carry commands to us? He wrote the Bible. He empowers preaching. He lives in our hearts and speaks to us, reminding us about Jesus. It is His presence that grows the fruits of love, joy, and peace in our lives — and without love, joy, and peace, there is no obedience to the commands of Jesus.

So who are the citizens of the Kingdom? They are the people who obey Jesus with spiritual power. They listen to His commands, and they do what He says through the indwelling Holy Spirit in their lives.

Does that describe you? Do you acknowledge Jesus as Lord in the sense that you receive His instructions through the Holy Spirit? Or do you feel free to blow off what He says if you're pretty sure you have a better idea, or that His command just isn't realistic for your situation, or that another moral standard is more righteous than His? Do you acknowledge, further, that without the Holy Spirit you won't be able to obey? The way you acknowledge that, by the way, is through prayer. If you won't pray, then you are saying "The Holy Spirit does not need to be present for me to do the right thing. I can and will do it on my own, thank you very much."

So that's the church — the population of the Kingdom of God. It is not the sum total of the Kingdom, but it is the most important component of the Kingdom. Christ's goal is to reign over human beings who willingly and lovingly own Him as their Lord and King. I hope that describes every one of us in here.

### **III. The Church's Agents, vv. 2-5**

So how does this kingdom spread? How does Christ's rule over human hearts spread? The opening verses of Acts highlight two agents.

#### **A. The Apostles (Chosen by Jesus), v. 2b**

The first of them is the apostles that Jesus chose. The book of Acts will tell us not only about the apostles that Jesus chose during His time on earth, but also about the replacement apostle that the

11 chose and the “13th” apostle, Paul, who does more in Acts than any other human character and who wrote 13 books of the NT. Clearly, brothers and sisters, without the apostles, humanly speaking, there is no church! Whether we look at what we believe (drawn from the writings of the apostles), when and how we meet together (drawn from the practice of the apostles), how we choose leaders for our church (drawn from the teachings of the apostles), and more, we see that the apostles are incredibly important to the Christian faith. Without them, we would be practicing something that would look a lot like Rabbinic Judaism.

#### **B. The Spirit (Promised by the Father), v. 4c**

But the other thing to realize is that the Spirit is the key agent in the book. He is the Father’s promised blessing; no greater blessing than Him can be known or imagined! Why? Because He is God with us, the other paraclete that Jesus spoke of. Do you see the Trinitarian emphasis? Jesus chose the apostles, and the Father promised the Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead are at work selecting and empowering the agents of the church’s growth and mission.

#### **IV. The Church’s Methods**

So we have Spirit-empowered apostles, sent out by the Father and the Son. But what do they do? By what methods do they spread God’s word?

##### **A. Word, v. 4a**

Well, Luke answers that question too. The transition from indirect to direct discourse in v. 4 is rather odd. First the narrator is telling us what Jesus said, and then “which you heard from me.” Suddenly the very words of Jesus intrude into the narrative. The NIV doesn’t like this and actually edits it right out of the text. But it’s there all the same — not because Luke didn’t know how to write, but because he wanted to make a point. The point he wanted to make was that the church proceeds by the very words of Jesus. The commands of Jesus are important, and doubly so when they are expressed in His own words. The church ministers by saying what Jesus said! This is the continuing task of the church. If you don’t get a stiff dose of Scripture here on a weekly basis, then this church is failing in its job.

##### **B. Sacrament, v. 5**

The other method by which the church advances is sacrament, and especially (in Acts) baptism. Jesus mentions both the water baptism of John and the Holy Spirit baptism that He Himself offers. Both are important; indeed, the church grows by exercising both. We bring people under Jesus’ rule by sharing His words with them, and by baptizing them in water — and by asking Christ to baptize them with His Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, you are part of the Spirit-empowered, word-and-sacrament fueled population of the kingdom of God that we call the church. This story of Acts is your story. So let’s listen to it, learn it, and be ready to live it out. Amen.