

**THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST CONTINUES**  
**(SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 2017)**

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**SCRIPTURE: 10 WORDS; LUKE 1:1-4; ACTS 1:1-3**

**INTRODUCTION**

Dennis Johnson in his book on Acts begins chapter 2 with the question, “How did New England move so quickly from a vibrant and true faith to deism and eventually to pantheism?”

This is a big question, but one of the answers that he submits is that before they accepted deism in theory, they were operating as deists in practice.

They first left the true faith in action and then left it also in confession.

Johnson warns that much of the Christian church today also is infected with practical deism, even churches that take stands on God’s word.

In practice many Christians really assume that God's "interference" in people's lives pretty much came to a halt sometime in the past...

While Christians would never say this out loud, we demonstrate this sinful belief in terms of prayer, our anxiety, our dependence on novel techniques in evangelism, our hope in technology to solve spiritual problems, our doubt that loving discipline can restore wandering brothers or sisters to repentance and reconciliation and the like.<sup>1</sup>

The book of Acts begins by directing you to consider the continued work of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and what your calling also is to be in light of this continued and glorious work!

Your focus needs to be on the Lord Jesus Christ, and prayerfully and boldly seek to be a witness of His continuing work.

**The work of Jesus Christ continues. Are you part of it?**

Our focus today is on the introduction to the book of Acts and its first three verses.

**1. INTRODUCTION TO ACTS**

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Johnson, *The Message of Acts*, 16-18.

Verse 1 helps provide the basis for any proper introduction to the book of Acts.

**Acts 1:1** The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,

These opening words are key in identifying the writer and perhaps also the purpose for which Acts was written.

There are two important details in verse 1 – the former account and the name Theophilus.

These two statements bring us to the book of Luke, where we have the only other reference to the name Theophilus and a similar introduction as what we find in Acts.

From this we see that Luke is the author of the book of Acts.

Actually, we might better say that Luke is the author of one book in two parts – Luke-Acts.

The name Luke appears only three times in the NT.

**Col. 4:14** Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.

This reference in Col. 4:14 shows us that Luke worked with Paul and was a doctor.

We see the connection of Luke and Paul in the book of Acts. Starting in Acts 16:10, Luke writes in the first-person plural, *we*.

**Acts 16:10** Now after he had seen the vision, immediately **we** sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

There are references early in church history also to Luke as being the author of Luke and Acts, beginning with Irenaeus in the second century.<sup>2</sup>

Now in Luke, Theophilus is addressed in a very formal way – most excellent Theophilus.

The only other people in Scripture to have this same title used for them are government officials – Felix and Festus in Acts 23, 24, and 26.

The name Theophilus is Greek; it means a lover of God. It was a common name among Greek speaking people and does not mean that Theophilus was a Christian.<sup>3</sup>

John Mauck, an attorney in Chicago, has written an excellent book entitled *Paul on Trial*.

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<sup>2</sup> ESV Study Bible

<sup>3</sup> John W. Mauck, *Paul on Trial*, 22.

In the early part of this book, he argues that Theophilus may well have had the office of an investigator (*cognitionibus*), and that he was charged with gathering information for the trial of Paul in much the way modern judges delegate parts of a complex trial preparation to others.<sup>4</sup>

What we can say about Acts is that it definitely has a lot to do with matters of law.

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The book of Acts definitely has a lot connected with legal matters.

Most commentators seem to not agree with the idea that Acts was written to supply the evidence needed for Paul's defense.<sup>6</sup> These scholars do not approach the book as a lawyer would.

Though I am not in a position to say definitively who is right, we can say this, as Dr. Lutzer wrote in his endorsement of Mauck's book.

... we as readers learn that our faith can hold its own in our litigious culture.<sup>7</sup>

The book of Acts is not a boring, legal brief.

It is not just filled with a bunch of facts.

It is as we see in Acts 1:1, a continued record of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach.

And as Acts frequently reminds us, when we are doing what Jesus calls us to do, we will face persecution, harassment, and legal challenges.

There is much more that could be said in terms of an introduction and Lord willing we will continue to think about other introductory matters in coming weeks, but let me show from two verses in Acts an outline for the entire book.

The two verses are Acts 1:8 and 9:15.

**Acts 1:8** But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

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<sup>4</sup> Mauck, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Mauck, 35-40.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall and others.

<sup>7</sup> Back cover of the book

**Acts 9:15** But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

These two verses provide an excellent outline for Acts.

Acts 1:8 describes the three geographical regions: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Chapters 1-7 have Jerusalem as their focus.

Chapters 8-12 deal with the spread of the gospel in Judea and Samaria.

And chapters 13-28 show the spread of the gospel to the nations.

Acts 9:15 gives additional detail on this third portion of Acts.

Paul’s ministry would be before Gentiles, the focus of chapters 13-20, before kings, chapters 24-26, and before the children of Israel, chapters 22 and 28.<sup>8</sup>

Let me make one final point of introduction.

At the end of Luke, we have a summary of one of the meetings that Jesus had with His disciples where Jesus opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

Listen to Luke 24:46-47.

**Luke 24:46** 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, **47** and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

We see several important truths from these verses.

Not only does the OT speak of the necessity of the suffering and death and resurrection of the Messiah, but the OT also speaks of how the gospel must be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

The book of Acts shows the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures.

The book of Acts shows that the work of Jesus Christ continues even today. Are you part of it?

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Johnson, 9.

## 2. THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST CONTINUES, ACTS 1:1-3

We have already focused attention on the start of verse 1, let me present 5 other points from verses 1-3.

Look at the end of verse 1 – of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.

The grammar that Luke uses in this verse is significant.

The verb **began** along with the two infinitives – to do and teach means that the work of Jesus Christ did not end with His resurrection or with His ascension.

A. T. Robertson writes: “Jesus is still carrying on from heaven the work and teaching of the disciples which He started while on earth before His ascension.”<sup>9</sup>

I mentioned several weeks ago there is a temptation for churches and ministries to build up their own name all in the name of Jesus Christ.

It is a dangerous path.

Now it is also done on the individual level.

Many people want to find their own glory in their families, in their work, or their wealth.

Here we must be very careful and consider that our own work is never guaranteed in terms of success or accomplishment, but the work of God, the work of the Lord Jesus Christ will never fail!

And so your focus needs to be as best you can on the continuing work of Christ while remaining humble in your service before the Lord.

As we study the book of Acts together as a congregation, I would encourage you to be in prayer as you consider your own part and place in the work of Christ and the expansion of His kingdom.

We keep in mind that every believer is called to the service of Christ. It is not just preachers and teachers and missionaries.

But with that said, we must be also be humble and diligent to make sure we are truly seeking to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2001), paragraph 2459.

Verse 2 directs our attention to the ascension of Jesus Christ.

At various times, we have given attention to this very significant part of our Lord's ministry.

Having come through the season where we are remembering His birth, it is worth asking, how much attention do we give to the ascension of Christ and His rule now at the right hand of the Father?

The verb in verse 2 – taken up, is used in several other places to speak of the ascension of our Lord.

In a week or two we will look at Acts 1:11 and later at Acts 1:22.

There are three references to the ascension in Acts 1.

1 Timothy 3:16 also uses the same verb, translated as received up.

**1Tim. 3:16** And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:

God was manifested in the flesh,

Justified in the Spirit,

Seen by angels,

Preached among the Gentiles,

Believed on in the world,

Received up in glory.

In John 14, Jesus before He went to the cross spoke of His ascension. He gave this amazing promise to His troubled and confused disciples.

**John 14:12** “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father. **13** And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14** If you ask anything in My name, I will do *it*.”

The ascension is not the end of the work of Christ but the guarantee that it will continue as Jesus said in even greater ways.

The ascension is also part of our great comfort and assurance in prayer – If you ask anything in My name, I will do it!

Oh, may the words of Christ be of great encouragement and even conviction to you.

The last part of verse 2 might seem confusing in relation to the first part of verse 2 when you first read it.

What verse 2 is saying is quite straightforward: Jesus was taken up after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen.

Here is another beautiful testimony to the Triune work of God. The Holy Spirit was part of the work of Jesus Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit continues to be part of the work of Jesus Christ through His apostles and through those who serve the Lord after them.

When we read and study the book of Acts we have to keep in mind there are historical aspects that will never be repeated. There are aspects that do continue.

We don't read the book of Acts thinking we should expect all the same dramatic and miraculous aspects to be present today. But this doesn't mean that the work of Jesus Christ has stopped. No, it continues in the faithful preaching and witnessing of His people.

Now the word apostles is not first used here in Acts. Matthew, Mark, and Luke use the word apostles, Matthew and Mark just one time.

Starting with Acts, the word apostle is used much more frequently.

Today, there are people who want to use this title. That is a very dangerous thing to do, and perhaps even blasphemous.

The apostles had an experience and calling that was unique, not be repeated.

The apostles are part of the great foundation for the work that Jesus Christ continues to do.

**Eph. 2:20** having been built on the foundation of the **apostles** and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*,

The Lord Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit selected the original 12 apostles and gave commands to them.

Our work is not as apostles but as those who are blessed by their work and who continue through the leading of the Holy Spirit to seek to carry out the work of Christ.

In verse 3, Luke states that Jesus presented Himself alive to His apostles by many infallible proofs and that He was with them forty days before His ascension.

The word translated infallible proofs is used only once in the NT.

It parallels a word used in Luke 1:4, where Luke says that he is writing so that Theophilus may know the **certainty**<sup>10</sup> of those things in which he was instructed.

We do keep in mind that the Christian faith is a call to believe and trust in the work of God in Christ.

Peter describes it this way in 1 Peter 1:8.

**1 Peter 1:8** whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,

You are called to believe and trust in God, to trust in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and in His resurrection as the basis for your salvation.

But we also can say this. We are not called to an empty faith. No, you are called to believe the evidence of many proofs.

There is absolutely no doubt that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. He showed this to His disciples and to others through many infallible proofs over 40 days before His ascension.

Now it is true that even believers will face seasons of spiritual challenge and maybe even doubt.

I would say this in response. The Christian faith can be examined. It can be defended. We must be very careful, however, that man is never elevated as the ultimate standard or judge.

So when you experience periods of challenge or doubt, seek the Lord in humility for strength, for understanding, and for assurance.

Follow the example of the father in Mark 9:24.

**Mark 9:24** Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; **help my unbelief!**"

Today it is popular to celebrate doubt.

I find that quite troubling.

We don't want to be hypocrites or unduly harsh, but doubt is not to be celebrated.

Jude 22 says, Have mercy on those who doubt.

Before that, Jude tells us,

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<sup>10</sup> ἀσφάλειαν – the word means security against stumbling or falling.



**Jude 20** But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, **21** keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Finally let us consider from verse 3 the phrase the kingdom of God.

This expression is used 32x in Luke and 7x in the book of Acts.

The expression refers to the rule of God in Christ. It speaks God's salvation in Christ as well as the rule and authority of Christ over all men.

Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come and expand over the earth.

Paul in Acts 14 encouraged those who received the truth of the gospel in this way.

**Acts 14:22** strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "We must through many tribulations enter the **kingdom of God.**"

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome also preaching about the kingdom of God.

**Acts 28:31** preaching the **kingdom of God** and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

Before Jesus ascended, He continued to give instruction even as He did in His ministry related to this very important theme.

John Calvin wrote here:

Hereby we gather that Christ did principally intreat [speak about] of the corruption of mankind; of the tyranny of sin, whose bond-slaves we are; of the curse and guiltiness of eternal death, whereunto we all are subject, and also of the means to obtain salvation; of the remission of sins; of the denying of the flesh; of spiritual righteousness; of hope of eternal life, and of like such things. And if we will be rightly instructed in Christianity, we must apply our studies to these things.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

1. Read and study the book of Acts over the next year.
2. The faith which we proclaim can be examined and defended. Have courage and confidence in sharing the Word of God.

3. The work of Christ continues – what is your part?
4. Transition to our celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### **Prayer**

### **Hymn 359**

### **Benediction and Commission –**

#### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.