

Mission: The future of the Church

Acts 1:1-8

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Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Acts of the Apostles. What a great title for a book! The Acts of those who were sent out. If there is a book that describes mission in the New Testament this is it. This is the NT book that depicts the earliest proclamation and extension of the Good News of God made known to humans in Jesus Christ.

Many of us, when we read Acts, want to get right into the story, the picture. So, we usually jump over the first few verses of Acts to get to the real meat.

But, there is a reason why Luke begins as he does.

Let's start at the beginning, where Luke does: Acts 1:1-2:

RSV 1:1 *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 commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.*

I'm going to return to this name "Theophilus" in just a minute.

But, let's note: Acts opens with Luke telling us that this is the second of two books. In the first book, he has described "all that Jesus began to do and teach". That book is of course the Gospel of Luke

I imagine that most of you know the story that Luke tells there. But, here's the condensed version. After John the Baptist's miraculous conception and wonderful birth, followed by an even more miraculous conception and birth of Jesus, and with barely a nod to the youth of either, we read about what Jesus began to do and teach in the form of a public ministry that includes incredible miracles and teaching with authority about the Kingdom of God.

Then, dramatically, Jesus is arrested, quickly tried, and crucified. Three days later Jesus appears to his disciples, having been raised from the dead.

All of this is fleshed out in 24 chapters. That, according to Luke, is what Jesus began to teach and do.

The Gospel begins much the same way that Acts does. But, do you remember how the first chapter of Luke's Gospel itself begins? It begins very much like the beginning in Acts.

Luke 1:1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, 2 just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, 3 it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

What Luke tells his reader in the Gospel is that many others have sought to tell the same story. Like Luke, they have done so on the basis of accounts from eye-witnesses -- most of whom probably had no idea how to write, much less write an orderly account that could would make sense. (After all, they were farmers... farmers of the sea, otherwise called fishermen.)

Luke then tells this man named Theophilus: And now I'm doing the same for you to give you the full assurance that comes from my work. My assurance is that all of this that I have written is true.

I have to say, selfishly, that I love to draw people's attention to Luke's work. Because in fact Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts were written by someone like me, that is, by a research scholar. Whether or not Luke was a doctor or not, which no one knows, we do know from what he tells us at the start of his two volume work that he was a research scholar. He tells us at the beginning of his work that he has undertaken a careful investigation by researching all the events, talking to all of the eye-witnesses, not just to recount the events but to do so in a way that gets at what was really going on, that is, the truth of what was going on.

Now, unlike pastors, whom the people of God see all the time, because that's part of their job -- to be present to people -- , people like Luke, and like me, work behind the scenes. In contrast to those who are out there on the front lines and in the public eye, research scholars do work that enables the people on the front lines to do their jobs and to do them well.

Imagine what some things would be like without research scholars. Imagine going to see a doctor who didn't base his diagnosis of your condition on years of extensive study of the latest medical and scientific research. What kind of diagnosis would you get?

Imagine going to see a lawyer to defend you against serious charges who didn't have a whole research team that was able to go through thousands of pages of documents to prepare your case. What kind of defence would you get?

My job, as a research scholar, is to ensure that when people speak about Christian faith and doctrine, they do so properly, based on a good foundation, rather than just idle opinion. My job is to ensure that when people talk about God's Word, be they pastors in the pulpit or lay people seeking guidance, they get it right.

That's what Luke says about his job, too. He tells us that his job was to make sure that Theophilus knew what was true in the midst of all the things that he had heard and why it mattered.

Now, research can be very expensive. One reason that medicine is so expensive is because of the amount of research that goes into making just the right blends of pharmaceutical chemicals. One reason that health care is so expensive is because of the vast research network of people who are exploring diseases like cancer and diabetes and strokes trying to get at the truth about them. But, we pay as much for medicine and health care as we do because we think that this research is important. After all, our lives depend on it.

We pay as much as we do for a good legal defence, especially when our life or career is on the line, because our lives depend on it.

But, what about what I do, or what Luke did? How much are we willing to pay to be assured of the truth of the things that have happened in our midst? Oh, I know, it costs something to be a member of a church? But is your life on the line when you pay to be a member of this church? I would guess that what you pay is not anywhere near as much as what we're willing to pay to get at the truth of what's going on in my body or to mount a water-tight legal defence.

But, think for a moment about Luke.

Do you know how expensive it would have been in Luke's day to hire a research scholar like Luke to take a year or two, or maybe more, to research the events from Jesus' birth around the year 4 BC until the time when Paul arrived in Rome in the late 50s or early 60s AD? You have to go through ALL of the events and write down what matters. How long would that take? And remember, when you start writing, there is no word-processor. This is all done with a quill and ink. And where do you get the quills, the ink, the paper when you are on the road and there is no Staples, or anything even remotely like it?

Consider this. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles together have more than 50 chapters. Together they make up more than 1/4 of the entire New Testament!! Do you know how much time it would have taken to write this down? Do you have any idea how much it would have cost to buy the ink and the paper? And where does the paper come from!! Papyrus comes from Egypt. And was it written down on papyrus scrolls, which everyone had been writing on for centuries, or one of these gadgets called a "book"? These new "books", pages of papyrus paper or animal skin, bound together on the side, and able to be flipped open, had only just begun to appear about the very time that Luke was writing. And as with any new technology, like the iPad, these first generation books were not yet perfected AND they were expensive.

Who paid for all of this?

Here's a rough estimate of his expenses: Luke's time, his travels to interview everyone, his pens, his ink (produced from very expensive minerals and dyes), his abundance of paper to write things down, the time that it would have taken him and any scribes or secretaries he would have had to employ to write out everything, and all of their livelihood while they were doing all this... would have cost, according to one estimate, the equivalent today of at least a half a million dollars.

That's a LOT of money for research.

Well, that's a normal amount for medical research, or even a big legal case of someone whose life is on the line and who might be sent to prison or executed if found guilty. But, for biblical research?

Would you pay that much for a two volume set of books? ... the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, two books that tell the story of what Jesus began to do and continued to do through the ones that he sent out? Would it be worth it?

Theophilus must have thought that it was. I say Theophilus because most of us who have studied Luke's work believe that the one who paid for this was the person that Luke names here: Theophilus. As was

customary in Luke's day, and in later centuries, most authors, like most artists, could not afford to do what they did. They needed patrons. And when they completed their work, they gave credit to the patron. Writers would start their works, as Luke does here, acknowledging the patron in the opening words.

Theophilus not only could afford to spend half-a-million dollars but he spent it on this: the full story of Jesus and the mission of some of the first followers of Jesus.

But, why was it worth it to Theophilus? Luke concludes why this half-million dollar investment was so important:

Luke 1.4 "so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

Isn't it amazing? Theophilus was willing to pay that much to know the truth.

I don't know about you, but I'm not sure that, if I had that much money, I'd be that willing to pay that much? Why that's about as much as a house is worth in Ottawa! I don't know how much I've paid over the years, but that's about as much as a family might pay for their food, their entertainment, their comforts, their travels over a few years! I mean that's a LOT of money!

Was it worth it? What did Theophilus find out?

Well, I'll let you judge how worth it it was. But here's what Theophilus found out:

He found out the truth. And the truth is that God is and always has been on a mission; that God has sent Jesus His only Son to begin to complete that mission; and that that only Son Jesus has sent his followers to be the ones who bring the mission to its conclusion. This significant investment has one very important outcome: to be assured of the truth about the mission of God and that it matters.

Luke spends half of his labours on establishing the mission of Jesus, God's only Son, as an extension of God's mission that God has been on from the beginning of time. And what is that? To reconcile the world to Himself. We know that this was the mission entrusted to those who eventually became the people of Israel. And now, through Jesus, that mission will be finally effective as Jesus takes upon himself all the work of reconciliation that God had given Israel to do, but that it had failed to do.

And then in the second volume Luke writes about what the mission of Jesus' followers was. It was to go forth and to continue to do and teach exactly what God had begun to do and was now continuing to do in Jesus through them.

This all sounds right, but you can't imagine how difficult this must have been for those first followers of Jesus to understand.

After his resurrection, the risen Jesus continued to appear to the apostles for 40 days.

Vs 3 To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.

Put yourself in their position for a moment. How many days ago was Easter? It was 28 days ago. If you and I were living in the time of the Apostles, we would be at about day 28 since the appearance of Jesus

from the dead. He would have been walking among us already, teaching, instructing, showing convincing proofs that it was he and not a ghost, for 4 weeks.

They, like you and me, would probably have spent the first days in shock. Can you imagine???? The Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, walking in their midst, talking with them. How would you have reacted? Shock? Fear? Wonder? Doubt? All of these are recorded in the gospels.

But, eventually the shock would have worn off. Then they might have approached him with some initial questions.

If I had been there one of my first questions would have been: what was it like? Death, I mean, and after-death? What is there? Did you see other dead people, like Abraham and Moses. Were you aware of anything?

But, in Acts Luke records only one thing that they asked him:

vs. 6 "So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?""

Remember: Luke is getting this right, and Theophilus is spending a lot of money to hear this story. But, then, why this one question? Is that what you would have asked the risen Lord Jesus Christ?

Probably not, but that's because you're not Jewish as the apostles were. Nor, are you Jewish living at the time that these men were.

No, these Jewish men were living at a time when all men had been taught, as all Jewish men had been taught for centuries, that when the Messiah appeared, he would glorify Israel and make Israel the greatest power that the world had ever known. These men had followed this man Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. Peter had even said at one point: You are the Christ, the Messiah, the one we have expected for centuries.

Luke even indicates at one point (9:51) that they had begun their long, slow march toward capturing Jerusalem, a march that Luke clearly documents. They had understood that this long march would bear fruit when Jesus entered the Holy City and begun slowly and relentlessly to destroy the evil Roman troops and to cleanse the Temple of all impurity. When they ascended the hill toward Jerusalem on that great Palm Sunday, and the crowds began to cheer them on, their expectation had reached a fever pitch.

But it came crashing down just a few days later when everything seemed to unravel around them. When Jesus himself had told them that he would be arrested and tried. And then it had happened: Jesus was taken away and instead of being made king, he was tried, tortured, and then crucified like the worst criminal. You can't imagine the depths of despair with which the two disciples on the road to Emmaus spoke in Luke 24 unless you imagine that their whole world has been shattered.

And you can't imagine the renewed hope with which the apostles now speak to the risen Jesus. He is back! Like Arnold himself ("I'll be back") he has come back and they now believe ... aha, now we understand. He had to die and be raised from the dead. And now he will begin to reign as Messiah. Now is when he will come with his legions of angels and begin to cleanse the earth of all Gentile impurity.

So, Lord, NOW will you restore the Kingdom to Israel?

Why is this question so important that it is the only statement by the apostles that Luke records during his account in Acts of this entire 40 day period? It is so important because it is so misguided. John Calvin gets it exactly right when he comments on their question: “There are as many errors in this question as [there are] words.”

It was so wrong because it shows the apostles looking back to what they had hoped for, rather than forward to what God wanted. It is so wrong because it gets the mission of God so wrong.

Theophilus needed to hear this, but so do we still today. The mission of God, expressed in the church, is not about what we hope God will do, based on our past experiences, but the truth about what God will do, based on Jesus, who always goes before us.

And so Luke records Jesus’ response to their question:

4 [Do] not depart from Jerusalem. [Wait] for the promise of the Father, which ... "you heard from me, 5 for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." 7 "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

In effect, Jesus tells them: I have not come to be the long-expected Messiah of Israel who will save Israel alone and condemn the rest of the world. I have come because God has always loved the world and has always intended to save the world, including Israel. And so from now on you are going to go everywhere throughout the world making God’s plan and action known.

Next week, I’m going to speak to you about the content of the mission of God, what the apostles said and did. Perhaps you are surprised that I’ve entitled next week’s sermon simply “Martyrdom”. But, that’s what the mission is about. One of my friends said to me: aha, you get people committed and then you tell them the cost! Not far from the truth.

But we start here because it’s important that we know that the truth isn’t cheap and that we think about that this week. It didn’t come cheap to Theophilus. It didn’t come cheap to the apostles, who had to give up their hopes for an Israelite Kingdom of God. And it probably won’t come cheap for us, all of whom have our own hopes. But what matters is what God wants.

And remember this, too: it is important during these 40 days after Easter, when you and I as followers of Jesus continue to wait upon the Lord, to remember that God was faithful to those earliest followers of Jesus during their 40 days. They didn’t know it, but suddenly, on that 50th day, just 21 days from now, they were going to be pushed by the Spirit into martyrdom as they are pushed out from their little holy huddle in which they found themselves and thrown into the world by the winds of the Spirit. They would gladly have stayed where they were and hoped for the best. But God had better plans for them, and I know that he also does for us.

So let us wait, and let us pray. Let us rest assured in the truth made known to us in God’s Word. And let us be prepared to be blown out the door into the world to proclaim in word and deed the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ.