

Message #1  
Acts

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## ACTS AND THE LESSONS OF CHURCH HISTORY ACTS 1:1-5

### INTRODUCTION

Joe Kennedy (PROJECTOR ON--- JOE KENNEDY) was an assistant football coach at the high school in Bremerton, Washington. He developed the practice of praying at the fifty yard line after football games. Some players on the team would often join him, along with a few parents. In 2015 school officials told him to stop doing that. He continued, and the school district suspended him. Joe Kennedy sued the school district.

At issue was the First Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits Congress from passing laws respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. The school district argued that Joe Kennedy's behavior had a coercive effect on the students. This amounted to the promotion of an establishment of religion. Eventually the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals heard the case and agreed with the school district. They decided that the coach's behavior amounted to the establishment of religion, and the school was right in firing him.

In 2022 the US Supreme Court heard the case and ruled 6 to 3 in favor of Joe Kennedy. The majority focused on the freedom of religion in the First Amendment. They noted that the prayer happened after the game and that there was no compulsion for students to join the coach. Neil Gorsuch, author of the majority opinion, argued, "**The Constitution and the best of our traditions counsel mutual respect and tolerance, not censorship and suppression, for religious and nonreligious views alike.**" (PROJECTOR OFF)

In 1803 Thomas Jefferson coined the term "separation of church and state" to describe the religious intent of the First Amendment. In the original context in which Jefferson used this term in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association he was concerned about government intrusion into matters of the church.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, a delegate from Pennsylvania to the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was the first Founding Father to propose free public schools in this new country. In his 1791 publication *A Defense of the Use of the Bible as a School Book* he argued that the Bible should be the primary text book.

Unfortunately some among the academic and cultural elite are trying to rewrite history. We who are Christians should be concerned about that. History is important to us. Christianity is based upon a claim that God in time and space became a human being, that the God-man died on a cross, that He rose again from the dead, that He ascended into heaven, and that He is coming back to earth in visible form some day. If these historical claims could be proven to be false, Christianity would collapse. So history is important to us.

Unfortunately our society appears to be losing interest in history. A year and a half ago a group called the National Association of Educational Progress reported that only 13% of eighth graders in the US met proficiency standards in history. Last year the American Council of Trustees and Alumni conducted a nationwide survey of college students and found that these students lack “a rudimentary grasp” of American history and government. Only 20% of American colleges were found to require a history course. This is unfortunate.

I.

So we come to the first point in our outline: IT IS IMPORTANT FOR CHRISTIANS TO UNDERSTAND CHURCH HISTORY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. IT IS IMPORTANT FOR CHRISTIANS...) The founder of our church is Jesus. It is important that we understand the events of His life and death and resurrection and ascension into heaven. It is important that we understand what happened after He physically left the earth.

Church historian Philip Schaff pointed out in the 1800s the value that church history should have for us. He argued, **“How shall we labor with any effect to build up the church, if we have no thorough knowledge of her history, or fail to apprehend it from the proper point of observation? History is, and must ever continue to be, next to God’s Word, the richest foundation of wisdom, and the surest guide to all successful practical activity.”**

It is especially important that we understand the beginnings of the church. For it was to the leaders of this early church that Jesus Christ gave His marching orders. It was to them that He revealed its plan of attack. It was in its early stages that the church developed its pattern of operation. Then also He provided an inspired account of how this all got started.

So today we are going to embark upon a study of the events that immediately followed the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are going to look at this history of the beginning of the universal church. In doing that I hope that we will come to have a better understanding of who we are and how we have arrived at our present place. I hope that we will learn something about the proper functioning of the church. I hope that we will learn something about how to be used by God in the midst of a society that is increasingly becoming antagonistic to our faith.

Woodrow Wilson, who was President during World War I and earned his Ph.D. in history (WOODROW WILSON QUOTE), once warned, **“A nation which does not remember what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today, nor what it is trying to do. (WILSON QUOTATION CONTINUED) We are trying to do a futile thing, if we do not know where we came from or what we have been about.”** The same thing could be said about the Church of Christ and its members. It is important to know something about our history, especially our earliest history as the apostles of Jesus set out to follow the Lord’s marching orders.

## II.

Consider then the second point in our outline (II. WE LEARN ABOUT OUR...): WE LEARN ABOUT OUR CHRISTIAN ROOTS IN ACTS. The four gospels in the New Testament tell us about the life of Jesus. The fifth book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, describes what happened to the followers of Jesus after His death and resurrection.

### A.

We are going to look at first THE AUTHOR of this New Testament book. (II. WE LEARN ABOUT... A. THE AUTHOR) The first verse of the Book of Acts begins with this: **“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach...”** The writer is not named here or anywhere else in the book. The reference to the first book points us back to the Gospel According to Luke. For that also begins with a reference to Theophilus. Three weeks ago I had a Christmas message entitled “Christmas through the Eyes of Theophilus.” I looked at the author’s account of the birth of Jesus. Luke’s gospel does not contain any specific statement that Luke is its author. But the unanimous testimony of church writers and leaders going back to the second century is that Luke authored both books.

In two of Paul’s epistles, Colossians and 2 Timothy, the apostle makes reference to Luke being with him on his missionary journeys. This combined with the use of the personal pronoun later in the Book of Acts lends support to the idea that Luke was indeed the author.

In the description of the second missionary journey of Paul the author seems to join the expedition. In #16 v. 10 (ACTS 16:10) we read, **“And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”**

In Colossians #4 the Apostle Paul makes mention of several Jewish Christians who are with him at Rome. In v. 11 he says that they are the only ones from among the circumcision who are with him. He goes on to list several additional Christians who are evidently Gentiles. Luke is listed among them. It would seem that he was a Gentile.

In Colossians #4 v. 14 (COLOSSIANS 4:14) Paul makes this remark: **“Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.”** Being a good doctor we are going to find that this man is a careful chronicler of the events that he personally witnessed and that he learned about from others. When we come to descriptions of the physical conditions of various individuals, it will be helpful to keep in mind that Luke was a physician.

### B.

Consider next THE PURPOSE of the Book of Acts. (II. WE LEARN... A. B. THE PURPOSE) The most immediate reason for writing was to answer questions that some guy named Theophilus had about Christ and about the beginnings of the church. In vv. 3 & 4 of Luke’s gospel (LUKE 1:3) we are told, **“...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, (LUKE 1:4) that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”**

The term “most excellent” was often used in the Roman world of people who were in the equestrian class, which was a cultural and political and economic category used to refer to high ranking people second in the empire only to the senatorial class. The term will be used in Acts a couple of times of Roman officials. Some have suggested that Theophilus was a wealthy man who was underwriting the cost of Luke’s investigation and writing. That also is possible, but there are other conceivable explanations. Theophilus may have been a Roman official who was investigating the claims of Christ. He may have been a new Christian. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Luke did not go to all of this work just to answer the questions of one man. He intended that others should benefit from his research and from his description of Jesus and the early history of the church. In writing Acts Luke was concerned about answering questions that Christians and non-Christians had about Christianity and its origins. He wanted to explain about how Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, came on the scene. He wanted to show that Christianity was a legitimate spiritual descendant of Judaism and a fulfillment of prophecies made in the Hebrew Bible.

Luke also wanted to use this account to deal with attacks that were made by unbelievers on this fledgling movement. In Acts #28 v. 22 (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 28:22) the author quotes the Jews at Rome as saying to Paul when they met him, **“But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”** So what Luke seeks to do is to show that Christianity is not a subversive movement--- at least not in a political sense. In his account we see that at every point where Christianity comes in contact with the Roman government it is vindicated. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Biblical Christianity is increasingly coming under fire in our own culture. Abortion and gay marriage and transgenderism and liberal views of sexuality and euthanasia have all gained dominance in our culture. Traditional Biblical views are thus under fire. In his recent book *Life in the Negative World* author Aaron Renn observes, **“For the first time in the four-hundred-year history of this country, society now disfavors Christianity.”** (p. 41) Thus how the early Christians responded to a culture which viewed them with suspicion and often antagonism has increasing relevance to our own situation.

Luke not only had an apologetic purpose, he also had a devotional purpose in writing Acts. In this book he testifies to the power of God. He shows that Jesus Christ is still carrying on His ministry. The difference is that He has empowered the people of God with the Holy Spirit. In his record of the early church Luke provides encouragement to Christians to depend upon this divine power as they persevere in serving the Lord.

C.

As for Luke's AUDIENCE (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. C. THE AUDIENCE), obviously it includes Theophilus. Whoever he was, it would seem that he was a man of some importance and education. For he is deemed worthy of being the immediate object of his writing. Beyond that it would appear that Luke's account was intended for a wider circulation among Christians. It also would have usefulness to unbelievers who had genuine interest in the claims of Christianity.

D.

The exact CIRCUMSTANCES OF WRITING (II. A. B. C. D. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF WRITING) are unknown. Theological liberals tend to date most of the books of the Bible long after they themselves claim to be written. So liberals often deny that the New Testament writers were first century witnesses to the events that they claim to describe. Many have denied that Acts was written by a contemporary of Paul named Luke.

As knowledge of the first century Roman Empire has increased, scholars have noticed the intimate acquaintance that the author of Acts had with customs of that time and with details of Roman law and politics. The abrupt end of the book suggests that Luke composed it before the first trial of Paul and before his death. The Jews in Israel also revolted against the Romans, and there was a war between them from 66-70 AD. No mention of that appears in Acts. Also Nero began an intense persecution of Christians in Rome in 64 AD. No mention is made of that. So it would seem reasonable to conclude that the book was written shortly before 64 AD. If we date the death and resurrection of Jesus at 33 AD, that would mean that Luke was describing the events that transpired in the first 30 years of the church.

The place of writing is unknown. Some have suggested Rome. Others have suggested Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea on the Mediterranean Sea.

III.

Finally we arrive at LUKE'S INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANS NEED RIGHT DOCTRINE AND DIVINE POWER. (III. LUKE'S INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIANS NEED RIGHT...) Luke probably did not put a title on this book. But the name "Acts of the Apostles" does go back to at least the second century. Some have suggested that a more accurate description of the book would be something like "The Acts of Jesus Christ as Performed by the Holy Spirit Through the Apostles." That is too long, though, to be catchy.

The stress on the work of Jesus Christ is appropriate, given what Luke tells us in the first verse. He makes reference to his gospel account as being "**about all that Jesus began to do and teach.**" In other words, what Jesus did and taught was not concluded at the end of Luke. It did not end with the death and resurrection and even with the ascension of Jesus. Jesus Christ is still alive and active. He is alive in heaven, directing the work of His church. His work of redemption was completed. But His proclamation and ministry work continue. He is sovereignly in charge of building His church.

Notice also that Luke seems to think that there are two things which mark out the life of Christ: what He did and what He taught. Indeed the gospel accounts focus on the

teaching of Christ and upon what He did to give proof to the truth of what He said. Together what Jesus did and taught comprise right doctrine. Right doctrines, or correct beliefs, are foundational to the Christian life and to the church.

Verse 3 also makes reference to what Jesus did and to what He said. First, the author makes reference to what Jesus did. He says, “**He presented himself alive to them [the apostles] after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days...**”

Luke indicates that Jesus’ appearances gave proof to His claims to have risen from the dead and thus His claim to be God come in the flesh. Obviously this involves miraculous and supernatural power. Luke, being a man of science, recognizes the need for convincing proof.

The word translated here as “proofs” is *tekmeria*. (TEKMERIA) A more common word in the New Testament, often used in John’s gospel, is *semion*. Usually this word is translated as “sign.” Both words were used in the realm of medicine in Luke’s day. A *semion* was a sign immediately and obviously observable by a doctor. *Tekmeria* were evidences of medical conditions determined only by closer testing.

Doctor Luke regarded the evidences of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead as being evidenced by close testing. Among other things he may have been thinking about the experience of doubting Thomas who put his hands in the holes in Jesus’ side and in His hands. He was perhaps thinking about the appearance of Jesus to the two followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. These acts--- these proofs confirmed Jesus’ claims about Himself. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 3 also speaks of this teaching. Luke says that Jesus spoke “**about the kingdom of God.**” There are different aspects of this kingdom. The kingdom of God refers primarily to God’s sovereign rule. The exact meaning varies from context to context. Many places in the Old Testament spoke of the coming messianic kingdom, that time when the Messiah would rule physically over all the earth and when Israel would have a place of prominence in that kingdom. The Book of Revelation refers to this as the Millennial Kingdom, that time after Christ returns to earth when He will reign for a thousand years upon the earth.

In v. 6 the apostles ask Jesus, “**Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?**” They were focusing on this aspect of the kingdom. Jesus also spoke about a form of the kingdom that would precede His Second Coming. In His parables He spoke about tares being sown among the wheat. He said that it was necessary to wait until the harvest had come to separate out the tares from the good wheat.

Jesus also spoke about a mustard seed which would eventually grow up and become a large tree. In this present form of the kingdom Christ is ruling in the hearts of believers. Because this aspect of the kingdom of God is not always visible, it is sometimes

referred to as the mystery form of the kingdom of God. Jesus probably spoke about both of these aspects of the kingdom of God to His followers after the resurrection.

So the apostles were set straight about correct doctrine. Jesus made sure that their belief system was right. He also instructed them about how to live and behave. In the Great Commission, recorded in the last few verses of Matthew, Jesus told them that they were to be witnesses to the world about everything that they had seen and heard from Jesus.

There was one more thing that they needed. Then needed power. Look at vv. 4 & 5: **“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.’”** Both John the Baptist and Jesus had spoken about this coming baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The Son of God had been around and active in Old Testament times. The angel of the Lord, mentioned several times in the Old Testament, was the preincarnate Christ. But the Son of God was fully manifested only after the incarnation. Likewise the Holy Spirit was alive and active in Old Testament times. But it is only after Pentecost that He is fully manifested. The primary thing that He will provide to God’s people is power.

This need for power was evident in the lives of the twelve apostles. Since the time of Jesus’ arrest the disciples had not demonstrated a whole lot of power. They had gone into hiding. Peter had denied that he knew Jesus when questioned by people present at His trial before the chief priests. The apostles had met in Jerusalem behind locked doors. For a time some of them returned to fishing in the Sea of Galilee. There was not much evidence of dynamic boldness in these characters.

The church today, just like the church in the first century, needs correct living. Correct living requires not only correct doctrine but also power, divine power. That power comes only from the Holy Spirit.

It is good for us as individual Christians and as churches to be wise in how we do things. There are ways of doing things that we can learn from other individuals and other churches and even secular organizations and businesses. The danger, however, is that we can substitute methods for divine power. Hold a conference for churches on the newest methods of attracting people to your church, and you can count on a crowd. Hold a conference on how to pray effectively, and you won’t have to worry about turning people away at the door.

If we are truly going to be effective as Christians, if we are going to have fruit from our lives that really lasts, we need divine power. One of the clearest examples of the difference that power from the Holy Spirit makes is substance abuse programs. Our country has poured tons of money into drug rehabilitation programs. The problem has been studied and analyzed and surveyed. Workers have been trained and educated

and prepared. Yet what kind of success do government funded drug programs have? Their own figures show that long term cure rates are in the range of single digits or lower double digits, in terms of their success percentage.

What kind of success rate do Christian substance abuse programs have? An outfit called the Center for Compassion surveyed graduates of Teen Challenge programs in Texas in 2019. They found that 78% of graduates from their program remained substance free.

Years before that the National Institute of Drug Abuse investigated Teen Challenge in New York state. They found that 86% of the graduates of Teen Challenge's program remained free of drugs more than seven years after completing the program.

The head of the federal investigation commented on these results, saying, **“I wish to admit that, where Teen Challenge once viewed me as their most severe and doubting critic, the conversion has taken place... Medicine has failed miserably to cure the psychological drug dependence. That is why Teen Challenge exists as such a unique and successful rehabilitation center. It is basically a spiritual center...”**

Right living results from right doctrine and divine power. This Christian drug program provides right doctrine. It correctly describes drug problems as sin problems. It provides drug dependent people with the truth about how to be rightly related to God. It also shows them how to make use of divine power that comes from the Holy Spirit. It provides a living situation that encourages the right use of divine truth and divine power. It is this spiritual power that enables former drug users to stay clean.

We may not have a drug problem. Maybe we have an overeating problem or an anger problem or a lust problem. What is needed in all of these situations is truth and divine power. Truth comes from God's Word, from studying what God has revealed to us in the Bible. That is the work of Bible study. That is why all of us need a regular intake of God's Word. We have little guides out in the foyer which can help you read through the Bible in a year. Perhaps you would like to try using that.

Divine power comes from trusting God to apply His word to our lives. It comes from faith in God. It comes from prayer. It comes from trusting God's promises. That power is delivered through the Holy Spirit resident within the life of every Christian.

The church was successful in its early history because Christians focused on the truth, and they trusted in God for divine power. That successful, right living is what we so desperately need as well, living in the world in which we live. I trust that in coming weeks, as we study the experience of the early Christians, that we will learn correct doctrine that will impact our thinking and that we will be motivated to trust God for divine power.