

“Getting Ready And Counting Down”

Acts 1:1-26

Series: Book of Acts [#1]

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

January 20, 2008

Introduction

This morning we begin looking at the N. T. book of Acts. As with every book in the Bible, Acts is important, contains much valuable truth and it has great benefits for us. The book of Acts gives us a picture of the first thirty years of the church. It is historical. But it also is much more than that. Beyond tracing the early history of the church, it also traces the truth, mission and life of the church—the truth, mission and life that are critical for us.

The opening scene can be described as is “*Getting Ready and Counting Down.*” Getting ready and counting down to the beginning of the church.

b. Before we zoom in on this scene, we need some introductions.

Some Introductions.

◆ We begin with meeting the author.

The author is not named in the book, but there is no difficulty in establishing that it was Luke. For example, compare the introductions to Luke’s gospel and acts.

His gospel opens, “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:1-4)

Then, Acts opens, “The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.” (1:1-2)

So we see that Acts is a continuation of Luke’s gospel.

Then, later in Acts there are the “we” passages where the author speaks of himself with Paul (e.g., 16:10 f., 20:6 f.) By a process of elimination, this leads us to Luke. As well, historically, Acts was circulated with the gospel of Luke as one unit until the four gospels were circulated together shortly after John’s gospel was written in the early 90s.

And so we have Luke, *Dr. Luke*. Paul referred to him as “the beloved physician.” His name is very familiar in the church, but we know little about him. His gospel and Acts

give us some perspective on him, but not a picture. He is only mentioned three times in other New Testament books, all by Paul—and these references do not give us details about him (Colossians 4:14; 1 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24).

- ◆ Let's move on to survey the setting.

Acts was probably written at or near Rome during Paul's first imprisonment there. I date it at that time because, along with other factors, there is no reference to Nero's persecution, which began with the burning of Rome in 64 A.D. As well, there is no reference to Paul's death or the fall of Jerusalem. It may well have been written around 61/62, one or two years after Luke wrote the gospel.

Acts was addressed to Theophilus, the same person to which Luke's gospel was addressed. We don't have background on him either. In Luke 1:3 he is addressed as "most excellent Theophilus," which may indicate he was a person with a high position.

When Acts was written, the center of activity for the church had moved from Jerusalem to Antioch, and then to Ephesus. Now, Paul was at Rome, the capital of the Empire. Persecution of the church up to this point had been largely waged by the Jews, not the Romans. Roman persecution would begin soon.

Acts covers the first three decades of the church. Its structure often has been seen as three movements:

- 1) *The church beginning in Jerusalem (1-7).*
- 2) *The church on the move in Judea and Syria (8-12).*
- 3) *The Church on the move to all the world (13-28).*

- ◆ We also should get acquainted with the importance of the book.

Acts is the only source which bridges the gap between the gospels and letters. It provides a broad overview of the church from its beginning to Paul arriving in Rome, about 30 years later.

Luke does not systematically work through particular points of doctrine, but he touches on all the basic truths of the gospel. In Acts we see the importance of the Holy Spirit's ministry in the church age; practical issues of the organization and nature of life in the church, including problems and solving them; and, principles from real life for evangelism and missions.

- ◆ Finally, we need to strike up a friendship with the purpose of the book.

Luke gives it to us in the opening verses, as he tells Theophilus and us that he is continuing to tell us about Jesus' work. Jesus said, "I will build My church," and in Acts we find the record of this building process. A record which makes it clear that the church is God's work for all people in all parts of the earth.

With these introductions in place, let's now zero in on the first of two major points of

focus in the first chapter. We begin with Jesus' departure.

Jesus' Departure In Preparation For The Church Age.

Jesus had told the disciples about His departure and its importance. In John 13, at the end of that last Passover meal, and after Judas left, Jesus said,

“...Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’” (31-33)

Then later, in John 16:7, “...I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.”

So we see something of the importance and the advantage of Jesus' departure. While Jesus was on earth, He was only in one place at any given time. When He returned to heaven He sent *the Helper*, the Holy Spirit, Who is within every believer bringing the presence of Jesus at all times. This change is a wonderful, powerful reality which gives assurance, guidance and power to all believers, and to the church as a whole.

Consider His final teaching. Luke gives an overall description of Jesus' final teaching in verse 3, “To these [the eleven] He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.”

Then Jesus gave them a promise.

“Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, ‘Which,’ He said, ‘you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’” (4-5)

He directed them to wait in Jerusalem for the *Father's* promise through Him—that is, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church age. Look at the specific statement: “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

This was fulfilled at Pentecost, which we will look at next time in chapter 2. It ushered in a new relationship of believers to God in that each believer from the point of salvation now has the Holy Spirit living in him/her. It ushered in the church age with the mission of the church to the world being, as Jesus said in verse 8, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

Jesus continued His final teaching with some correction. The disciples posed a question, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” They had been with Jesus for more than three years. They had experienced His betrayal and death, and then the mind-

boggling reality of His resurrection. Now they had spent 40 days with Him, being with Him, learning more about God's kingdom.

“*What was next?*” They wondered if *now* was the time Jesus was going to usher in His kingdom on earth. I don't fault them for asking the question. It certainly doesn't appear that Jesus did. He redirected their thinking in His answer, verse 7, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.” The time of Jesus' setting up His kingdom on earth was not open for discussion, and it isn't today either.

Then Jesus concluded His teaching with their mission in the world. Look at verse 8 again,

“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

The resources, the ability to be God's witnesses comes from the Holy Spirit within them, and from within us. Our prime purpose to the world, to those outside the family of God, is to be God's witness. We are to live and speak of the good news of Jesus, and do that purposefully, clearly and effectively. Every believer is called, is commissioned by Jesus Christ to be His witness.

Then, think about His final action. Having concluded His work, Jesus *took off*.

Verse 9, “And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.”

Space travel is not new. Jesus didn't need a launching pad, space suit, rocket and special vehicle as He left earth. And so, there was the glorification of Jesus to the right hand of the Father—think of the grand celebration in heaven!

How did the disciples respond? How would you and I have responded if we were there watching Him go up into the clouds and out of sight? Luke tells us “[the disciples] were gazing intently into the sky while He was going” (8).

God sent two angels who broke their trance-like looking at the clouds by saying, “...why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” God sent the angels to interpret what was going on and to reassure them. It's possible that they also came to prevent a repeat of the disciples' response at Jesus' transfiguration, recorded in Luke 9:28-36, when they wanted to build a monument on the spot.

So we see Jesus' departure in preparation for the church age. In it we see His power, His love and care for the disciples. And this brings us to the other focus in this chapter, the disciples.

The Disciples' Condition At The Dawn Of The Church Age.

Think about their progress under Jesus' ministry. They now had confidence in Christ. Go

back to verse 6,

“So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying,
‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’”

You may wonder, “How does their question show this confidence in Christ?” Their question was of *time*, not *ability*; it was a question of *when* not *if*.

Not too long before Jesus’ crucifixion they tried to correct Him when He taught about His death, about His leaving them. They saw that as a great loss for themselves and a great defeat for Jesus. Now that had changed. They knew and believed. They had complete confidence in Christ, in His direction, in His ability to establish His kingdom, as well as the certainty that He would.

They also had confidence in each other. Go down to verse 14,

“These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”

The next verse tells us there were about 120 people in this group. A group which all “with one mind.” Do you recall the rivalry, the debates that had gone on between these men? “*Who was the greatest?*” “*Who would be in the kingdom?*” At the end of his gospel, John tells us Peter was so concerned about his relationship with Jesus in comparison to John that this group of the eleven disciples and the inner circle of family and friends who believed, now including Jesus’ half brothers, were “all of one mind.”

Yes, they had grown, but they still needed Jesus’ further ministry. In spite of their progress, they were still not fully prepared for and able to carry out the ministry ahead of them. We see this demonstrated in two areas.

First, in their ignorance of Jesus’ purpose. Their question about the kingdom in verse 6 reveals this. They had heard Jesus say, “I will build My church.” They had spent the last forty days listening and learning. But they still were not clear on Jesus’ plan. Clarity would come after Pentecost. Some years later, in the Council at Jerusalem in chapter 15, James said,

“Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.”

Secondly, we see it in their inability to carry out Jesus’ commission on their own. Verses 15-26 record the selection of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve. There has been much discussion and debate on whether this was a faithful or impetuous act. What

we know is that Peter drew upon Old Testament scriptures to make the case for them needing to select a replacement. He did not interpret Psalm 60:25 and 109:8, but applied them to this situation.

As he saw it there were, of course, *twelve* tribes in Israel. Jesus chose *twelve* disciples and told them they would “sit upon *twelve* thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30). So, Peter concluded they needed to choose a successor to Judas.

Some suggest that God chose His own replacement later in the apostle Paul citing, among other things, Paul’s opening words in his letter to the churches of Galatia, “Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead)...”

The point I want to make here today is that the apostles could not carry out the mission on their own any more than we can. They talked and thought together, they prayed and cast lots—all looking to God and trusting Him for guidance. They needed further, ongoing ministry from Jesus.

Conclusion.

There are at least two lessons I want you to take from this opening chapter. First, Jesus gave the *Great Commission* not just to those who watched Him ascend back to heaven, but to all believers, to every believer. It is still in force for you and me. It will remain in force until Christ comes again. As we watch some highlights of the first 30 years of the church unfold in Acts, we see this mission being carried out.

Throughout these weeks I will be bringing us back to look at the highlights of how we are doing today, not just those first century believers so long ago. We will learn about them. We also can learn from them how to carry out our mission.

The second lesson is the importance and value of the Holy Spirit in our lives and work for God. Jesus restated the promise of the Holy Spirit here. We will see Him come in chapter 2. We feel inadequate for the task because we are inadequate for the task. We are no different than the first believers—on our own we cannot accomplish our mission. Often Christians try either to excuse themselves or try on their own.

We see this last tendency in an allegory that is told about a young man named *Sinner* who received a new red car named *salvation* from his father. It was great! He never could have afforded it. The young man even changed his name from *Sinner* to *Saved*, and told everyone about this amazing gift from his father.

One day while *Saved* was pushing his car *Salvation* down the highway, a person named *Helper* came and asked if He could assist. *Saved* replied that he had become quite good at pushing the car and had already pushed it about 200 miles!

Helper told him to get in the car. *Saved* hesitated, but then got in and sat down. It was the first time he had rested since being given the car. *Helper* got into the driver’s seat, started

the motor, and soon they were quietly and smoothly slipping down the highway. *Saved* knew he needed *Salvation* to be admitted through the gate at the end of the highway, but somehow he felt getting there was his responsibility. Now he realized that *Helper* had come to help take him there, and the intention never was for him to go alone, but with the assistance of the *Helper*.

Today, and throughout the weeks of our time in Acts, realize, continue to learn about and depend on the Holy Spirit to make you what God wants you to be, to enable you to do what God wants you to do.

In the next few moments that you spend quietly with God, talk with God about the commission He has given you to be Christ's witness. Where is it on your list of priorities? How are you doing as a witness? Thank God—yes, *thank God*—for this responsibility and privilege.

Then thank God that living for Him and serving Him is not all up to you, that you don't have to *push the car down the highway*. Thank Him for the Holy Spirit within you, bringing the presence of Jesus, instruction, correction, assurance and power.

© 2008 Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.