

I

Prelude to Pentecost (Acts 1:1–26)

Prologue (Acts 1:1–5)

Scholars disagree about where Luke’s prologue to Acts ends, and where the body of this book begins. Some see the prologue extending to verse 14.¹ Others see the prologue extending only to verse 8.² It is best, however, to see the prologue consisting of the first five verses.³ This is so, I. H. Marshall observes, because ‘verses 1–5 are largely a recapitulation of [Luke 24]’, while ‘fresh material is added in verses 6ff’.⁴

- 1 Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.61; Peterson, *Acts*, p.99; Richard Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Herm; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), p.32.
- 2 Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (trans. from the 14th German edition; 1965; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), pp.135–47.
- 3 Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.97. Curiously, Bruce’s independent English text commentary understands the Prologue to consist of verses 1–3. *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p.28 (hereafter *Acts* (NICNT)).
- 4 Marshall, *Acts*, p.55.

The prologue of Acts serves at least two purposes. First, as we have noted, it connects Acts with Luke's Gospel. Partly because John's Gospel separates Luke and Acts in our canon, it can be easy to forget that Luke intended for us to read Luke and Acts together, as two instalments or volumes of a single enterprise. This conjunction is just one way that Luke tethers the ministry of the apostles to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Second, it introduces the book that follows. Luke signals here the themes and concerns that will predominate in the chapters that follow. We have, therefore, a divinely-provided reading strategy for the Acts of the Apostles.

1:1. *In the first volume, O Theophilus, I wrote about all the things that Jesus began to do and to teach.*

Luke begins Acts with a reference to his 'first volume', that is, Luke's Gospel. Luke does not necessarily imply that more volumes will follow Acts. He means to say, rather, that Luke's narrative in the Gospel finds its continuation in Acts. There is a sense in which Luke's Gospel is incomplete and unconcluded without Acts.

It was unusual but not unprecedented in antiquity for a writer to dedicate a multi-volume work of history to an individual.⁵ Luke dedicates this work, as he did the Gospel (see Luke 1:3), to 'Theophilus'. Theophilus means 'loved by G/god' or 'lover of G/god' and was a common proper name in the ancient world. Some have seen Theophilus as Luke's patron, a man of 'high social standing', or 'a Christian Gentile wavering in his faith'.⁶ Theophilus's exact identity and relationship to Luke, however, is both unknown and unnecessary for understanding this book. Luke's mention of Theophilus, however, does remind us of his earlier

5 See the discussion at Pervo, *Acts*, p.35 n.28.

6 All referenced at Bock, *Acts*, p.53.

address to Theophilus in the Prologue to his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). In that first Prologue, Luke stresses the utter and absolute reliability of that Gospel. It is an account in which Theophilus may place his full confidence. In echoing that first Prologue here in Acts 1:1, Luke stresses the complete trustworthiness of the account to follow.⁷

In a single sentence, Luke summarizes the third Gospel: ‘I wrote about all the things that Jesus began to do and to teach.’ The focus of Luke’s Gospel, Luke says, is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Specifically, Luke highlights Jesus’ doings and doctrine—both Jesus’ miracles and signs, and his extended discourses and parables (note Luke’s order here and at Luke 24:19). Why does Luke connect these two things? Jesus’ miracles, Calvin observes, were ‘seals whereby the truth [of the doctrine of Christ] is established and confirmed, and the effect declared.’⁸ In the apostles’ ministry in Acts, we repeatedly see this same combination (sign and word) in the same relationship (miracles confirming teaching).

Importantly, Luke refers to Jesus’ deeds and teaching in the third Gospel as ‘all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach’. We are therefore to understand Acts as providing Jesus’ continuing works and teaching. On occasion in Acts we see Jesus speaking (Acts 9:4–6; 9:10–16; 18:9–10; 23:11) and acting (Acts 2:47, 14:3, 16:14). Luke’s primary meaning, however, becomes apparent from the next verse—Jesus continues to teach and work through the ministry of the apostles and by the Holy Spirit. We are to understand, then, the ministry of the apostles and of the Holy Spirit in this book to be the ministry of the risen, glorified Saviour in heaven.

7 Dennis E. Johnson, *Let’s Study Acts* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), p.2.

8 John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles* (repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), vol. 1, p.32.

1:2. *until the day when he was taken up, after he gave command through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.*

In this verse, Luke brings his summary of the third Gospel to its close. ‘The day when he was taken up’ is a reference to Jesus’ ascension, which Luke recounted at the close of the Gospel (Luke 24:50–53), and will relate in a moment (Acts 1:9–11). The account of the ascension of Christ, therefore, not only stitches Luke’s Gospel and Acts together, but also provides the apex or zenith of Luke’s two-volume work.

Luke documents the final recorded act of Jesus before his ascension. It took place in a meeting with the ‘apostles whom he had chosen’. These ‘apostles’ are the men (minus Judas Iscariot) whom Jesus chose at the outset of his ministry (Luke 6:12–16) and whom Luke in his Gospel repeatedly terms ‘apostles’ (9:10; 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10). Luke names them at 1:13, and elaborates in 1:3 and 1:22 what qualified a man to be an apostle. Other than these eleven men, only Paul and Barnabas are named apostles in Acts (14:4, 14).

The term ‘apostle’ denotes one who is both sent and commissioned by another, and who therefore bears the authority of the one sending him.⁹ In saying that Jesus ‘had chosen’ these men, Luke stresses that the apostles were not self-appointed or self-selected. In just a few verses (1:6–8), Luke will record the commission that Jesus gives to these chosen few.

The ‘command’ that Jesus gave them is probably relayed in 1:4 (cf. Luke 24:49)—Jesus tells the apostles there to ‘wait for the

9 Bock, *Acts*, p.53; Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.99. Commentators note that not every individual sent by Jesus was an apostle of Jesus (e.g. the Seventy of Luke 10:1–20).

promise of the Father'.¹⁰ Jesus, having been raised by the power of the Spirit, and having 'become life-giving Spirit' (1 Cor. 15:45; cf. 2 Cor. 3:17) gave this command 'through the Spirit'.¹¹ As Dennis Johnson explains, Jesus' 'every appearance and every word were expressions of his new vitality in the power of the Spirit—the Spirit through whom Jesus would continue to speak and act in his apostles, after taking his seat at God's right hand in heaven'.¹² Luke therefore helps us to see one important way in which Jesus' continuing, heavenly ministry will differ from Jesus' earthly ministry.

1:3. to whom also he presented himself as one alive after he had suffered, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days, and speaking to them of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

Before Luke specifies the 'command' referenced in the previous verse, he tells us 1) of Jesus' intermittent but extended contact with the apostles between his resurrection and ascension; and 2) the purposes for which Jesus met his disciples during this window of time.

Jesus 'appeared' to the apostles 'over the course of forty days'. In context, the 'forty days' refer to the period between Jesus' resurrection ('after he had suffered') and his ascension (see 1:2). Luke does not suggest that Jesus dwelt with the apostles for the

10 Although it is not necessary to identify the meeting of Jesus with the apostles in Luke 24:49 with that of Acts 1:4.

11 While it is grammatically possible that the phrase 'through the Spirit' modifies the verb 'chose' rather than the participle 'gave command', it is more probable that the phrase modifies the participle. Mikeal C. Parsons and Martin M. Culy, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2003), p.3.

12 D. Johnson, *Acts*, p.3.

entirety of that period. Jesus' interactions with the Eleven, rather, were occasional (cf. 1 Cor. 15:5–7).

Why did the resurrected but not yet ascended Christ meet with the apostles at this time? Luke supplies here two reasons. The first was that Jesus 'presented himself as one alive after he had suffered, by many convincing proofs'. Nobody had witnessed the act of Jesus being raised from the dead in the very same body in which he had suffered. The apostles, however, were privileged to see, hear, even touch the risen Jesus.¹³ The Jesus whom the apostles proclaim is neither a bodiless ghost, nor the product of apostolic hallucination or ecstatic experience, nor the living memory of a noble but dead man, but the Son of God who 'suffered' unto death and, three days later, rose gloriously from the dead. Furthermore, Jesus afforded them 'many convincing proofs' in order to establish to them—and to us—beyond doubt or dispute the truth of his resurrection.¹⁴ Given the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus both to the preaching of both Peter and Paul (see especially Acts 2:14–36; 13:16–41) and to the salvation of believers (see Rom. 1:4; 4:25; 6:5–11; 8:9–11; 1 Cor. 15:1–58), it should come as no surprise to us that Jesus prioritized the establishment of credible witnesses to his resurrection in the days leading up to his ascension.

A second reason that Jesus met with the apostles in the period between his resurrection and ascension was to 'speak to them of the things concerning the kingdom of God'. Strikingly, whereas

13 John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), p.35. Compare here 1 John 1:1–4.

14 Aristotle defines the word translated 'convincing proofs' (Greek *tekmērion*) as 'a compelling sign'; *Rhetoric* 1.12.16f., cited at Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.100. Quintilian puts it more strongly: 'indications from which there is no getting away', *Institutes of Oratory* 5.9, cited at Witherington, *Acts*, p.108. Luke therefore underscores the extraordinarily compelling proofs underlying the resurrection of Jesus.

teaching and miracles characterized Jesus' earthly ministry (1:1), Luke mentions expressly only Jesus' teaching during this interim period. Since Jesus will shortly call the apostles to be his 'witnesses' (1:8), and since Acts is replete with substantial examples of apostolic teaching centring upon the person and work of Christ, we may fairly infer that the apostles' preaching and teaching in Acts finds its source in Jesus' teaching during this forty-day window. As he has stressed in verse one, Luke wants us to understand the apostles' teaching in this book to be *Jesus'* teaching.

Luke does not leave us ignorant of the content of Jesus' teaching during this period. Its focus or theme was 'the things concerning the kingdom of God'. John the Baptist had come preaching the kingdom (Matt. 3:2), and so did Jesus (Luke 4:43; Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14–15).¹⁵ It is fair to say that not only Jesus' teachings but also the whole of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels find coherence and meaning in the kingdom.¹⁶ Jesus' teachings over the course of these forty days, and the apostles' subsequent teachings, are not departures from what he had taught during his earthly ministry. On the contrary, Luke underscores the continuity among Jesus' pre-resurrection teaching, his post-resurrection teaching of the apostles, and apostolic preaching and teaching.

What is the 'kingdom'? In brief, it is the redemptive rule and reign of God. The term does not refer to the sovereignty of the triune God in creation and providence, although the term assumes God's sovereignty. The 'kingdom' pre-eminently has as its focus

15 Contrary to some interpreters, Jesus did not preach a 'kingdom of God' distinct from a 'kingdom of heaven'. See the discussion at Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (repr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1972), pp.24–26.

16 For a full and persuasive defence of this proposition, see Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (trans. H. De Jongste; Philadelphia: P&R, 1962).

the crucified and risen Jesus, now enthroned at the right hand of the Father. While Christ's reign encompasses the whole of the cosmos, it has particular reference to those people whom he has purchased by his blood and called out of the world into his service. Christ's 'kingdom' advances as human beings receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord in the way of repentance and faith. The 'kingdom' comes to its fullest and most visible expression in this age in the life of the people of God who are ruled by the Word of Christ and empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

Whereas Luke mentions the word 'kingdom' in his Gospel account nearly three dozen times, he only mentions it six times in Acts (here; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). One would be mistaken to infer from the infrequency of the term's occurrences that it is unimportant to Acts. When the term appears in Acts, it is never mentioned incidentally, and it frequently has programmatic significance (see 20:25; 28:23, 31). That 'kingdom' should both open and conclude Acts (1:3; 28:31) signifies its importance to the entirety of this book's message. Luke, then, invites us to understand the whole of Acts in terms of the kingdom of God.

1:4. *And while eating with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father which you heard from me.*

The meaning of the participle translated 'while eating with them' (Greek *synalizomenos*) is debated among commentators and translations. Some argue that the proper translation is 'while staying with them'.¹⁷ Others properly conclude that the proper translation is 'while eating with them'.¹⁸ The New Testament records more

17 So ESV; NRSV; Parsons and Culy, *Acts*, p.5.

18 So TNIV; ESV margin; Marshall, *Acts*, 58; Bruce, *Greek Text*, 101; Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, pp.71–72. This view persuasively understands the Greek verb to

than one occasion on which Jesus enjoyed a meal with his disciples after his resurrection (Luke 24:41–43; John 21:9–14). Luke does not specify the precise time of this meal, but it appears to be not long before his ascension (see comments on 1:2).

Jesus gives his disciples two commands. Negatively, they must ‘not ... depart from Jerusalem’. Positively, they must ‘wait for the promise of the Father which you heard from me’. As both the following verse and the parallel with Luke 24:49 make clear, the ‘promise of the Father’ is none other than the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Jesus means here that the Holy Spirit is the great gift whom the Father has pledged to give to the apostles.²⁰ Jesus also says that the apostles had ‘heard’ of the Holy Spirit ‘from me’. In that sense, the Holy Spirit is also the promise of the Son.²¹ Notably, the promise of the Holy Spirit falls on the heels of Jesus’ teaching about the ‘kingdom of God’ (1:3). Luke surely intends for us to understand the kingdom of God in terms of the ‘coming of the Holy Spirit in power’ (cf. Rom. 14:17).²²

The apostles are commanded to ‘wait’. The Holy Spirit is the Father’s gift to them, and he will give this gift at the proper time (see comments on 2:33). The apostles do nothing to merit it or to prepare themselves for it. They are simply to ‘wait’ in the place

be derived from the Greek noun ‘salt’, and therefore (literally) mean ‘to eat salt with’. In context, the verb’s meaning, then, is ‘to have a meal with’. It is probable that Peter at Acts 10:41b references this meal, among other meals; so Bock, *Acts*, p.59.

- 19 Compare also 2:33, ‘having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father’, and Gal. 3:14, ‘the promised Spirit’.
- 20 Peterson correctly understands such Old Testament passages as Joel 2:28–32; Isa. 32:15; 44:3–5; Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:25–27 to be in view here, *Acts*, p.106.
- 21 Stott, *Acts*, p.36. See John 14–16 for Jesus’ extensive teaching concerning the Holy Spirit’s mission and work after Jesus’ resurrection, and Bruce’s discussion at *Acts (NICNT)*, p.34 n.24.
- 22 Witherington, *Acts*, p.109.

(‘Jerusalem’) of God’s appointment. Apostolic witness to Christ must be undertaken in the power of the Holy Spirit.

‘Jerusalem’ is important because it is the starting location of the mission that Christ assigns to the apostles (1:6–8; Luke 24:47). While so much of Luke’s Gospel is an inexorable march towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), the scene of Christ’s death and resurrection, Acts reverses that pattern. Beginning from Jerusalem, Christ’s witnesses will move farther and farther away from that city, even to ‘the end of the earth’ (1:8).²³

1:5. *because John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*

Jesus has anchored the impending ministry of the Holy Spirit in the promise of the Father and of the Son (1:4). Now he reminds the apostles of the way in which John the Baptist’s ministry had also prepared them for the Holy Spirit.

‘Because’ tells us that what Jesus says in 1:5 provides the ground or reason for the command to ‘wait’ in the previous verse. John’s ministry was characterized by a ‘baptism with water’. In other words, John employed water as the means²⁴ or medium²⁵ of his baptizing activity. John’s baptism was a ‘baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Luke 3:3). When a Jew professed repentance in response to John’s preaching, he received John’s baptism as a sign that he had been forgiven by the one of whom John spoke.²⁶ John’s baptism, then, was preparatory for a greater baptizer and a greater

23 Peterson points to Isa. 2:3; Micah 4:2 as Old Testament prophetic anticipation of this movement. *Acts*, p.107.

24 Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.102; Bock, *Acts*, p.51.

25 Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.8.

26 Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, p.212.

baptism, ‘he who is mightier than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Luke 3:16, ESV).

That greater baptizer, Jesus, had in fact come (Luke 7:18–35). The risen Jesus will imminently ‘baptize’ his disciples ‘with the Holy Spirit’.²⁷ Some commentators see the primary significance of this baptism in terms of the cleansing of the apostles for service. Cleansing is certainly part of the picture, but Luke’s focus is elsewhere. As the parallel text in Luke 24:49 shows, to be baptized with the Holy Spirit is to be ‘clothed with power from on high’.²⁸ In view, then, is the empowerment of the apostles for the commission that Christ is about to give them (1:6–8).

When will this ‘baptism’ take place? Jesus says that it will be ‘not many days from now’. This baptism is neither distant in time nor recurrent in character. It is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It marks the dawn of the age to come, the ‘last days’ of which the Old Testament prophets spoke. It also prompts a question from the disciples (see 1:6).

Application

The American automobile pioneer, Henry Ford, famously scoffed, ‘History is bunk.’ How different is Luke’s mind. Christianity is an historical religion—its truth depends upon Jesus of Nazareth having been raised from the dead nearly two thousand years ago; and upon the credibility of the earliest eyewitnesses to Jesus and the trustworthiness of their testimony. Luke wanted Theophilus—

27 The Greek text uses the passive form of the verb ‘to baptize’; however, it is clear from Luke and Acts that the one baptizing is Jesus, *pace* Pervo, *Acts*, p.38.

28 The picture, then, is not one of immersion, but of affusion, Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.8. *Pace* James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Holy Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* [SBT [second series] 15; London: SCM, 1970), pp.11–14.

and you and me—to know that the gospel is absolutely reliable and credible.

Sometimes scholars have tried to pit Jesus against Paul (or the other apostles). It is sometimes said that Jesus was simply a kindly, noble teacher who taught people how to live good lives. Paul, however, is said to have created a religion built around the worship of a deified, cosmic Jesus. Luke gives the lie to such claims. He wants us to know that what the apostles taught was precisely what Jesus taught them and commissioned them to teach.

Luke also gives words of comfort and encouragement to the church. Jesus continues to teach and to act on behalf of his church. The Father was true to his promises of old to send the Spirit, showing us that he is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. The Son has equipped the church with no less a one than the Spirit who resided upon his ministry on earth and who raised him from the grave. Acts (and subsequent church history) shows us that the church's life is far from trouble-free (Acts 14:22). We are engaged in spiritual warfare and have dangerous and powerful enemies. But we serve a good and faithful God who cares for us. He has shown his concern by sending his Spirit to indwell and to empower us, and as the apostle John reminds us, 'he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (1 John 4:4).

Commission (Acts 1:6–8)

These three verses relay the last words that Jesus spoke on earth before his ascension into heaven. In them, Jesus further teaches his disciples about the Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit (see 1:3–4). In doing so, he gives the apostles a specific mandate that we shall see faithfully followed throughout Acts.