

Bible Study Week 1

Acts 1:1-5 Introduction: the mission of the church

Good day. I hope and pray that I find you well. Welcome to our new weekly online Bible Study. We have been unable to gather in the Edzell Church lounge for Bible Study for nearly a year now and while we hope that we will be able to resume our normal weekly gathering at some point in the coming months, for now I aim to post these short weekly studies.

Originally, the intention was to meet online in a live interactive setting via Skype or Zoom. However, the connection is not always reliable, and I am conscious that the majority of our Bible Study Group do not actually use these platforms. Therefore, I will prepare and record a study which can be accessed anytime via our Church Facebook page. I will also include notes and questions that can be printed off for those unfamiliar with the new technology.

Prior to the pandemic and the resultant restrictions, we had begun working our way through The Gospel According to St John. I am not entirely sure where we left off and we may well return to it when permission is given to gather safely in person again but for now, I want to begin a new study. And I have chosen the Acts of the Apostles for our focus.

I do so because mission lies at the heart of the church's witness. We gather for worship recognising that our chief and ultimate end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever as our forebears remind us. And we long for the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. However, as the apostle reminds us: How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" 17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom.10:14-17).

Our mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour near and far. It is the Great Commission given by the Lord Christ to his church to go make disciples, baptising them and teaching them all things that he commanded. And the need has possibly never been greater. The church that fails to evangelise (communicate the gospel) must ultimately fossilise. And we have seen the slow but steady numerical and cultural decline of the church throughout our nation in recent decades. As a

result, church buildings are closing, congregations are compelled to amalgamate (not always a bad thing), there is a shortage of ministers and elders in some parts, denominations are failing (maybe that's not a bad thing either), and an increasing number of people have next to no knowledge of the Christian Faith. Baptisms are at an all time low. Church weddings and funerals are on the decline. Children are no longer brought to Sunday School and our nations' schools no longer teach the faith like they once did. Only a generation ago, children in Scotland began the school day with prayer, Bible lessons, and catechism but that has become a distant memory.

Lamentably, this trend will likely accelerate due to the lockdown. People have gotten out of the habit of attending church and while we expect most to return it is no means a certainty. Some congregations will likely never reopen as they are no longer financially and administratively viable and the church centrally will no longer be able to subsidize them due to the sizeable loss of income in recent months. And so the need for the church to re-engage in mission has never been greater. Christ promises to build his church, but he works through his people and the means of grace in doing so. And therefore we need to get with his programme. We do not lose heart but rather when we can, we must gather and go forth in faith, hope and love with good news of great joy which is for all people. And we need to demonstrate our faith in care, compassion and community.

I want us to see in the coming weeks and months how the early church, like the mustard seed in our Lord's famous parable, began in a small upstairs room and yet by God's grace and power turned the world upside down. Transforming individual and collective lives for better. She came to thrive in and through trying and troublesome circumstances and we can do likewise - because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Let us make a start. And by way of an introduction, I wish to focus on the first five verses which act as a prologue.

O Lord our God Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Grant to all who watch this video and read these words the Spirit of illumination. Gives us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts ready to apply your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Text: In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the

Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1:1-5).

1. Firstly, let us consider the author, the recipients of the book, and its subject matter: In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

a) The author is St Luke. He was a physician by training. And therefore, he is sometimes referred to as Dr Luke. He was an evangelist and a close companion of the Apostle Paul's. And that is why he will occasionally use the plural pronoun 'we' here in his Acts of the Apostles. He had first-hand knowledge of the apostles and was an eyewitness to much of what is recorded in this book. And, of course, he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for as his close companion Paul tells us, all scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable (2Tim.3:16-17).

The first book referred to is the Gospel According to St Luke. The third of the four Gospels contained in the Bible which in turn is both a library of books and yet is truly one book, comprising the Old and New Testaments. And so, we ought to see the Acts of the Apostles as a continuation of the Lord Jesus's words and works through his appointed and anointed apostles and other followers in the early church.

b) The recipient is Theophilus, described as the 'most excellent' in volume one (Lk.1:3). He was possibly a patron who had commissioned the work as a historical record of the Lord Jesus' earthly ministry, and of how that ministry was continued through his church as they sought to obey his command to go into all the world and preach and live out the gospel. Such commissioning of works was common in the past. For example, I did my doctoral thesis on Archbishop John Spottiswoode who was commissioned by King James VI & I to write a History of the Church in Scotland.

Theophilus however quite literally means God-lover or lover of God, or even friend of God. And therefore, maybe Luke is using the name symbolically and addressing his inspired works to all lovers of God. It is certainly God's gift to us all. Written down, like John's gospel, that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that through believing we might have life in and through him and be enlightened and equipped for service.

c) And so, the subject is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the focus and the fulcrum of the biblical message. The word in scripture reveals the Word Incarnate and teaches us how to follow him. As the Good Shepherd himself says, My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand (Jn.10:27-28).

The Acts of the Apostles is the continuation of Christ's ministry through his body which is the church as it seeks to fulfil his Great Commission.

You may have heard the Acts of the Apostles understandably but mistakenly referred to as the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work is unquestionably indispensable, but his function is to reveal Christ to, in and through us, as Jesus teaches in John's Gospel (see John 14:16-19, 26, 16:7-10, 13-16). That is why the Anglican scholar, James Packer once referred to the Spirit as the 'Shy Sovereign'. He exists to cast his light on Jesus in whom we bear fruit. No, it is the Acts of the Apostles, not the Acts of the Holy Spirit. As someone once astutely remarked: 'Formerly they (the apostles and others) had experienced the Spirit through the presence of Jesus. After Pentecost they would experience Jesus through the presence of the Spirit.'

2. The Risen Christ called, coached, and commissioned his church through its founding fathers, the apostles: 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

a) The Lord Jesus chose and called the twelve to be the founding fathers of his church in this New Covenant era. And so, in the Old Testament the children of Israel comprised the progenitors and leaders of 12 tribes representing the church (people of God) in the Old Covenant period. And so, the parallel symbolism of the 12 apostles representing the founding pillars of the church in this New Covenant age. And as we shall see that is why Matthias was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot.

These apostles were men who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his earthly ministry and who were therefore credible and reliable eyewitnesses to his person and work. They had not only witnessed his passion, crucifixion, death and burial but had been utterly amazed, overjoyed and transformed by his resurrection from the tomb, as promised. We can never overestimate the inspirational importance of Christ's Resurrection which lies at the heart of the good news that we are to believe and share. And that is why Paul expands on this theme in the 15th chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians.

b) The Lord Jesus coached the apostles throughout the three and a half years of his earthly ministry. He was preparing them for their mission. He finally appeared to them and gave them their final instructions between his resurrection and ascension in readiness for sending them out into the world with good news in the Great Commission.

Luke is teaching us that Christ is the Head of his body, the church. It is his prerogative and privilege to call and command. That is why the Great Commission is prefaced with the words of Jesus saying, 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, you go...' He is our wisdom from God,

righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. He is our Prophet, Priest and King whose ministry continues through his church by his word and sacraments and by the enlightening and equipping of the Holy Spirit. This is the Father's love gift and will. Let us listen to him. Let us hear and heed him.

c) The Lord Jesus therefore taught them about the Kingdom of God. The New Covenant reign and rule of Love personified whose name is Jesus. He sits upon his throne at the Father's side. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. His Kingdom grows like a mustard seed. He reigns in the hearts and minds of his people by his word and Spirit. He has provided the means through which people enter and become part of it. He has given it a constitution – the Law of Love which is internalised by the Holy Spirit who unites God's people to the Head and one another in the body. His Kingdom continues to grow and will be completed and perfected at the Second Coming.

3. Finally, therefore Luke tells us that the Lord Jesus commanded his church to await the anointing of the Holy Spirit for the Great Commission: 4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

a) This was in fulfilment of God's promise. John the Baptist had said: "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk.3:16). The Spirit would descend after Christ's ascension as promised. And so, by faith they must wait on God's anointing for their ministry. He will enlighten, equip, empower, and embolden them for and in their mission.

b) The Spirit was a sign and seal of God's fatherly love and faithfulness to his church in Christ, his only begotten Son. Again, the apostles are now awaiting the imminent fulfilment of prophecy. God had promised through the Prophet Ezekiel: A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God (Eze.36:26-28).

The Spirit unites God's people to himself in Christ, provides assurance of God's Fatherly love towards us, and enables us to keep the faith and bear much fruit which is the Father's will. (see John 15 & Romans 6).

c) And so here at the beginning of the Book of Acts we find the church waiting patiently and expectantly to be anointed and empowered in preparation for the Great Commission which continues still through us today.

Questions to ponder:

- 1) How does the Lord Christ communicate his will for our lives today?
2. How do we demonstrate our love for God and neighbour?
3. How important is the Great Commission for the church today?
4. How should we prepare for worship, work, and witness in and as members of the church?