

Acts 1-The Great Commission and the Ascension of Christ

The New Testament book called “Acts” is unique in the Bible in that it records about 30 years of history of the early church following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The close companion of Paul, Luke, wrote this book as the sequel to his earlier letter we call “The Gospel According to Luke”. Acts is addressed to the same man named Theophilus that Luke’s Gospel was written to. Also, Acts 1:1 refers back to the Gospel of Luke. The book of Acts is our history of the early spread of Christianity and growth of the church. Luke wrote to produce a new theological outlook of the New Covenant in which the coming of the Holy Spirit and the mission of the church filled the gap caused by the period of time between Christ’s first and second coming.

Forty Days of Appearing

In Acts 1:1-5, we find out that after the resurrection Jesus continually appeared to His disciples for forty days ministering to them, teaching them, commanding them, and promising them great things. It sounds like He would come and go, and appear to different groups in different places. We have the record of at least eleven appearances in the New Testament, but He probably appeared more often than that in those forty days. It was imperative that His disciples first believe that He was alive in order to insure their confidence, hope, and courage to continue His ministry that He was entrusting to them. The resurrection appearances played a big part in their transformation from timid and clueless to bold and knowledgeable. The text says that He spoke of the things “concerning the kingdom of God”. In its simplest form, the kingdom is God’s sovereign rule. Now, God rules in the hearts of believers, but in the end, God will rule over all things. During the church age, God rules in the hearts of believers through the church, but the rest of the world goes its own way. When Christ comes back, He will change that.

In verse 4-5, Christ gave them instruction to stay in Jerusalem and wait for some great life changing event. Remember that all the Apostles at that time were from the Galilean area, so they may have thought about going home. Jesus had already promised them at the Last Supper that the Holy Spirit was coming to help them, but they probably had no idea how awesome this would be, or the difference He would make. Jesus had taught them a lot of truth, but they needed power to accompany that truth. Therefore they had to all stay in Jerusalem to wait for the new change to come upon them, and it would be entirely a divine activity. John the Baptist had predicted that they would be “baptized by the Holy Spirit” in Luke 3:16, and Jesus had taught about a year before that “He who believes in Me, from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water; but this He spoke of the Spirit whom those who believed in Him were to receive...”(John 7:38-39).

Like Children in the Back Seat

All through Jesus’ ministry, the disciples had been chomping at the bit for Jesus to set up the Kingdom so they could get great rewards and positions of power. They were like little kids in the back seat who constantly ask, “Are we there yet?” Even after the resurrection that was foremost on their minds as they asked Jesus in Acts 1:6 “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” They still had no clue as to the extended time period we call the church age between the first and second advent of Christ. Can you imagine how surprised they would be now two thousand years later? Now it is we who are saying, “Are we there yet?” Jesus told them in v.7 that it was not for them (or us) to “know times or epochs which God the Father has fixed by His own authority”. Their job was to anticipate the kingdom by living with an urgency to minister until then.

The Great Command

Acts 1:8 is connected to the previous verse by a “but” which means that instead of being obsessed with the “when question”, they needed to totally focus on being a witness for Jesus now. That is the work at hand for the church until Jesus comes back. A witness gives testimony to what he or she believes is the truth. The authors of the New Testament gave the best testimony because it was eyewitness testimony. The Apostle John wrote in 1 Jn.1:1, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, and our hands handled...” Also Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:16 that “we were eyewitnesses of His majesty”. You might ask yourself how effective they were as witnesses, and the answer is in Acts 17:6, they “upset the world”. This could be translated from the Greek to say that they turned the world upside down with the Gospel. An interesting bit of trivia is that the Greek word for witnesses is “martures”, and it came to be used for those who gave up their lives because of their witness so our word for martyrs comes from the Greek word for witness.

As I look at the rest of the book of Acts, I see at least four ways the Apostles were effective witnesses:

- Personal testimony: they gave their personal story of how Christ changed their lives.
- Proclamation of the Gospel truth: they were constantly telling any audience available the basics of the Gospel
- Apologetics (a defense of the faith): like Peter before the Sanhedrin or Paul in Athens at the Areopagus
- Lifestyle evangelism: these guys lived the kind of life that makes Christ look good.

Acts 1:8 is the book of Acts without the details. Following the geography that Jesus laid out, His disciples took the Gospel to first Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and then to the rest of the world. The most important part of Acts 1:8 is the promise of the receiving of power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them. This happened about 8-10 days later as recorded in chapter two. Most people think of Matthew 28:19-20 when they think of the "great commission", but to me Acts 1:8 is even better because it includes the coming of the Spirit. Here in Acts 1, they are still timid and clueless, but when the Spirit came upon them in Acts 2, they became bold authoritative witnesses for Christ. Not only did the Spirit affect them, but the audiences were affected as well. As Jesus said in John 16:8, the Holy Spirit would convict the world concerning sin. The audiences in Acts 2 responded to the Gospel message of Peter by being "pierced to the heart", and asking what they needed to do. The Spirit would not only enable the disciples, but also prepare the hearts of unbelievers to hear and believe the truth.

The Ascension of Christ

Acts 1:9-11 records the ascension of Christ to heaven where He took His rightful position at the right hand of God Almighty. As amazing as this event was, don't forget that when Luke wrote this, most of the audience of about 120 disciples was still alive, so Luke had to be exact in his account or else be refuted by the eyewitnesses. This final dramatic scene of Christ's ascension was stated simply and factually by Luke as Jesus being "lifted up...and received by a cloud until He was out of their sight". We know they were on the Mount of Olives at the time because of Acts 1:12 and Luke 24:50. Imagine the scene with all these believers looking up "gazing intently", when suddenly two angels were among them and spoke to them. First, the angels gave them a mild rebuke for staring so long and hard as if they were in shock at losing Jesus. They were not losing Jesus, because He was coming back in just the same way in the clouds, and to just the same spot on the Mt. of Olives. This prediction was perfectly in line with the prophecy of Zechariah 14:4 in the Old Testament that the Messiah's "feet will stand on the Mount of Olives which is in front of Jerusalem on the east."

Jesus had departed from the disciples, just as He said He would, to return to His former glory in heaven, but He left the disciples with that great dramatic moment that they would always remember. The physical presence of Jesus departed to be replaced by His spiritual presence in Acts 2. Think of the motivation that would have given them to carry on His work on earth while Jesus was in heaven. In addition to this visual display, they were assured by holy angels that Jesus would return. It is important to remember that when Jesus returns, He will return in His glorified body as the conquering King, and coming with Him will be the entire heavenly host. In Matt.24:29-31, Jesus described the awesome scene of His return as one so incredible that everyone on earth will behold it. All the luminaries like the sun, moon, and stars will be as darkened because the powerful glory of God will light up the earth. In Revelation 19:14, John described it as "the armies which are in heaven...were following Him on white horses, and from His mouth comes a sharp sword so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron."

Until that time, our task is the same as the Apostles---to finish the work that Jesus began, and be His witnesses in our community, our state, our country, and to the whole world.

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