

**A Study Commentary
on
The Acts of
the Apostles**

Guy Prentiss Waters



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Guy Waters's Study Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles is exegetically and theologically sound, cogently reasoned and clearly written. Demonstrating Luke's competence as a historian, Waters also shows the author's literary skill and biblical-theological sensitivity to the Old Testament as foreshadowing Christ's work through his Spirit in the church. Application sections show how the unique redemptive-historical events of the apostolic period still speak authoritatively into the lives of Christians and churches today. I highly recommend this commentary to pastors and teachers preparing to preach and teach Acts, and to anyone interested in a readable exposition of Luke's unique account of the risen Lord Jesus' words and deeds through his chosen witnesses.

Dennis E. Johnson, Ph.D., Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

In an age of multiplying commentaries, some of them very technical and some exceedingly popular, Guy Waters has contributed a mid-level work that is robustly theological, written in straightforward English, and designed to be edifying. It does not attempt to break new ground by focusing on challenging details (e.g., how Acts cites the Old Testament); rather, Waters moves confidently from exegesis to theological synthesis. Happily he avoids two opposing pitfalls: the assumption that Acts has been given to us to set forth what primitive ecclesiastical purity looks like, and the assumption that Acts is so transitional we can learn nothing of practical relevance to churches in the twenty-first century. This is a commentary that will make many friends among serious Bible readers.

D. A. Carson, Research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and co-founder (with Tim Keller) of The Gospel Coalition

Dr. Waters is the ideal commentator on Acts. Scholarly, pastoral, theological—all these and more combine in making this my first resource for Luke’s second volume. An outstanding contribution to the series and deserving of the appellation, “Essential”!

Derek W. H. Thomas, The Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, RTS Atlanta; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

About the author

Guy Prentiss Waters is Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss., USA. He received his B.A. in Greek and Latin from the University of Pennsylvania; his M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary; his Ph.D. in Religion from Duke University. From 2002 to 2007, he was Asst. Prof. of Biblical Studies at Belhaven University, Jackson, Miss., and has served at RTS since 2007. Guy is a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). He is the author of several books, articles, chapters, and reviews. Guy and his wife Sarah have three children and reside in Madison, Miss.

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Preface

Since I began this project in earnest in January, 2009, no fewer than four exegetical commentaries on Acts have come into print. This expository proliferation sharply poses the question ‘why one more?’ What will *this* commentary contribute to the burgeoning literature?

Perhaps one way to answer this question is to highlight three features of this particular exposition of Acts. It is, first of all, relatively brief. Over the last generation, commentaries have been trending larger. Bigger is not always better. Readers can easily get lost in a welter of detail, missing not only the ‘big picture’ or the ‘main point’ of a particular text, but also a sense of what holds the biblical book together. Calvin aspired, in his exposition of Scripture, to implement the principle of *claritas et brevitās*—‘clarity and brevity’. He understood that clarity and brevity were not only noble goals in themselves, but also that they complement one another. That Calvin fulfilled this aspiration is evident from the fact that his commentaries continue to be published and read nearly half a millennium after they were written.

Second, this commentary strives to offer exegesis in the service of exposition. Some commentaries are helpful in identifying the main themes or motifs of a text, but not as helpful in demonstrating how those themes and motifs emerge from the text. Other commentaries are helpful in analysing the grammar, syntax and historical background of the text, and interacting with the secondary literature, but not as helpful in explaining the importance of these areas to one tasked with preaching or teaching the text to others.

The primary goal of this commentary is to elucidate the text for those who want to understand it better for themselves, and especially for those called to explain it to others, whether in a classroom, a Sunday School, or a pulpit. This goal shapes the grammatical, literary, historical and cultural details, and the academic discussions that I have chosen either to address or to leave to the side. Readers will note that this commentary is generous in its footnotes. One purpose of these footnotes is to highlight entire issues or discussions that I have opted not to include in the body of the exposition. I often refer readers to places in the literature where they may pursue these issues or discussions in more detail.

Third, this commentary is Reformed in its orientation. It proceeds from the conviction that the Westminster Standards are the best summary of the Bible's teaching in the church's possession. It believes that Reformed theology and sound exegesis are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but the very best of friends.

Specifically, this commentary strives to follow in the hermeneutical footsteps of Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr, three distinguished Reformed biblical theologians. It argues that the Acts of the Apostles plays a unique role in the unfolding New Covenant revelation that Jesus has given the church through his apostles. In doing so, it seeks to avoid two poles that are not easily avoided, even within the Reformed

church. First, it strives to avoid an understanding of Acts as ‘church in the good old days’. Such a primitivist approach to this biblical book can, for example, too easily lose sight of what in Acts is unique, unrepeatable, non-episodic, and once-for-all. Second, this commentary equally strives to avoid an understanding of Acts as a book that has nothing to say to the contemporary church. Acts is full of relevance and application to the contemporary church. Avoidance of these two poles may seem to be an impossible task, and it is all too easy to erect a false dilemma between an application-less redemptive-historical reading, and an application-oriented reading that sees little meaningful difference between the apostolic and post-apostolic church. On the contrary, it is when we appreciate the redemptive-historical lines of Luke’s teaching in Acts that we are best poised to make rich and full application of Acts to our Christian lives. It is this vantage point that informs the entirety of this exposition.

It is only appropriate to express appreciation to many who have helped and encouraged me in this project. Special thanks go to John Currid, who invited me to undertake this project, and has waited patiently for its completion; and to the staff of Evangelical Press, for all their help in seeing this work to print. Unless otherwise noted, the translation is my own. Any and all errors in this work are entirely my own.

I devoted much of 2009–2011 to preaching and teaching through the book of Acts. I am grateful to many congregations who kindly welcomed me as I expounded large portions of Acts to them—the Singles and Doubles Sunday School Class of the First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS; Tchula Presbyterian Church, Tchula, MS; Woodland Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, MS; and Pinehaven Presbyterian Church, Clinton, MS.

I have benefited greatly from the insights and assistance of students

at Reformed Theological Seminary. Students in my spring 2013 Exegesis seminar kindly read and provided feedback on the material comprising this commentary's exposition of Acts 1–12. My student assistants, Mike Lynch and Nathan Lee, have dedicated hours to formatting and editing drafts of this commentary. For their labours I am especially grateful.

I could not have undertaken and completed this project without the support of my colleagues at Reformed Theological Seminary. Special thanks go to my colleagues in the Biblical Studies Department, Ben Gladd and Miles Van Pelt (who also serves as Academic Dean at the Jackson campus). I am also thankful for the encouragement of Guy L. Richardson, President of RTS Jackson, and Ric Cannada, Mike Milton, and J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellors of RTS during the time that I prepared this book. The Faculty and Board of Trustees of RTS kindly granted me a sabbatical in 2013, which has afforded me precious time to complete this project.

Special thanks go to my family, who were faithful to inquire into my progress and patient to endure long spells and seasons of writing and editing—my parents, Elzberry and Karen Waters; my children, Phoebe, Lydia, and Thomas; and my dear wife, Sarah.

I dedicate this book to Dr Richard B. Gaffin, Jr, under whom it was my privilege to sit as a student at Westminster Theological Seminary. He first taught me to understand the Acts of the Apostles; has modelled to me what it means to trust and to serve the Saviour and King of whom Acts speaks; and has been a personal and professional encouragement and support to me.

To Richard B. Gaffin, Jr,
Servant of the Word of God

Introductory matters

Authorship of Acts

The same person who wrote Luke's Gospel also wrote Acts. This fact becomes evident when one compares the prefaces of each book (see Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5). Both books are dedicated to the same person, Theophilus, and the author of Acts speaks of his 'first volume' in which he 'wrote about all the things that Jesus began to do and to teach'.

Who, then, wrote Luke-Acts? Although the Gospel bears Luke's name, the title is a later, scribal addition to the text. In neither book does the author identify himself, much less identify himself as Luke. The ascription of the Gospel, and therefore of Acts, to Luke reflects an early, settled, and enduring understanding in the church that Luke was the author of both books.¹

What is the factual basis for this consensus? We are dependent upon evidence that is both external and internal to Luke-Acts. Beginning with Irenaeus in the late second century, Luke was

1 'Luke's authorship of the third gospel and the book of Acts went virtually unchallenged until the onset of critical approaches to the New Testament at the end of the eighteenth century.' D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (second edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p.291.

identified as the author of both books.² There were no serious objections to this judgment, nor did any alternative contenders for authorship emerge in the literature of the post-apostolic church.³ External evidence, then, solidly supports Lucan authorship of Acts.

Is there any indication within Acts that Luke was its author? We may begin answering this question by reflecting on what other New Testament books tell us about Luke. In three of his epistles, Paul identifies 'Luke the beloved physician' as one of his associates in ministry (see Col. 4:14; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). We may reliably identify Luke, then, as one who knew Paul and who served with Paul.

This datum is important because the author of Acts identifies himself as a sometime travelling companion of the apostle Paul. The so-called 'we' passages (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) testify to this identification. These passages take their name from the fact that they are in the first-person plural ('we'), not the third-person narrative that characterizes the rest of Acts. They indicate that the author was an eyewitness to the events related in them. Since these passages all fall within the travels of Paul, we may reliably conclude that the author occasionally joined Paul on his journeys.

On the supposition that the author did not also refer to himself in the third person, we may rule out as authorial candidates named individuals who are listed as also travelling with Paul in Acts. These individuals include Silas/Silvanus, Timothy, Sopater, Aristarchus,

2 On the distinct question of the canonicity of Acts, that is, how the early church came to recognize this book as part of the canon of Scripture, see F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (third edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp.19–21.

3 See the summary of evidence at Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.1; more fully at C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), vol. 1, pp.30–48.

Secundus, Gaius (of Derbe), Tychichus, and Trophimus.⁴ Positively, the fact that Paul mentions Luke in two letters dating from his first Roman imprisonment, Colossians and Philemon (cf. Acts 28:17–31), and that Luke was present with Paul during at least part of this period of Paul’s life and ministry (cf. 28:1–16), puts Luke on a shortlist of known candidates for the authorship of Acts. These are the people whom Paul mentions in ‘the letters that he wrote during that period’: namely Mark, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, Demas, Luke, Tychicus, Timothy, Aristarchus, and Epaphroditus.⁵ It is here, Carson and Moo note, that ‘external evidence takes over ... and singles out Luke from the list of possible candidates’.⁶

In summary, the combination of internal and external evidence points to Luke as the only viable candidate for authorship of Luke–Acts. There is a considerable body of evidence supporting Lucan authorship of Acts. Those who would doubt or question this conclusion bear the burden of disproving it and proposing an alternative.

Date of Acts

It is generally difficult to assign a precise date to the books of the New Testament. Frequently, one must be content with a range of dates within which the book was written. Within what span of time may we conclude that Acts was written?

Few now question that Acts was written in the first and not the second century.⁷ At least two considerations require a first-century date.⁸ First, if Luke, the contemporary of Paul, is the author of

4 This list is from Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.6.

5 This list from Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, p.291.

6 *Ibid.*

7 On which see the masterful argument of Bruce, *Greek Text*, pp.10–12.

8 Both of these come from David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p.4.

Acts (see above), then he must have written the book in the first century. Second, the last recorded event in Acts is Paul's two-year stay in Rome under house arrest. This event may be reliably dated to AD 60–61. It is improbable that the author would have written this account in the second century since 'the longer the time gap, the more the need to fill in the details for the next generation of believers'.⁹

We may confidently conclude that Acts was written after AD 61, and before AD 100. Evangelical scholars debate whether Luke wrote Acts during the AD 60s or between AD 80 and 100.¹⁰ While it is impossible to say with certainty, an earlier date within the window AD 61–100 is preferable. It places the authorship of the book closer to the events that it narrates. It situates the composition of Acts close to the composition of Luke's Gospel. It may serve to explain the omission of such historical events as the trial of Paul before Caesar; the martyrdom of Paul; and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.¹¹

Title of Acts

The title of Acts ('The Acts of the Apostles') is not part of the text of Acts. It came to be attached to the book in the course of the scribal transmission of Acts during the first millennium of the church's history. It likely originated not later than the second century.¹²

9 *Ibid.*

10 On which, see the discussion of Bock, *Acts*, pp.25–27. Marshall, Bock, and Peterson opt for a date in the AD 60s, as do Carson and Moo. Bruce, however, opts for a date in the 'late 70s or early 80s', *Greek Text*, p.18, as does Witherington.

11 Although there may be good reasons why Luke omitted these details—reasons that have nothing to do with the date of composition. See our discussion under 'Purpose' below.

12 See the helpful discussion of Bock, *Acts*, p.1.

The title ‘Acts’ was an accepted one in the Hellenistic world. It was used of literary works that related the feats and accomplishments of a person, a group of persons, or a city.¹³ ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ is, therefore, an appropriate way to describe this book. The ministry of the apostles is a constant of the narrative, from the first chapter to the end of the book and at every point between them.

Because this title is not part of the inspired text of Scripture, however, it is not beyond criticism. For one thing, the title is subject to misunderstanding. Most of the book highlights the ministry not of all the apostles, but of two apostles—Peter and Paul. Furthermore, as we shall see, Acts is not a biography of the apostles, much less of Peter and Paul.¹⁴ Luke’s purposes lie elsewhere.

For another thing, the apostles are not technically the chief actors of this book. The chief actor is the exalted and reigning Jesus Christ, who has sent his Holy Spirit in power upon the church. The apostles are servants of, witnesses to, and instruments of the Lord Jesus. The remarkable extension and endurance of the church is not attributable ultimately to the apostles. It is attributable to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the Spirit of Christ. We might, then, as appropriately title this book the ‘Acts of the Risen Jesus’ or the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’, or even the ‘Acts of the Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ, by the Power of the Holy Spirit’.

Genre of Acts

What is the genre of Acts?¹⁵ Scholars have proposed a range

13 See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp.1–2; Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, p.285.

14 J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (1857; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963), vol. 1, p.xiv.

15 The literature on this question is substantial. For helpful introductory surveys, see Witherington, *Acts*, pp.2–39; and Peterson, *Acts*, pp.5–15.

of possibilities—from history to biography to historical novel.¹⁶ Evangelicals have properly insisted that Luke intends to provide us with an historical account. The opening verses both of the Gospel and of Acts are ‘prefaces to a historical work’ and therefore inform the reader’s expectations concerning how each book is to be read.¹⁷ The centrality in Acts of the apostles, commissioned to be unique ‘eyewitnesses’ to Christ, simply confirms this assessment.

Two further comments merit reflection. First, some quarters of scholarship have questioned Luke’s accuracy and veracity as an historian.¹⁸ In response to such scholarship, there have been a number of helpful defences of the historicity of Acts.¹⁹ At no point has Luke’s account been disproven with respect to its factual claims. On the contrary, the progress of research and investigation has only confirmed Luke’s trustworthiness as an historian.

Second, it is important to remember that history, both in antiquity and in modern times, is ‘written ... for moral, ethical, and polemical purposes, and not just to inform or entertain’.²⁰ In keeping with Old Testament historiography, Luke’s record is both selective and crafted with a purpose.²¹ Also in keeping with Old

16 Peterson, *Acts*, pp.8–13.

17 The phrase is that of Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p.11.

18 For a survey of such scholarship, see Longenecker, *Acts*, pp.666–71, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Luke—Acts, Volume 10* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), and W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (second edition; Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1989).

19 See, for example, not only the commentaries of I. Howard Marshall, Ben Witherington, and Darrell Bock, but also Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

20 Longenecker, *Acts*, p.673.

21 For ways in which Acts resembles Old Testament narrative, see Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan* (NBST 27; Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2011), pp.19–23. Even if one is not persuaded of Thompson’s thesis (following Brian Rosner) that Luke

Testament historiography, Luke's historical narrative evidences considerable literary sophistication.²² It is important to keep in mind that these particular features of Acts are not indicators of Luke's lack of interest in historical accuracy. On the contrary, they are marks of careful historiography and, in Luke's case, wedded to a commitment to historical accuracy.

Purpose of Acts

To address the purpose of Acts is necessarily to broach two additional questions. To what audience did Luke direct Acts? What is the precise relationship between the third Gospel and Acts? We shall take up each of these questions in turn.

First, what is the purpose of Acts? Scholars are not agreed. No fewer than three options have been proposed.²³ Many critical scholars in the nineteenth century viewed Acts as primarily an attempt to reconcile the two forms of Christianity alleged to be represented by the apostles Peter and Paul. This particular approach to Acts has long since been refuted.²⁴ Even so, it is not unwarranted to see Luke intending to show that 'Peter and Paul were in essential agreement over the basics of the faith' in order to help reconcile differences within the church.²⁵

Others have seen Luke's purpose as apologetic or evangelistic. Luke is intending to demonstrate, for instance, the innocence of

is consciously writing in the genre of 'biblical history', the points of similarity documented between Old Testament narrative and Acts are striking.

22 See here especially the commentary of Richard Pervo. For a helpful introduction to Old Testament historiography, see V. Phillips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

23 See the more or less agreed taxonomies of Longenecker, *Acts*, pp.676–80, and Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, pp.301–6.

24 See especially J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: MacMillan, 1865).

25 Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, p.303.

the apostle Paul as he makes his way through the Roman court system (Acts 16–19, 21–28). Alternatively, Luke is intending to show that Christianity is the fulfilment and not the repudiation of Old Testament expectation. Each of these conceivable purposes would have a shared goal—to present a case for Christianity alongside Judaism as *religio licita* ('a lawful religion') within the Roman Empire. One main objection to this view is the unlikelihood that first-century Roman officials would have bothered to read Acts at all, much less reflect on its argument.

Still others have seen Luke's purpose as catechetical or edificatory. That is to say, Luke has authored Acts for the purpose of instructing and building up professing Christians in the faith. The prefaces of both Luke and Acts support such an understanding of Acts. The content of the speeches, in which Acts abounds, also supports this view. One attractive feature of understanding edification as the primary purpose of Acts is its elasticity. It is able to accommodate conciliation and apologetics as subordinate purposes.²⁶

These reflections serve to answer the question of Luke's audience. If Luke's primary purpose in Acts is edificatory, then he is addressing such professing Christians as Theophilus (Acts 1:1). If, however, Luke has a subordinate, apologetic purpose, then he has crafted his account in such a way as to address non-Christian audiences as well.

Given these purposes and audiences to Acts, what may we say of the relationship between Acts and Luke's Gospel? If Luke terms the Gospel a 'first volume' with respect to Acts, how are we to understand the pairing? Tellingly, Luke describes the Gospel as an

26 So, rightly, I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp.21–22; Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, p.306. For a listing of specific ways in which Luke sought to edify his Christian readership, see Longenecker, *Acts*, p.681.

account of ‘all that Jesus began to do and to teach’ (Acts 1:1). Acts is the continuation of Jesus’ deeds and teaching. In that respect, then, Acts is an extension of Luke’s Gospel. It is furthermore likely that ‘the first volume was ... written with at least one eye on the sequel’, and it is arguable that the preface at Luke 1:1–4 encompasses both volumes.²⁷

This is not to say that the two volumes constitute ‘a single narrative broken in two only by space considerations’.²⁸ It is doubtful that the Third Gospel and Acts are identical in genre.²⁹ There are, after all, genuine differences in ‘form, style, and function’ between the two volumes.³⁰ Even so, the relationship that Luke establishes between the two works in the prefaces to each suggests at the very least complementary, if not identical, purposes. Luke has authored both books primarily to edify Christian audiences by giving them not only confidence in the truth of the things that Jesus has said and done but also an understanding of their meaning in relation to God, humanity, history, and the world.³¹ The Gospel does so by concentrating on what Jesus said and did in the course of his earthly ministry. Acts does so by dwelling on the continued words and deeds of the exalted Jesus through his apostles.

Outline and Motifs of Acts

The way in which Luke sought to edify his readers becomes evident by consideration of the structure of Acts. Scholars have proposed more than one outline for the book, but there is no need to select one to the exclusion of others. There are at least three legitimate

27 Witherington, *Acts*, pp.8, 22.

28 So, rightly, Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, p.212.

29 *Pace* Witherington. See the helpful reservations at Peterson, *Acts*, p.15.

30 Peterson, *Acts*, p.15.

31 See Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp.12–15; Bock, *Acts*, pp.23–25.

and complementary outlines to the book. These outlines help us to see some of the themes and motifs that Luke highlights and develops in this book.³²

The first is drawn from Acts 1:8, ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria even unto the end of the earth’. This verse provides a three-part outline to the book. This outline is based upon geographical progression—Jerusalem; Judea and Samaria; the end of the earth. Acts 1–7 documents the progression of the gospel within Jerusalem; Acts 8–12, to Judea and Samaria; Acts 13–28, to the ‘end of the earth’, that is the Gentiles (see notes on 1:8). One virtue of this outline is its emphasis upon concerns that are central to the book—the apostolic witness to Christ, the work of the Spirit of Christ within the church, and the once-for-all redemptive-historical progression of the gospel from Jew to Gentile.

The second outline takes into account the summary statements that appear in stages throughout Luke’s narrative (see 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31). Richard Longenecker, for instance, has argued that Luke’s narrative consists of two parts (2:42–12:24; 12:25–28:31), prefaced by an introduction (1:1–2:41). These two parts concentrates on the Jewish and Gentile missions, respectively. Each part is divided into three smaller parts, marked by the summary statements noted above.

One virtue of this outline is the way in which it calls attention

32 For surveys of the themes and motifs of Acts, see Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997); Michael Green, *Thirty Years That Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (second edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Darrell Bock, *The Theology of Luke and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

to the importance of the progression of the Word of God to Luke's account. These summary statements frequently appear in at least one of two contexts—the persecution of the church because she is faithful to preach Christ; the growth and flourishing of the church, both quantitatively (numerical addition) and qualitatively (edification and maturity). This outline, then, further calls attention to two concerns that Luke highlights in Acts—the church as the people of God; and the persecution of the church.

The third outline observes the way in which Luke's account of the ministry of the apostles focuses on two men in particular—Peter and Paul. Their ministries dominate the two halves of Acts (1–12; 13–28), which halves correspond to the Jewish and Gentile missions, respectively. Luke consciously and frequently sets the ministries of Peter and Paul in parallel by showing the similarities between the two men and their ministries.

One virtue of this outline is the way in which it highlights the importance of Jew-Gentile concerns to the first-century church. It underscores the legitimacy and importance of the Gentile mission generally, and of Paul's ministry particularly. It furthermore stresses the underlying similarities between Peter and Paul as apostles, commissioned by Christ to bear foundational witness to him before all kinds of people.

By virtue of its early placement in the book, the first outline (Acts 1:8) is the most prominent of the three surveyed. The other two outlines, then, play a subordinate but supporting role to this outline. The outline of Acts 1:8 accents the redemptive-historical and geographical progression of the gospel. The other two outlines support this primary outline by calling attention to the motifs of apostolic witness; the church as the body formed by the Word of God; the persecution of the church for her faithfulness to bear

witness to Christ; and the relationship between Jew and Gentile within the church.

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

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- 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

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.

Theophilus—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.

1:6. *So after they had come together, they asked him, ‘O Lord, is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’*

Luke’s opening statement ‘So’ (*men oun*) is his customary way of ‘opening a new section of the narrative, connecting it with the preceding section’.²⁹ Luke tells us that the apostles have ‘come together’. This statement presumably means that they had parted after the meal of 1:4–5 and have now reassembled. Luke does not tell us how much time has lapsed between these two meetings.

Up to this point in Acts, it is Jesus who has acted and spoken in the presence of the apostles. Now for the first time we hear the apostles speak: ‘they asked him’ a very specific question. Some commentators have seen genuine merit in their inquiry.³⁰ Others see more misunderstanding than perception in this question. As Calvin has memorably said, ‘There are as many errors in this question as words.’³¹

The latter view is closer to the mark. The disciples ask Jesus, ‘is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ Jesus’ earlier teaching about the kingdom and the Holy Spirit has likely prompted this question. The Old Testament had taught that the coming of God’s kingdom and the activity of the Holy Spirit were hallmarks of the prophesied last days. Jesus had confirmed to the apostles that the last days were upon them. The apostles, however, labour under a certain misunderstanding about what the dawn of the last days will entail. That misunderstanding centres on the ‘kingdom’. The apostles correctly understand Jesus to be King, but they think that the ‘kingdom’ is essentially Jewish in

29 Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.102. Bruce cites 1:18; 2:41; 5:41; 8:4, 25; 9:31; 11:19; 12:5; 13:4; 15:3, 30; 16:5 as other examples.

30 Most recently, Peterson, *Acts*, p.109. See the literature he cites at p.109 n.34.

31 Calvin, *Acts*, p.43. Note Stott’s concurrence, *Acts*, pp.40–45.

character.³² This concept of the ‘kingdom’ likely entails Jewish political autonomy and deliverance from Roman domination.³³ Their question gives no indication that the fate of the Gentiles is of concern to them.³⁴

Further, the phrase ‘at this time’ suggests that the apostles believe that the ‘kingdom’, so understood, will soon be consummated in history. They are looking to Jesus to confirm their working timeline of events. The apostles’ question, then, suggests a fairly specific set of assumptions and expectations.

1:7. *And he said to them, ‘It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has appointed by his own authority.’*

Jesus makes oblique reply to the disciples’ question of 1:6.³⁵ His answer is not a point by point response to their inquiry. He only explicitly addresses the question of timing that they posed to him. He does so by admonishing them for indulging in speculation about matters that God has not revealed to them. Jesus’ point is that ‘the Father’ has sovereignly and eternally decreed (‘has appointed by his own authority’) the timetable (‘the times or seasons’) according to which his saving plans and purposes unfold and come to fruition in history.³⁶ This point was new neither to Jesus’ teaching nor to the

32 As careful study of the Gospels shows, this concept of the kingdom was not uncommon among first-century Jews.

33 Marshall, *Acts*, p.60. Richard N. Longenecker puts the matter even more pointedly: ‘the question the disciples asked reflects the embers of a once-blazing hope for a political theocracy in which they would be leaders (cf. Mk. 9:33–34; 10:35–41; Lk. 22:24)’; *Acts*, p.718.

34 Bock, *Acts*, p.62.

35 Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.77.

36 It is doubtful that Jesus intends a conceptual distinction between the two Greek words here translated ‘times’ and ‘seasons’, on which see Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.103.

apostles' hearing (see Mark 13:32) and bore repeating even at this late hour.

Jesus does not expressly speak to the disciples' expectations about the 'kingdom' (see 1:6). Some commentators infer from this silence that Jesus tacitly approves these expectations, or at least does not reject them wholesale.³⁷ Jesus' words in the following verse suggest otherwise. His commission in 1:8 does not dwell on Israel to the exclusion of the nations, but upon Israel alongside the nations. His concern there is not temporal, military, or political prosperity, but a flourishing owing to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

Some Christians believe that national Israel retains a place in God's plan distinct from that of the people of God, or the church. They believe that God will one day restore national Israel to Palestine and will bless Israel in a this-worldly fashion. This restoration is thought to coincide with what is said to be the as-yet future millennial reign of Christ on earth. Neither Jesus' words here nor the rest of the Old and New Testament Scriptures support this understanding of the future.³⁹ Jesus' words in the next verse, in fact, point us in a very different direction.

1:8. *'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria even unto the end of the earth.'*

37 Bock, *Acts*, p.62, and to a lesser degree, Longenecker, *Acts*, p.718, and David Gooding, *True to the Faith: Charting the Course through the Acts of the Apostles* (West Port Colborne, Ontario: Gospel Folio, 1995), pp.39–45.

38 So, rightly, D. Johnson, *Acts*, pp.3–4.

39 I am responding in the preceding paragraph to varieties of dispensational pre-millennialism. For a helpful survey of and response to dispensational pre-millennialism, see Keith Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995).

Jesus begins his statement here with the word ‘but’. The Greek word underlying ‘but’ (*alla*) is a strong contrastive word. He is saying that instead of indulging in speculation about the future, the apostles should devote their time and energies to another project.⁴⁰ It is that project that Jesus delineates in this verse.

Jesus says two things about the disciples: ‘you will receive power’ and ‘you will be my witnesses ...’ First, he promises them ‘power’. He ties their reception of this power to the ‘Holy Spirit coming upon you’. This promise recalls that of Luke 24:49 (‘... until you are clothed with *power* from on high’) and that of Acts 1:5 (‘but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’).⁴¹ The power that Jesus promises his disciples is not that of military might, political pressure, or even elocutionary excellence. This power likely has reference to two things: speaking boldly for Jesus Christ (see 4:33; 6:8–10) and working miracles that attest the word of Jesus (see 2:22; 3:12; 4:7; 8:13; 10:38; 19:11).⁴² Both will be on full display on the day of Pentecost.

This fact helps us to understand when this ‘power’ will come. It is the Day of Pentecost. In fact, Luke’s account of Pentecost tells us more about this ‘power’. In his Pentecost sermon Peter makes clear that the sending of the Holy Spirit in power is evidence that the exalted Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of God (see Acts 2:33). This Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus (Rom. 8:9), whom the exalted Jesus has received from the Father and has poured out in fullness upon his people (Acts 2:33). The incarnate, risen Christ has come into ‘complete possession of the Spirit’.⁴³ In their redemptive activity,

40 ‘The ends of the earth rather than the end of the world will be the subject of this book.’ Pervo, *Acts*, p.48.

41 Some interpreters see a connection with the Septuagint of Isaiah 32:15, ‘The Spirit is poured upon us from on high’ (ESV).

42 Bock, *Acts*, p.63; Peterson, *Acts*, p.111.

43 Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996),

then, the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit are one (2 Cor. 3:17).⁴⁴ Luke, then, must mean for us to understand this powerful work of the Holy Spirit in Acts in terms of the continuing work of the risen and ascended Jesus (see 1:3).

As we shall see, this power is also one that is inward and renovating. Because it is the power of God the Spirit, it is ‘the only power strong enough to invade and enliven dead, rebel hearts’.⁴⁵ Acts will afford us instance after instance of the Holy Spirit doing just this in the lives of men and women who come under the ministry of the preached word.

This power is exercised sovereignly, but it is not exercised randomly. Jesus says that this power will come ‘upon you’, that is, the apostles. Jesus conjoins this promise of power with a task. The apostles are to be ‘my witnesses’. This charge recalls Jesus’ words in Luke 24:48 (‘you are witnesses of these things’). To what or to whom are the apostles to bear witness? The word ‘my’ may indicate possession (‘witnesses belonging to me’), but it may also indicate the object or reference of witness (‘witnesses to me’).⁴⁶ The latter is

p.55.

44 Herman Bavinck explains: ‘Naturally Paul does not by that statement [i.e. 2 Cor. 3:17] mean to obliterate the distinction between the two [i.e. Jesus and the Spirit], for in the following verse he immediately speaks again of the Spirit of the Lord (or, as another translation has it, of the Lord of the Spirit). But the Holy Spirit has become entirely the property of Christ, and was, so to speak, absorbed into Christ or assimilated by him. By the resurrection and ascension Christ has become the quickening Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). He is now in possession of the seven Spirits (that is, the Spirit in his fullness), even as he is in possession of the seven stars (Rev. 3:1)’; quoted at *ibid*.

45 D. Johnson, *Acts*, p.4.

46 Parsons and Culy, *Acts*, p.9.

preferable.⁴⁷ throughout Acts, the apostles consistently bear witness to the person and work of Jesus in their preaching and teaching.⁴⁸

This call to be ‘my witnesses’ is, in one important sense, unique to the apostles. They are pre-eminently witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (see 1:3, 22).⁴⁹ This dimension of their task is one indication of the foundational and unrepeatable nature of the apostolic office (see Eph. 2:20). It also means that there is no path of access to Jesus Christ except through the witness of his appointed apostles. Christians do bear witness to Jesus Christ today. We do so by pointing others to the infallible and inerrant witness to Jesus that he has given to us through the apostles—the New Testament.

Jesus not only gives the apostles a particular task, he assigns them the sphere within which they are to exercise that task. Jesus calls the apostles to bear witness to him ‘in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria even unto the end of the earth’. The disciples are presently in Jerusalem and are to remain, for a time, in Jerusalem (see 1:4). However, after Jesus sends the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the church will begin to move out of Jerusalem.

This three-fold statement provides what has been called a ‘basic table of contents’ for Acts.⁵⁰ Acts 1–7 takes place in Jerusalem. The events of Acts 8–12 are concentrated in Judea and Samaria.⁵¹ Acts 13–28 charts the progression of the gospel all the way to Rome. The fact that Acts concludes with the apostle Paul in Rome raises the question whether Jesus intends ‘the end of the earth’ to refer to

47 Peterson agrees, but for support points to the parallel with Luke 24:44–48, *Acts*, p.111.

48 See the texts cited at Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.103.

49 But also to his ‘doctrines, miracles, life, death ... and ascension’; Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.12.

50 So Longenecker, *Acts*, p.719.

51 A single Greek article governs ‘Judea’ and ‘Samaria’, indicating that Luke means for us to understand a ‘single geographical area that can be designed by its two ethnological divisions’; Longenecker, *Acts*, p.719.

Rome specifically. Some commentators argue that ‘the end of the earth’ should be understood primarily or exclusively in terms of Rome. Others have argued that Luke (and Jesus) intend for us to identify Ethiopia, Spain, or more distant regions as ‘the end of the earth’.⁵² Still others have argued that the phrase primarily refers to the Gentiles (cf. Luke 24:47).

How are we to resolve this difficulty? The progression and conclusion of Acts suggest that Luke understands ‘the end of the earth’ in terms of Paul’s arrival in Rome. The latter part of the record of Paul’s ministry is centred upon the apostle reaching Rome (19:21; 23:11; 25:1–28:31), and both Luke’s account of Paul’s ministry and the book itself end with Paul in Rome. This understanding of ‘the end of the earth’ in terms of Paul’s arrival Rome is strengthened by the sole other appearance of the phrase ‘the end of the earth’ in Acts at 13:47, ‘I have appointed you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be for salvation *to the end of the earth*.’ Here Paul quotes Isaiah 49:6 in reference to himself. That Paul’s ministry in Acts concludes in Rome suggests that this Isaianic prophecy has reached some measure of fulfilment in that ministry. Paul’s Gentile mission, completed in Rome, represents the gospel’s arrival at ‘the end of the earth’. The phrase ‘the end of the earth’, while not without reference to Rome, primarily denotes the Gentiles. In Acts, Luke will document the once for all, redemptive-historical progression of the gospel from Jew to Gentile, an epochal extension of gospel blessing to all kinds of people.

It is important to remember in this connection that ‘Acts 1:8 is not addressed indiscriminately to all believers, regardless of time and place, but directly only to the apostles ... and concerns

52 For a fuller list and discussion of the merits of these and other options, see Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2004), pp.372–76.

the foundational task of bringing the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome *completed* by them (cf. Col. 1:6, 23). It does apply today, but only derivatively, as we build on the apostolic foundation and hold fast to their foundational gospel witness.⁵³ To say that Acts documents not only the progression but also the fulfilment of the apostolic commission of 1:8 in no way militates against the church's continuing responsibility to bring the gospel to the nations. On the contrary, the church may and must witness to Jesus Christ in the confidence that the epochal 'establishment of the new covenant church as made up of both Jew and Gentile' is decisive and complete.⁵⁴

Application

Speculation about the future has plagued the church throughout her history. Not even the apostles were immune from it. Jesus warns us here against what the Westminster Larger Catechism has termed the 'curious prying into ... God's decrees and providences' (Q.113). In Calvin's words, 'Where God has made an end of teaching, we must make an end of learning.' There are so many questions we have that God either leaves unaddressed or does not answer to our satisfaction. Part of our call to discipleship is to leave 'the secret things ... to the LORD our God' (Deut. 29:29). What can help cure this hunger to speculate? Jesus' cure is to give the apostles something to do. It is when we are in the way of Christian duty that speculation's appeal wanes.

What can the church today learn from the commission Jesus gives to the apostles? First, the church's task in every age is to bear witness to Jesus Christ. The primary way that the church

53 Richard B. Gaffin, Jr, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), pp.23–24.

54 Gaffin, *Pentecost*, p.23.

bears this witness is through the preaching of the Word of God—preaching that is centred upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Second, the church must look to the Holy Spirit to make her witness effectual in the lives of men and women. Programmes and personalities are no substitute for the illumination, conviction, and transformation that the Holy Spirit alone gives sinners. Third, Jesus is present with the church in the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is no absentee master. Wherever in creation the church goes, there Jesus goes with her. This assurance enables us to labour in confidence. Fourth, the church must expect opposition. Judea and Samaria were scenes of opposition to Jesus in his earthly ministry. Jesus had warned his disciples that that hostility would continue (John 15:8–16:3). Acts bears abundant testimony to the hostility that the gospel and gospel messengers face from sinful people—whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, urban or rural. Left to ourselves we would despair. But we are not left to ourselves. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit both to empower our witness and to comfort and encourage the witness-bearers. We ought to praise Jesus for this his greatest gift to the church.

Ascension (Acts 1:9–11)

One might think that, after the first eight verses of Acts, Luke would immediately record the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He does not. As Stott pithily remarks, ‘Before the Spirit could come, the Son must go.’⁵⁵ Clearly, then, the ascension of the risen Christ is essential for us to understand the apostolic mission of 1:6–8.⁵⁶ As we have already noted, this is Luke’s third reference to

⁵⁵ Stott, *Acts*, p.45.

⁵⁶ Longenecker, *Acts*, p.720.

the ascension (Luke 24:50–53, Acts 1:2). This repetition underscores the importance of the ascension to our understanding of this book.

Some critical scholars have questioned the historicity of the ascension.⁵⁷ As we shall see, however, Luke goes out of his way to demonstrate the fully historical character of the ascension. He furthermore highlights the importance of the ascension to the apostolic mission and the ongoing life and work of the church.

1:9. *After saying these things, while they were looking on, he was taken up and a cloud took him up from their sight.*

Luke tells us that the ascension takes place ‘after saying these things’, that is, the commission of 1:6–8. We are therefore to understand a close connection between the previous commission and the impending ascension.⁵⁸ What takes place occurs ‘while they were looking on’. The onlookers are, of course, the eleven apostles whom Christ had appointed to be his ‘witnesses’ (1:8). The apostles will bear witness to Jesus’ resurrection; so also they will bear witness to his ascension. Jesus’ ascension is therefore no less historical than his resurrection.

Luke’s account of the ascension is sparse and concise.⁵⁹ He describes it in two verbs. First, ‘he was taken up’. The resurrected Jesus is removed from the earth. We have seen the resurrected Jesus appearing and reappearing to his disciples. The following verse makes clear that this removal is a permanent one. Jesus will continue

57 ‘It would be a grave misunderstanding of Luke’s mind and purpose to regard his account of the Ascension of Christ as other than symbolic and poetic.’ William Neil, quoted at Stott, *Acts*, p.47.

58 Peterson, *Acts*, p.114.

59 Stott and Longenecker both cite in this connection Ernst Haenchen: ‘The story is unsentimental, almost uncannily austere.’ *Acts*, p.151.

to be present with his disciples (Matt. 28:20), but that presence will not be bodily.

Some commentators see Elisha's succession of Elijah as providing critical background to the ascension.⁶⁰ The analogy, however, is not altogether apt. While Jesus is removed bodily from the earth, Luke has already stressed his continuing presence, by the Spirit, with the apostles. The apostles are not being appointed as replacements for Jesus. The risen, ascended Jesus, rather, continues to work and to teach through the apostles.⁶¹

Second, 'a cloud took him up'. In the Old Testament, clouds frequently denote the glorious divine presence (Exod. 16:10; 19:16; 40:34–38; 1 Kings 8:10–11). The prophet Daniel shows us the Son of Man appearing 'with the clouds of heaven' alongside the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:13). This pattern continues in the New Testament. At the Transfiguration, the voice of God 'came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"' (Luke 9:35, ESV). Jesus, furthermore, will return in judgment 'with the clouds' (Rev. 1:7; Luke 21:27 and parallels). This biblical background helps us to see that the ascension was part of Jesus' exaltation. In his glorified humanity, the God-man Jesus ascends in order to exercise worldwide dominion from the right hand of the Father.⁶²

Luke stresses that the cloud bore Jesus away 'from their sight'. This detail underscores that the apostles were eyewitness to Jesus'

60 So Witherington, *Acts*, p.112; Pervo, *Acts*, p.45. In this connection, Pervo points especially to the bestowal of the Spirit upon Elisha and the miraculous departure of Elijah from the earth.

61 Bock, *Acts*, p.67.

62 D. Johnson, *Acts*, p.4. Johnson references in this connection Dan. 7:13, in which the Son of Man's appearance 'with the clouds of heaven' is associated with his reception of universal dominion.

envelopment in the cloud and to his removal from the earth.⁶³ It reinforces the fundamental historicity of the ascension.

1:10. *And as they were gazing into heaven while he was proceeding, behold, two men in white clothing stood by them.*

Once again, Luke stresses the apostolic eyewitness to the ascension. As Jesus ‘was proceeding’, the apostles were ‘gazing into heaven’. This detail confirms that directionally, Jesus is being taken up. The verb of sight that Luke uses here is a favourite of Luke’s and denotes focused attention.⁶⁴ ‘They were straining their eyes to see their departing Lord.’⁶⁵ While many commentators speculate concerning the reasons for the apostles’ intently looking at this spectacle, Luke is simply concerned to record the fact that they were paying attention to the miraculous sight unfolding before them.

The apostles’ gaze is interrupted by the presence of ‘two men in white clothing’. Luke concluded his gospel with an account of ‘two men’ in ‘dazzling clothing’ appearing to certain women (Luke 24:4). On that occasion, they both admonished the women (Luke 24:5) and helped them to understand the significance of what had just happened to Christ—his resurrection (Luke 24:6–7). Similarly here, these ‘two men’ will both admonish the apostles and help them to understand the significance of Jesus’ ascension.

Who are these ‘two men’? The similarities between this account and that of Luke 24, as well as the identification of the two men at Luke 24:4 as ‘angels’ (Luke 24:23) suggests that these two figures are angels. Angels had appeared in connection with Jesus’ incarnation

63 Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.13.

64 Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.104.

65 Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.82.

(Luke 2:8–14) and resurrection, and now they appear in connection with his ascension. We are surely to understand the ascension, then, as a pivotal event in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

1:11. *And they said, ‘O men of Galilee, why are you standing looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him proceeding into heaven.’*

The ‘two men’ now address the apostles directly and personally. Having found the apostle staring into the sky, the angels rebuke them in the form of a question, ‘why are you standing looking into heaven?’ The angels are implying at least two things in this question. First, the apostles should not expect for the present to see and to commune with Jesus in the flesh.⁶⁶ Their manner of relating to him will now be different. Second, the apostles should be engaged in other activity, specifically, the work of the commission that Jesus had given them in 1:6–8. Instead of staring motionless up into the sky, the apostles should set their gaze upon and move toward ‘the end of the earth’.

The remainder of the angels’ words pertains to the return of Christ, the event in history that will conclude the church’s earthly mission: ‘This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him proceeding into heaven.’ Several things surface in this statement. First, Jesus has ascended ‘into heaven’. Jesus removes from the earth to an unspecified but local part of the creation that Scripture calls ‘heaven’, ‘a definite portion of space where God specially manifests his presence’.⁶⁷ Second, Jesus ‘will come’: he will certainly return to earth in time

66 Calvin, *Acts*, p.51.

67 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), vol. 2, p.630.

and history. Jesus' glorious return is not a matter of speculation or inference but a biblical fact. Third, it is 'this Jesus' who will return: the very same Jesus who lived, died, was raised and ascended in our nature and for the salvation of his people. Fourth, in keeping with Jesus' words in 1:6–8, the angels refrain from specifying the time of Jesus' return. This uncertainty of time provides added incentive to the apostles to be diligent in undertaking their mission (Luke 12:35–48). Fifth, Jesus' glorious return from heaven will be patterned after his ascension into heaven: 'in the same way that you saw him proceeding into heaven'. We are likely to understand at least two points of similarity between his ascension and his return. Both are visible, historical events centred upon the person of Jesus Christ. And both are events that disclose the glory of Jesus Christ and display supernatural power. As Jesus ascended in a cloud, so he shall return in a cloud (see comments on 1:9). Sixth, the return of Christ in judgment at the end of the age is the single great expectation of the church. The angels do not chart an elaborate sequence of events lying in the church's future. They point the apostles and us to the single great event of Jesus' return.

Application

It is fair to say that many Christians do not give much thought to the importance of Jesus' ascension to the church and to the Christian life. The Westminster Larger Catechism summarizes the Scripture's teaching on the ascension of Jesus and helps us to see what the ascension meant to Jesus and what it means to believers.

Q. 53 How was Christ exalted in his ascension?

A. Christ was exalted in his ascension, in that having after his resurrection often appeared unto and conversed with his apostles, speaking to them of the things

pertaining to the kingdom of God, and giving them commission to preach the gospel to all nations, forty days after his resurrection, he, in our nature, and as our head, triumphing over enemies, visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for men, to raise up our affections thither, and to prepare a place for us, where he himself is, and shall continue till his second coming at the end of the world.

What did the ascension mean to Jesus? We may point to two things. The one who ascended had, forty days previously, risen from the dead. Over those forty days, he visited his disciples from time to time. As F. F. Bruce explains, 'It is [not] suggested that the intervals between his resurrection appearances were spent in some earth-bound state. These appearances, in which he condescended to his disciples' temporal conditions of life, were visitations from that eternal order to which his "body of glory" now belonged.'⁶⁸ The ascension, then, was Jesus' assuming permanent and abiding residence in that sphere to which his resurrection body was adapted. Second, the ascension marked Jesus' royal accession to his heavenly throne. Paul elaborates this point at Ephesians 4:8f., even as Psalm 24 eloquently anticipates it. What a marvellous thing to consider how, as 'Rabbi' John Duncan put it, the dust of Adam sits on the throne of God!

What does the ascension mean to believers? One thing it does not mean is Jesus' absence from the church. Not only is Jesus present with his people in the person of the Holy Spirit, but Jesus stressed that this presence is to be preferred to his bodily presence (John 16:7). Positively, the ascension reminds us that Jesus is on his throne. He reigns over all things, Paul says,

68 Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.103.

with an eye to the church (Eph. 1:22). As we will see again and again in Acts, Jesus' reign gives the church the confidence she needs to serve him in this present, evil age. The ascension also reminds us that Jesus is coming back. When he returns, Paul reminds us, we will 'appear with him in glory' (Col. 3:4). We shall fully share in the glory that the Second Adam won for us by his death and life. He will take us to the place that he has prepared for us, where he himself now is (John 14:1–4). Whatever the Christian faces in this life, he may be sure that he will dwell with Christ in glory. And by the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, we enjoy *now* the firstfruits of the glory he won for us.

Reconstitution (Acts 1:12–26)

As the apostles wait for the ascended Christ to pour out the promised Holy Spirit, they are not inactive. Two features are prominent in this account of the pre-Pentecostal apostolic assemblies—prayer and the Word of God. Both will characterize the life of the church throughout Acts. The first half of Acts 1 has prepared us to see the importance of the apostles to the foundation and mission of the church. The latter half of the chapter demonstrates and illustrates that point vividly.

This passage consists of two parts. The first, 1:12–14, provides a general description of the life of the church between the ascension and Pentecost. The second, 1:15–26, describes how the apostolic office vacated by Judas Iscariot was filled. The eleven apostles become once again 'the twelve'.

1:12–14. *Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mountain called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey from it. And when they arrived, they went up into the upper room where they were staying—Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew,*

*James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.
All of these were devoted with one purpose to prayer, along with the women
and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.*

In 1:12, we learn that the place from which Jesus ascended into heaven was a ‘mountain called Olivet’. Olivet was the place where Jesus had stayed during the last week of his earthly ministry (Luke 21:37), where he had delivered the ‘Olivet Discourse’ (Matt. 24:3 and parallels), and where he had prayed in agony before his arrest (Luke 22:39ff.). The prophet Zechariah tells us that when the LORD comes at the end of the age to do battle with and to judge the nations, ‘on that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east ...’ (Zech. 14:4a). Significantly, Olivet is also the place from which Jesus has sent his apostles with tidings of salvation to the nations (Acts 1:6–8).⁶⁹ Before Jesus returns to judge the nations (cf. 1:11), he bids the church to summon the nations to the salvation that is alone found in Jesus’ name.

Olivet was located east of Jerusalem, ‘a Sabbath day’s journey’ from the city. Scholars differ concerning the precise distance between the mountain and the city, but it was approximately 0.75 miles/1.2 kilometres.⁷⁰ ‘A Sabbath day’s journey’ was the distance that Jews were legally permitted to travel without violating contemporary understandings of the fourth commandment. In denominating the distance this way, Luke is not suggesting that the Ascension took place on the Sabbath.⁷¹ The fact that the eleven return to ‘Jerusalem’ shows their obedience to the earlier command of Jesus (Acts 1:4).

69 Peterson, *Acts*, p.116.

70 See the discussions at Bock, *Acts*, p.76; Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, pp.85–86.

71 Pace the suggestion of Barrett, *ibid.*

Upon arrival, the eleven go to ‘the upper room where they were staying’. The Greek word translated ‘upper room’ appears only in Acts (9:37, 39; 20:8). Traditionally it has been identified with the room where Jesus and the disciples had their last meal (cf. Luke 22:12). The fact that Luke uses the definite article in 1:13 with ‘upper room’ renders this claim plausible. Against this view, however, is the fact that the words in Luke 22 and Acts 1 denoting this ‘room’ are not the same, and that Luke does not here explicitly specify this room as that of the Last Supper. Likely Luke’s point in specifying this room is to indicate that it was the place where the disciples were habitually ‘staying’ or meeting in Jerusalem at this time.⁷² This second-storey room would have afforded some degree of privacy to the disciples. Strikingly, Luke tells us that a significant portion of the church can fit into a single room—something that will soon change.

Luke then proceeds to give us the names of the eleven disciples gathered in that upper room. The eleven had dispersed at the arrest and trial of Jesus, and Jesus had mercifully gathered them after his resurrection.⁷³ Luke has earlier given us a list of the disciples’ names at Luke 6:14–16 (cf. Mark 3:16–19; Matt. 10:2–4). These lists are essentially the same, with minor differences.⁷⁴ Several features of Luke’s list in 1:13 merit mention. First, the overwhelming similarity between the lists of Luke 6 and Acts 1 demonstrates that the disciples who accompanied Jesus in his earthly ministry are the same individuals who witnessed his resurrection, were commissioned by Jesus, and who will be present and active on the day of Pentecost

72 The verbal construction that Luke uses (the periphrastic form of the imperfect) suggests that the disciples were continually or habitually residing in this room; so Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.87.

73 Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.19.

74 See Alexander, *ibid.* and Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.105 for a detailed discussion of these differences.

(see 1:21–22).⁷⁵ Second, Peter and John head the list. They will feature prominently in Acts 1–12.⁷⁶ In this way, Luke signals his intention to focus on the apostolic ministry of Peter in the chapters to follow. Third, there is one notable omission from the list of 1:13—Judas Iscariot. This omission sets the stage for the events of 1:15–26. Since lists in Acts ‘signal an important transition in the narrative (6:5; 13:1; 20:4)’, Luke likely highlights the following account as significant.⁷⁷

Luke then tells us what characterized the activity of the eleven as they met in the upper room: ‘All of these were devoted with one purpose to prayer.’ The disciples are resolutely engaged in prayer together. The verb ‘devoted’ is used at least three times in Acts in connection with prayer (1:14; 2:42; 6:4).⁷⁸ It denotes the commitment of these disciples to corporate prayer. The adverb ‘with one purpose’ appears ten times in Acts and indicates not simply that the disciples are gathered together but that they engaged in prayer with one accord.⁷⁹ Luke does not tell us what it was for which the disciples prayed, but some have plausibly reasoned that they were petitioning the Father to send the promised Holy Spirit.⁸⁰

The eleven were not the only ones engaged in this united, fervent prayer in the upper room. With the eleven were ‘women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers’. Luke has earlier highlighted the critical role that women played in the material support of Jesus and his disciples (Luke 8:1–3), in keeping vigil

75 Marshall, *Acts*, p.62.

76 Luke will not mention the other nine apostles again in Acts.

77 Pervo, *Acts*, p.46.

78 Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.88.

79 Pace Barrett, *ibid.* See Bock, *Acts*, p.78.

80 Calvin, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.57; Peterson, *Acts*, p.118; D. Johnson, *Acts*, p.7, referencing Luke 11:13.

at the cross and at the tomb (Luke 23:55), and in bearing initial witness to the resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:1–12). Although women were not called to serve as apostles, Luke stresses here how they nevertheless play a critical role in the life of the church. Who are these ‘women’? Some have suggested that they were the wives of the apostles.⁸¹ Since Luke does not specify them further, however, it is best to understand them as unnamed disciples of Jesus.

Also present were ‘Mary’ and the ‘brothers’ of Jesus. ‘Mary’, the mother of Jesus, had figured prominently in Luke’s account of Jesus’ conception and birth (Luke 1–2). Strikingly, while Luke does distinguish her by virtue of her biological relationship with Jesus, she is simply named among the company of praying disciples. Here we see Mary’s continuance in the faith she had earlier professed in God her Saviour and Lord. The ‘brothers’ of Jesus are also mentioned.⁸² During Jesus’ earthly ministry, they were unbelieving and worldly (John 7:1–9). Paul tells us that, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to James, one of his brothers (1 Cor. 15:7). Presumably at least some of Jesus’ remaining brothers (see Mark 6:3) have also since come to accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

1:15–17. *And in those days, Peter arose in the midst of the brothers and said (now the assembly of persons was altogether about 120), ‘Men and brothers, it was necessary that the Scripture be fulfilled—the Scripture which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who was a guide to those who arrested Jesus, because he had been counted among us and had obtained a share in this ministry.’*

81 So Calvin, *Acts*, vol. 1, pp.56–57; Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.89.

82 There is no textual reason to doubt that Jesus’ biological half-brothers are meant—the natural children of Joseph and Mary conceived and born after the birth of Jesus. See here Bruce, *Greek Text*, pp.106–7.

At some point during the period that Luke has described in 1:12–14 (‘and in those days’, 1:15), ‘Peter’ addresses the body of believers in the upper room. In addressing the whole assembly,⁸³ ‘Peter’ is speaking on behalf of his fellow apostles, as he had at Caesarea Philippi (Luke 9:18–20). This address is the first of several speeches that Peter will make in Acts. In telling us parenthetically that the number of persons there was ‘about 120’, Luke intends us to understand the listings of 1:13–14 as partial but not exhaustive.⁸⁴

Peter’s speech turns, as the speeches in Acts so often turn, on the exposition of the Old Testament. Peter makes a few important claims about the Old Testament before he cites particular passages in 1:20–22. First, ‘the Holy Spirit spoke [it] beforehand through the mouth of David’. Peter affirms both the divine authorship and human authorship of Scripture. It is entirely David’s word, and it is entirely the Holy Spirit’s word. David, speaking prophetically, is the mouthpiece of God the Spirit. Second, Peter highlights the Old Testament as a book that not only prophesies the sufferings of Jesus Christ, but finds its fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus (he will explain how in 1:20). In making this point, he demonstrates that he has grasped Jesus’ teaching at Luke 24:44–49. Peter (and the other apostles), then, are reading the Old Testament in the manner in which Jesus has instructed them.⁸⁵ Third, Peter stresses a divine necessity to the Scripture’s fulfilment (‘it was necessary that ...’), here specifically in the betrayal of Judas (see 1:20). Once the Spirit had foretold the betrayal of Judas in the Old Testament, it could not

83 The gendered Greek words ‘brothers’ and ‘men’ do not necessarily exclude women when they are forms of address; cf. Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.108.

84 Some also understand this figure to be *quorum* for a legitimate Jewish assembly; so Marshall, *Acts*, p.64. The extrabiblical evidence, however, is contradictory and does not support such a claim. See the discussion at Bock, *Acts*, pp.80–81.

85 D. Johnson, *Acts*, p.8.

be otherwise than that the Spirit's Word would come to pass. These 'events ... are an unfolding of the predetermined plan or will of God'.⁸⁶

What events concerning Judas does Peter have in mind? As the following verses make clear, it is not so much the death of Judas as the betrayal of Judas that has brought the Scriptures cited in 1:20 to fulfilment and has necessitated his replacement.⁸⁷ Although Judas 'had been counted among us', that is, the apostles (not the body of believers as a whole), 'and had obtained a share in this ministry', he became 'a guide to those who arrested Jesus' and therefore forfeited his place in the apostolic band.

1:18–19. (*Now this one, purchased a field with the wages of unrighteousness and, falling headlong, he burst apart in the middle and all his innards were poured out. And the matter became known to all those who dwell in Jerusalem, with the result that that field was called in their own language 'Akeldama', that is 'Field of Blood'.*)

These two verses are parenthetical to Peter's speech. Luke has likely included them in order to provide additional details about Judas that his readers might otherwise not know.⁸⁸ Here we see the consequences or outcome of Judas' treachery: he experienced a gory death in the 'field' that he 'purchased ... with the wages of unrighteousness'. Judas' death, Luke tells us, was a matter of some notoriety in Jerusalem—so much so that the field was renamed 'Akeldama', which is Aramaic for 'Field of Blood'.

How are we to reconcile these details with the account of Judas' death in Matthew 27:3–10? Matthew tells us that the chief priests

86 Peterson, *Acts*, p.122.

87 Bruce, *Greek Text*, p.109; Peterson, *Acts*, p.123.

88 So Calvin, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.62, 63; Pervo, *Acts*, p.50.

purchased the field (Matt. 27:7); Acts tells us that Judas purchased the field. Matthew tells us that Judas hanged himself (Matt. 27:5); Acts tells us that Judas ‘falling headlong ... burst apart in the middle and all his innards were poured out’. Some commentators see inescapable conflict between these two accounts.⁸⁹ There is, however, no necessary contradiction between them and they may be readily harmonized. With respect to Judas’s death, it is possible that ‘his fall was the sequel to his hanging in some way, with his body rupturing as a consequence’.⁹⁰ With respect to purchase of the field, the chief priests ‘bought the potter’s field in Judas’s name with the thirty silver coins belonging to him’.⁹¹

This gruesome account is one of a handful of signal divine judgments that Luke relates in Acts (cf. 5:1–11; 12:20–23). Judas’s purchase of a field with blood money is also in striking contrast with those ‘loyal believers, who sell their fields and donate the proceeds to the community (2:45; 4:34–37)’.⁹² This parenthesis, then, reinforces Luke’s concerns in Acts to impress upon his readers the holiness of God, and to distinguish genuine from spurious discipleship.

1:20–22. *‘For it is written in the book of Psalms, “Let his residence be a desert place and let there be no one dwelling in it,” and “Let another take his office.” It is necessary, therefore, that—of those men who have accompanied us on every occasion when the Lord Jesus went in and went out among us,*

89 See Pervo, *Acts*, p.52 and the literature cited at p.52 n.25.

90 Peterson, *Acts*, p.124. Some have suggested that the phrase translated ‘falling headlong’ is better translated ‘became swollen’, thus accounting for the details that Luke proceeds to relate. Decisively against this view, however, see Barrett, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.98.

91 Longenecker, *Acts*, p.727.

92 Pervo, *Acts*, p.53.

beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men be a witness of his resurrection along with us.'

Peter's speech resumes at 1:20. 1:20 provides the ground ('for') for Peter's statement in 1:16: how it is that the Scripture has found fulfilment in Judas's betrayal of Jesus. Peter quotes verses from two Davidic Psalms; the first comes from Psalm 69:25; the second from Psalm 109:8. Both are psalms of personal lament.⁹³ Psalm 69 is quoted in the New Testament on four other occasions (John 2:17; 15:25; Rom. 11:9–10; 15:3). In three of these four references, the psalm is applied directly to Jesus, and particularly to his sufferings and death. It is not surprising, then, to see the psalm finding fulfilment in the one who, in betraying Jesus, set in motion the course of events that resulted in Jesus' death. Here, Peter quotes this verse as finding prophetic fulfilment in the circumstances surrounding Judas's death, specifically his abandonment of the field that he had purchased with his blood money. Psalm 109, quoted in the New Testament only here, is an imprecatory psalm in which David calls upon God to curse his enemies.⁹⁴ Peter quotes this verse as warrant for filling the office that Judas vacated by his treachery.

Peter draws a conclusion ('it is necessary, therefore ...') from these Scriptures: Judas must be replaced. Here Peter rehearses the qualifications of an apostle. The apostle must be a man (Peter uses the gendered Greek word for 'man'). He must have been with Jesus and the other apostles the whole time between the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus' ascension. Specifically, he must be 'a witness

93 I. H. Marshall, 'Acts', in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p.530.

94 For a list of possible allusions or echoes to this psalm elsewhere in the New Testament, see *ibid.*

of his resurrection', just as Jesus had specified at 1:8 (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8–10).

Why the concern to replace Judas? Were not eleven disciples sufficient to the task of bearing witness to Christ? Two considerations suggest otherwise. First, Peter stresses that the replacement of Judas is a matter of divine necessity. Because God had prophesied, through David, Judas' departure from office, 'it must be the divine will and purpose that [the apostolical office's] integrity should be preserved'.⁹⁵ Second, Peter states that Judas had been 'counted' among the apostles (1:17). The verb 'counted' suggests 'a definite and well-known number', that is, twelve.⁹⁶ Jesus had appointed twelve apostles and had made specific promises to the twelve (Luke 22:28–30). This state of affairs mandated a replacement for the twelfth spot.⁹⁷

1:23–26. *And they nominated two men: Joseph who was called Barsabbas, who was named Justus; and Matthias. And praying they said, 'You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all people, indicate the one whom you have chosen from among these two men, to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas has gone aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them and the lot fell upon Matthias and he was added along with the eleven apostles.*

Elsewhere in Acts, appointment to office is through the election of the church (6:3). Here, the procedure is different. First the apostles 'nominated two men', that is, men who met the qualifications stated in verses 21–22.⁹⁸ The two men—'Joseph who

95 Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, p.31.

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

97 Bock, *Acts*, p.82.

98 Even though the apostles address the whole body of believers, Peter's words in

was called Barsabbas, who was named Justus; and Matthias’—are mentioned only here in the New Testament. The absence of any further personal details about either man further demonstrates that Luke is primarily concerned to relate the full restoration of the apostolate.⁹⁹

Then the apostles commit the matter to prayer. They pray to the ‘Lord, who know[s] the hearts of all’. The apostles are likely petitioning the Lord Jesus.¹⁰⁰ Jesus is said to have ‘chosen’ the apostles in 1:2, and is now asked to ‘indicate the one whom you have *chosen* from among these two men’ (Luke uses the same Greek verb in both verses). Peter later addresses God as the one ‘who knows the heart’ (15:8) and therefore provides us here with indirect testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ.¹⁰¹

The apostles reiterate and amplify the circumstance which has occasioned this request. Judas has ‘gone aside’ from ‘this ministry and apostleship’. He has thereby ‘gone aside to go to his own place’, that is, to hell. Judas’ departure from office and self-murder proved to be fruits of a heart untouched by the grace of the Saviour in whose presence he had lived and laboured for three years.

The scene concludes with the apostolic casting of ‘lots’ in order to discern which of these two men God has chosen to fill Judas’s vacated office. During the Old Testament period, God had appointed the casting of lots as a periodic means for his people to discern his will.¹⁰² The casting of lots—then and here—ensured that the decision was entirely the Lord’s (Prov. 16:33). Strikingly,

1:21–22 demand that it is the eleven apostles who nominate the two men, *pace* Stott, *Acts*, p.58.

99 See here Witherington, *Acts*, p.126.

100 *Pace* Pervo, *Acts*, p.55.

101 See Peterson, *Acts*, pp.127–28 for multiple Old Testament references ascribing knowledge of the heart to God.

102 See the discussion, with references, at Longenecker, *Acts*, p.731.

this is the last mention of the casting of lots in the New Testament. We may conclude that, since Pentecost, lots are no longer a divinely approved method of discerning God's will.¹⁰³ There is no reason, however, for concluding that the apostles employed illegitimate means in securing Judas' replacement or that Matthias was thereby an illegitimate successor.¹⁰⁴

After 'the lot fell upon Matthias', he 'was added along with the eleven apostles'. With Matthias chosen by Christ and formally enrolled by the apostles, the apostolate is now complete. But 'though the place left vacant by Judas has been filled by Matthias, the place left vacant by Jesus has not yet been filled by the Spirit'.¹⁰⁵ We now await the promise of the Spirit to empower what will be the apostles' global witness to Jesus Christ.

Application

This passage presents certain difficulties to the contemporary church. After all, we no longer have apostles (much less a selection process for apostles). They constitute a once-for-all foundation upon which Jesus is building his church (Eph. 2:20). Neither ought we to consult lots to discern the will of God. The Scripture is a sufficient guide to show us what we must believe and how we must live (2 Tim. 3:16). Is there anything to be learned from Acts 1:12–26? At least three lessons emerge from this passage.

First, we see two traits of the church—prayer and devotion to the Scripture (cf. Acts 2:42). The church commits herself to the Scripture as the inspired Word of God, a book whose primary purpose is to set forth Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord of men.

103 So Chrysostom, cited at Stott, *Acts*, p.58 n.74.

104 See the discussions at Marshall, *Acts*, p.67; Alexander, *Acts*, vol. 1, pp.37–38.

105 Stott, *Acts*, p.59.

The church gives herself to corporate, persevering, and whole-hearted prayer. Where these traits are lacking, we cannot expect the church to flourish.

Second, we see the sovereignty of God set alongside human responsibility without tension or contradiction. God appointed long ago that Judas should vacate his office by betraying Jesus. At the same time, Judas is fully responsible for his own decisions—he has gone ‘to his own place’. Jesus has promised that the Father will send the Spirit. The church fervently and perseveringly petitions God to send the Spirit. In the latter case, we see that awareness of divine sovereignty, properly understood, far from enervating us and relegating us to passivity, should stir us to the fullest exercise of our energies in the use of all the means that God has appointed.

Third, we see Jesus’ abiding concern and provision for his church. From heaven, he answers the church’s prayer to provide a twelfth apostle. This gift of Christ to the church enables her to carry out her mission of bearing witness to Christ before the nations. The wisdom according to which Jesus answers his church’s prayers, Luke reminds us, is a *divine* wisdom. How grateful we should be that the one who directs the affairs of the world and of the church is all-knowing and always concerned for the welfare of his people.