

**The Book of Acts (#1);
The Prologue (Acts 1:1-3)**

This morning we begin a new sermon series on the book of Acts. It is reasonable for us to pursue this course, having just completed our study of the Gospel of Luke, the first of Luke's two volumes contained in our New Testament. I do not know how far in Acts we will proceed, or how long we will dedicate to this study. But pondering the matter for some weeks, I have increasingly seen the value that could be accrued to us by the Lord through studying its message.

The book of Acts is the longest book in the New Testament, containing 28 chapters. Actually, Luke contributed the largest content to the New Testament. We might assume that honor would be through Paul's hand, for he wrote at least 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. But if you consider the total number of words penned by each writer, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts contain by far the greatest portion of the New Testament canon.¹

The name, Acts, was not assigned by Luke, but it is attested in the early centuries of the Christian era. The major subjects of Acts could be claimed to be a record of the ongoing deeds of the resurrected Christ through His church (cf. Acts 1:1) and of the expansion of the kingdom of God into the Roman world. Acts records the risen Lord imparting the gift of the Holy Spirit to His people who then proceeded to bless the work of advancing and expanding the kingdom of God from Jerusalem and its environs, and then to Judea and Samaria, and eventually when apostolic Christianity arrived in Rome through the apostle Paul.

Albert Barnes (1798-1870) in the introduction to his commentary on this book listed seven important themes that Luke put forth in this volume.

1. It contains a record of the promised descent and operations of the Holy Spirit.
2. This book is an inspired account of the true character of revivals of religion.
3. This book shows that revivals of religion are to be expected in the church.
4. The Acts of the Apostles contains a record of the organization of the Christian church.
5. In this book we have many striking and impressive illustrations of what the gospel is fitted to produce, to make men self-denying and benevolent.
6. This book throws important light on the Epistles.
7. This book contains unanswerable evidence of the truth of Christianity.²

Of this last point Barnes wrote these words:

It is a record of its early triumphs. Within the space of *thirty years* after the death of Christ the gospel had been carried to all parts of the civilized and to no small portion of the uncivilized world. Its progress and its triumphs were not concealed. Its great transactions were not "done in a corner." It had been preached in the most splendid, powerful, and enlightened cities; churches were already founded in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and at Rome. The gospel had spread in Arabia, Asia Minor, Greece, Macedon, Italy, and Africa. It had assailed the most mighty existing institutions; it had made its way over the most formidable barriers; it had encountered the most deadly and malignant opposition; it had traveled to the capital, and had secured such a hold even in the imperial city as to make it certain that it would finally overturn the established religion and seat itself on the ruins of paganism.

¹ The total number of chapters that Paul penned was 87; Luke/Acts contains but 52 chapters. But Luke's chapters are much longer than Paul's in his epistles. The total number of words in Luke/Acts in the KJV is 50,184; the total number of words in Paul's writings amount to 43,792 words.

² Albert Barnes, **Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical; Acts**, ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), iv.-vii.

Within thirty years it had settled the point that it would overturn every bloody altar, close every pagan temple, bring under its influence everywhere the men of office, rank, and power, and that “the banners of the faith would soon stream from the palaces of Caesars.”³

We should say a few words about Luke, who penned this document. He was a physician (Col. 4:4) who traveled a great deal with the apostle Paul. In fact, Paul could write of Luke just before his martyrdom, “Only Luke is with me” (2 Tim. 4:11). Luke was a careful historian, having investigated the claims and recorded events of the apostolic age. He was an educated man and an able author. Although all writers of our canonical books were inspired of God, they varied in their style and ability to communicate their message. Luke is universally regarded as telling forth his story in a noble and high style of the Greek language and in careful and precise description of historical events and geographical locations. The biblical archaeologist and scholar, **Sir William Ramsay** (1851-1939) gave his assessment of Luke’s writing style and capability. It was said of him,

Sir William Ramsay called Luke writer of exceptional genius and versatility, extraordinary accurate and well-informed, and said Acts (was) invaluable not only as religious, but also as a historical document. Was remarkable literary feat to catch evangelical language of other Synoptists in his Gospel and then turn to narrative style characterizing Acts; needed no ordinary perception of different natures of Peter and Paul to put into mouth of each speeches appropriate to audience and occasion and, even when the subject virtually same, to show individuality of either, but seems as natural to Luke as to Shakespeare! Skill of epitomizing letter of Lysias and speech of Tertullus evidence of literary art of highest rank.⁴

These comments of Ramsay are particularly interesting because he began his career thinking very little of the accuracy of details of history and geography recorded in Acts. But in his travels and studies of the Mediterranean world and of Palestine, he became convinced of the accuracy and completeness of Luke’s record. **Richard Lenski** (1864-1936) wrote of Ramsay,

He started with the view that the Acts were of little value historically because, like John’s Gospel, they had been written with an ulterior purpose. But in his *Bearing of Recent Discovery*, p. 89, he confesses: “The more I have studied the narrative of Acts, and the more I have learned year after year about Graeco-Roman society and thoughts and fashions and organizations in those provinces, the more I admire and the better I understand. I set out to look for truth on the borderland where Greece and Asia meet and found it here (i.e. in Acts).⁵

When was the book of Acts originally written? Luke probably wrote this second volume in AD 62 or 63. The book ends with Paul in prison in Rome (Acts 28). This would have been during the first of two imprisonments of Paul. Apparently Paul had obtained release and continued to minister in the Roman world, but was rearrested a couple of years afterward, which ended in his execution in Rome under Emperor Nero. Although several different sites for its composition have been proposed, Luke probably penned Acts while in Rome during Paul’s first imprisonment.

Today we will consider the opening words of Luke in Acts 1:1-3, which we may simply describe as the prologue to the book. In the New King James Version, these verses read as follows:

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, ²until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, ³to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ W. H. Griffith Thomas, **Outline Studies in the Acts of the Apostles** (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1956), 15.

⁵ Richard C. H. Lenski, **The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles** (Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 8f.

proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

I. The preface of the book of Acts (1:1-3)

A. Luke writes of his former account (Acts 1:1)

Luke wrote in verse 1, “*The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach...*” Luke opened his treatise with a reference to the Gospel he had written previously, which he had dedicated it to Theophilus. We see that this record of Acts is also dedicated to Theophilus.

We may remind ourselves of what Luke had recorded in the prologue to his first volume. In Luke 1:1-4 we read these words:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

At the end of verse 3 Luke identifies the one individual for whom or to whom he was writing as “*most excellent Theophilus*.” Several points may be made regarding this address. First, Theophilus, which means “lover of God” or “pleased by God”, was probably an actual person who was a Roman of some rank or importance, but specific identification with a specific person in the first century has not been possible.

The word translated “most excellent” used in his Gospel, Luke also used on three occasions in the book of Acts. It was used (1) in a letter of a tribune which was written to Governor Felix (Acts 23:26), (2) by the spokesman Tertullus who represented the Jewish leaders before Felix (Acts 24:3), and (3) by Paul who addressed Festus, the successor of Felix (Acts 26:25). This may suggest Luke’s use of the word in his preface identifies Theophilus as a Roman official. Extra-biblical usage of the word is consistent with Luke’s usage in that it was used as an “honorific appellation for any official.”⁶

Perhaps Theophilus was a literary patron, one who had underwritten the publication of the “book”, but this is not very likely. However, this was a common way in which books were published and promoted in the first century. Prefaces like this one in which a dedication is made to the literary patron was commonplace.

Whether or not Theophilus was a Christian is not clear, but we do know that he had been instructed previously in the things of the gospel and Luke was attempting to instruct him further. The English word, “instructed”, in Luke 1:4 is the translation of the Greek word, **κατηχήθης** (*katayxaythays*), from which we get the words catechesis and catechism. Theophilus may have been catechized with respect to the Christian faith. And so, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that Theophilus was a new Christian of some importance and needed grounding in the faith.

Some have suggested that Theophilus may have been a person of importance who could either make it easier or more difficult for Christians, so Luke was writing a sort of apology or defense of the faith to him. There is some evidence for this that we will point out later in our study. But we might say this here and now, that in both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, on every occasion a Christian is brought before a Roman officer or official, and even when Christ was brought before Herod, the official declaration was that there was no legitimate charge of insurrection or rebellion that was affirmed. Every official Romans finding and declaration recorded in Luke and Acts declared the charged Christian(s) to be innocent. It maybe that Luke was attempting to prove to Theophilus, if he was a Roman official, that Christianity posed no real threat to the Roman powers of the day. It is important for us to note, that Luke’s mention of this man is one further argument for the reliability and accuracy of both Luke’s Gospel and the book of Acts. Luke would not be fast and loose with the facts when writing to an important person in authority. You do not lie or give

⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (Doubleday, 1981), 300.

false facts to a Roman official. Luke would give careful attention to the accuracy and truthfulness of his account.

It is interesting that Luke had addressed Theophilus in the preface to his Gospel with the honorary description, even title, “most excellent Theophilus”, but Luke did not use this title before the name of Theophilus here in his preface to the book of Acts. He wrote simply, “*O Theophilus.*” Maybe Luke and Theophilus had become well-acquainted with one another due to the Gospel Luke had previously given him. Perhaps Theophilus had become a Christian, a brother in Christ, which would have rendered honorific titles inappropriate for Luke to address his brother in Christ. Some have suggested that Theophilus no longer held the responsible and exalted position that he had formerly, so the title had ceased to be used of him. This is all speculative; we just do not know why Luke addressed him in this less formal way here in Acts 1 when considering his formal address in his Gospel.

In conclusion, we can say that Luke through his preface sought to commend his writing to a person of notoriety. Luke sought to show himself as a sincere, competent witness of the gospel story and he desired foremost that his reader(s) would receive his story as both accurate and relevant, having received it from one who is sincere, credible, and respectful.

Let us now turn to Luke’s opening address in Acts 1. **Verse 1** records, “*The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach...*” The NKJV uses the word “account” to refer to Luke’s Gospel. This is the best translation of the word, *λόγον* (*logos*), in this verse. The English Standard Translation translates the Greek word as “book”: “In the first book, O Theophilus...” But there were no true “books” used and circulated in the first century. Documents were written on scrolls, usually of papyrus that was prepared as one long “page” rolled up on two sticks that needed to be unrolled when read. Often there were wax seals applied to the scroll to secure the contents of official documents. The early New Testament “books” circulated on scrolls. Richard Lenski commented on this:

The word *λόγος* does not mean “book”; the term never means “book,” and even when there is reference to a book, not the book as a book is referred to but only its contents. When Luke refers to a “book,” the ancient manuscript roll, he writes *βιβλος* (Luke 3:4; 20:42; Acts 1:20; 7:42; 19:19) or *βιβλίον* (Luke 4:17, 20). “Treatise” in our version is better. Luke wrote an “account” of certain things to Theophilus, a full account, indeed, but only an account, and is now penning another. He is not thinking of publication nor suggesting such a thing to Theophilus.”

Originally the Gospel of Luke and the Acts were on two separate scrolls that circulated together. The maximum potential of contents for a scroll would have been about the length of the Gospel of Luke or the book of Acts. Early in the Christian era the scrolls of the other Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and John—probably were collected together along with the Gospel of Luke on its scroll. This would explain how the Gospel of Luke was “separated” from Acts, with John’s Gospel between them once the New Testament documents were copied and distributed in codex form, or books.

Luke described the contents of his first treatise. It included “*all that Jesus began both to do and teach.*” This aptly describes the Gospel record. It retells both the works of Jesus but also His words. When Luke used the word “began” to refer to the ministry of Jesus, he is implying that the events he had now recorded in the Acts were further works and words of Jesus now that He had ascended into heaven. Jesus was at work in His world through His apostles, bearing witness of His works and words.

B. The duration and nature of our Lord’s post resurrection ministry to His apostles (Acts 1:2)

Verse 2 reads, “*until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen...*” Luke told Theophilus that his Gospel had recorded all that Jesus began to do and teach, “*until the day when He was taken up.*” Luke had recorded in Luke 24:50f, that Jesus had ascended. There we read,

And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. (Luke 24:50f)

However, we will read of a more thorough description of His ascension later in this first chapter of Acts.

Now we pointed out recently of the verses of Luke 24:50f, that when Luke recorded “that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven”, that the verbs “was parted” and “carried up” were passive voice verbs. In other words, Luke was recording that it was God the Father who had carried or brought up Jesus into His presence in heaven. But there are other places in which Jesus Himself is said to have ascended into heaven. Lenski commented about this:

The terminus of the Gospel is the ascension. In Luke 24:51 one verb is used, here, in v. 11 and 22, and in 1 Timothy 3:16, another verb occurs, but all five verbs are passive: “He was received up,” the agent of the passive being God. Yet in John 3:13; 6:62; Eph. 4:10; Heb. 4:14 we have the active: Jesus Himself ascended. Both statements are true...they are ascribed equally to different Persons.⁷

Jesus was “taken up” “*after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles.*” Jesus gave His apostles His commandments “*through the Holy Spirit.*” In Luke 24 we read of our Lord’s instructions to His apostles,

And you are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high. (Luke 24:4f)

And of course they did stay until that event of Pentecost, of which we have the detailed record in the next chapter of Acts. But during the forty days of post resurrection appearances of Jesus accompanying with His teaching, Jesus taught them “*through the Holy Spirit.*”

Our Lord had enabled His disciples to hear and understand His teaching through imparting the Holy Spirit to them even before the day of Pentecost to enable them to hear and understand His teaching and His commandments to them. We read of this in John’s Gospel.

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” ²²And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to His apostles through breathing upon them. This is clear evidence of the biblical and theological truth that the Holy Spirit not only “proceeds” from the Father, but that He also “proceeds” from the Son.⁸ Further, that Jesus “breathed on them” imparting the Holy Spirit, shows that His action underscores the common biblical association of the Holy Spirit with breath or wind. The Hebrew word for Spirit is רִיחַ (*ruach*), which is the same Hebrew word for “breath” or “wind.” And just as the idea of breath is associated with the Spirit, so does “wind.” We read of God creating Adam, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and **breathed** into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Gen. 2:7). This depicts God imparting life into the body of Adam; it was an imparting of the Spirit to him in that God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And regarding the idea of “wind” being the emblem of the Spirit, we read in Ezekiel 36:

Again He said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: “Surely I will cause **breath** to enter into you, and you

⁷ Lenski, 21.

⁸ This was one of the great divisive points between Western Christendom and Eastern Orthodoxy. The Eastern Orthodox refused to accept the teaching that the Holy Spirit not only proceeded from the Father, but also from the Son. The result was “the Great Schism” between east and west in AD 1054.

shall live. ⁶I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put **breath** in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.”””

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.

⁹Also He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the **breath**, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Come from the four **winds**, **O breath**, and **breathe** on these slain, that they may live.””” ¹⁰So I prophesied as He commanded me, and **breath** came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. (Ezek. 37:4-10)

When we arrive at the next chapter in Acts, we will read of the coming of the Holy Spirit with the presence of a great wind.

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ²And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of **a rushing mighty wind**, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.” (Acts 2:1f)

The risen Lord had given “commandments” to His apostles. His apostles were His earthly witnesses, even spokesmen for His kingdom. What kind of commandments did our Lord give His apostles? In His post resurrection ministry to them, He instructed them regarding the nature of their calling and the content of their message that they were to take to the world. He instructed them on the nature and mission of their calling as apostles to the Jews and perhaps later to the Gentiles. He rehearsed to them both the content of their message, but He also probably commanded them regarding the nature of their apostolic ministry. They would be given power to proclaim the Word clearly and boldly. They would be gifted with the ability to perform miracles that would attest and affirm their position and confirm their message to the people. I imagine Jesus reiterated to them the importance and necessity of prayer and of the weekly gathering of His disciples for corporate worship and to preach and provide instruction to His people.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) wrote of our Lord’s instruction to His apostles:

A general hint given of the instructions He furnished His disciples with, now that He was about to leave them, and they, since *He breathed on them* and *opened their understandings*, were better able to receive them. 1. He instructed them concerning the work they were to do: *He gave commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen*. Note, Christ’s choice is always attended with His charge. Those whom He elected into the apostleship expected He should give them preferments, instead of which *He gave them commandments*. When *He took His journey, and gave authority to His servants, and to every one His work* (Mark 13:34), *He gave them commandments through the Holy Ghost*, which He was Himself filled with as Mediator, and which He had breathed into them. In giving them the Holy Ghost, He gave them His commandments; for the Comforter will be a commander; and His office was *to bring to their remembrance what Christ had said*. *He charged those that were apostles by the Holy Ghost*; so the words are placed. It was their receiving the Holy Ghost that sealed their commission (John 20:22). He was not taken up till after He had given them their charge, and so finished His work.

C. Luke described our Lord’s post resurrection ministry to His apostles (Acts 1:3)

Luke stated that Jesus had repeatedly shown Himself alive to His apostles after His resurrection and before His ascension. We read in **verse 3** of Jesus before His apostles, “***to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.***”

The opening words of verse 3, “to whom”, which refers to the Lord’s apostles, Luke begins to speak more specifically and directly of our Lord’s post resurrection ministry to them.

With οἷς καὶ (*hois kai*) (i.e. “to whom”, referring to the apostles) Luke passes directly from the content of the earlier book into the presentation of the new action, as was certainly permissible in ancient historiography. The only striking thing is that Luke goes back beyond the final point mentioned, the Ascension, and speaks of the many ‘convincing proofs’ by which Jesus showed Himself to be alive after His death. These are the ‘appearances’, which ensued within the sacred space of forty days. The Gospel of Luke had left the reader with the impression that the Lord’s final parting from His disciples took place on the very night of Easter Sunday. Now we learn that during the following forty days Jesus was repeatedly in their company and spoke to them of the ‘kingdom of God’. This not only gives the content of the conversation but prepares for the disciples’ question about the kingdom (v. 6).⁹

Luke recorded that our Lord appeared to His apostles in a manner to refute any claim or argument that He had not risen from the dead. It was to His apostles “***to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs.***” If due consideration is given to the evidence and record of the risen Lord Jesus in both the Gospels and the post resurrection appearances mentioned here in Acts 1, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a settled fact of history.

Luke stated that our Lord had shown Himself to His apostles “***by many infallible proofs.***” The apostle Paul would later state a number of these appearances of our Lord.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that He was seen by Cephas (Peter), then by the twelve. ⁶After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. ⁸Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. (1 Cor. 15:3-8)

This is a detailed list of Christ’s resurrection appearances, but it is not a complete list of all of our Lord’s post resurrection His appearances. The occasions of our Lord appearing to His apostles were “many” through this forty day period.

No less than forty days were used for these appearances. Again and again Jesus let Himself be seen. The apostles (and others) had time to think, to consider, to talk the matter over, to make any new test they might desire. The present participle fits the repetition of the appearances to their proofs.¹⁰

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) wrote of the factualness of the resurrection of Christ,

The resurrection of Christ, as we have often said, is the best attested of all historical facts... Remember that this feat was attested by men who could not be deceived concerning it, and who sealed with their blood, as well as with their unfaltering testimony, their solemn belief that they had touched Him, that they had spoken to Him, that they had listened to Him, that they had eaten with Him, and had seen Him eat of a broiled fish and of a honeycomb after He rose from the grave. We know that Christ has risen from the dead. That is one of the great corner stones of the Christian faith.¹¹

Paul declared the implications for the resurrection of Jesus Christ to guarantee the certainty of the future judgment of all mankind. Paul proclaimed on Mars Hill in Athens to a pagan crowd regarding their idolatrous beliefs and practice:

⁹ Joseph Ernst Haenchen, **The Acts of the Apostles; a Commentary** (The Westminster Press, 1971), 139-141.

¹⁰ Lenski, 24.

¹¹ Charles Spurgeon, **The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit**, vol. 51 (Pilgrim Publications, 1969),

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)

We then read of the reaction of these people of Athens:

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.”³³ So Paul departed from among them. ³⁴ However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34)

Since Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it follows that He is alive now and all people everywhere are responsible and accountable to believe and act upon this reality. Jesus Christ is Lord over all. He is the risen and enthroned King of kings, and He reigns over all humanity on behalf of His Father. The message of the gospel is to proclaim Jesus the Lord and that everyone everywhere should acknowledge and submit to Him as their Lord and Savior. To do so assures His forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness which will exonerate the believer in the final judgment. It will assure entrance into the fullness of the everlasting kingdom of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God.

Now we read that Jesus was not only repeatedly showing Himself to His apostles over the course of 40 days, but also during that time Jesus was “*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*” Of this kingdom, **F. F. Bruce** (1910-1990) wrote this excellent description and depiction:

From the earliest times in Israel, God was acknowledged as King (cf. Ex. 15:18). His kingship is universal (Psa. 103:19), but is manifested most clearly where His creatures recognize it in practice by doing His will. Therefore in the Old Testament times His kingship was specially manifested on earth in the nation of Israel, to whom He made known His will and whom He called into covenant-relationship with Himself. When Human kings arose over Israel, they were looked upon as viceregents of the Divine King, representing His sovereignty on earth. With the fall of the monarchy and the end of Israelite independence, there arose a new conception of the kingdom of God as something to be revealed on earth in its fullness at a later date (cf. Dan. 2:44; 7:13f). It is in the light of this later conception that we should understand the New Testament teaching of the kingdom of God. Jesus brings the kingdom in; it “drew near” with the inception of His public ministry (cf. Mark 1:14f); His death and exaltation released it in power upon the earth. “The things concerning the kingdom of God” at the beginning of Acts are identical with “the things concerning our Lord Jesus Christ” at the end of the book (Ch. 28:31; cf. also Chs. 8:12; 20:24f; 28:33). When they related the story of Jesus, the apostles proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God—the same good news as Jesus Himself had announced earlier, but now given effective fulfillment by the saving events of His passion and triumph. We may reasonably conclude that the teaching which He gave the apostles about the kingdom of God during these forty days was calculated to make plain to them the bearing of these saving events on the message of the kingdom of Jesus.¹²

One could rightly argue that the kingdom of God is at the heart of the message of the gospel of salvation. The message of the gospel is the good news that God has inaugurated His promised kingdom in the reign of Jesus Christ and that sinners may be granted entrance into His kingdom through repentance from sin and faith in Him. In this kingdom His people receive the forgiveness of sins, enjoy fellowship with the Lord and His people, live with joy in peace and in righteousness, both in this age and in the age to come (eternity). The heart of the gospel message is “Jesus is Lord”, that is, He is the once crucified, but now risen and enthroned Sovereign Ruler over the promised kingdom of God.

Charles Spurgeon concurred with this understanding that the kingdom of God is essential to a biblical understanding of the gospel. He wrote, “The gospel is ‘the word of the kingdom’: it has royal authority in it;

¹² F. F. Bruce, **Commentary on the Book of Acts** (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 34.

it proclaims and reveals King Jesus, and it leads men to obedience to His sway.” Similarly, **Matthew Henry** noted,

The seed sown is the word of God, here (i.e. Matt. 13) called *the word of the kingdom* (v. 19)... The gospel comes *from* that kingdom, and conducts *to* that kingdom; the word of the gospel is the word of the kingdom; it is the word of the King, and where that is, *there is power*; it is a law, by which we must be ruled and governed.

To enter the kingdom of God is to receive and experience salvation. We are to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and press people to turn from their self-directed lives to believe and submit fully unto the Lord Jesus Christ. I fear that much nominal Christianity—those who are Christian in name only—is the result of a “gospel” message that has failed to emphasize the kingdom of God, having reduced “the gospel” to a promise of God’s forgiveness of sins only. This truncated gospel is a message that promises to relieve the sinner of guilt, to escape hell, and to go to heaven. People are told that if they simply and only believe on Jesus Christ as their “personal Savior”, they have salvation. But little or nothing is said to them about the kingdom of God over which King Jesus reigns. It is not widely proclaimed that one may only enter that kingdom through repentance from sin, surrendering one’s heart and will wholly to the Lord Jesus Christ, by denying oneself to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. The result is that many have a form of Christianity, while denying the power of their “faith” to transform their lives. They wrongly think that they are truly “Christian” because they only believe certain things about Jesus Christ. But sadly, they do not order their lives as citizens of the kingdom of God under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But this is what saving faith is according to the Holy Scriptures.

Now, having considered the first three verses of Acts 1, let us stand back and consider the kingdom of God as portrayed in the book of Acts.

II. The kingdom of God in the book of Acts

The kingdom of God is mentioned by Luke as being the major subject of our Lord’s instruction to His apostles during the forty days from His resurrection to His ascension into heaven and His coronation in heaven on the throne of God.¹³ Again, Acts 1:3 records that Jesus “presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and *speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*” The Gospels and the book of Acts set forth that the promised Messianic kingdom of the Old Testament was inaugurated by Jesus Christ through His life, death, burial, and resurrection. The promised kingdom of the Old Testament has been established. It was initially realized upon the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and has continued to be the message of the Scriptures throughout this church era. Jesus Christ is reigning as the promised Son of David, the Son of God. This promised kingdom of God is at the heart of the New Testament record and message. Jesus is Lord.

But it has been the bane of evangelicalism that it largely adopted a different understanding of the purpose of God in history. Popular evangelicalism teaches that the promised kingdom of the Old Testament is of a restored Jewish nation, the political nation-state of Israel. As such, it has not yet been established and will not be until the second coming of Jesus Christ. Then, it is claimed, Jesus will become king over a restored Israel which will dominate the Gentile nations for a 1,000 year future kingdom on earth, with King Jesus reigning in earthly Jerusalem. Because of this teaching regarding a future Jewish millennium, which is commonly taught by dispensationalism, the kingdom of God in this church age is said not to be the fulfillment or realization of the Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom. I am afraid that our study of the book of Acts, beginning as early as next Lord’s Day, will involve our exposure and correction of this flawed understanding of the purposes of God in history. We will need to address the subject repeatedly as we progress through our study of this book.

¹³ The enthronement of Jesus upon His ascension 40 days after His resurrection is described in Revelation 5.

Now the view that we (I) hold and espouse is that of amillennialism. The dispensationalist teaches premillennialism, as we have briefly described it. We might attempt to compare and contrast these two views briefly, and then we will close.

Amillennialism is the belief that the promised kingdom of the Messiah was inaugurated upon the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ to the throne of God in heaven, even to the throne of David. Jesus Christ rules as the Son of David over His kingdom that has expanded to encompass Jewish and Gentile believers from all over the world. This view of the kingdom is in conflict with the popular dispensational view of the Messiah's kingdom, which teaches that the promised Messiah's kingdom will be an earthly Jewish, political kingdom over which Jesus will reign during a future 1,000 year millennium.

The differences between the two views are numerous, but may be summarized as follows:

- (1) The amillennialist understands this church age as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy; dispensational premillennialism does not, but believes the prophets foretold a future 1000 year millennium on earth.
- (2) The amillennialist sees one people of God--all those redeemed by Christ throughout all of history, including all Old Testament true "believers" and New Testament Christians. The dispensationalist premillennialist understands the Bible to teach of two separate peoples—Israel and the Church, for which God has two different plans with two different futures.
- (3) The amillennialist sees the one promised mediatorial kingdom in Scripture is the kingdom of God ruled by our Lord Jesus Christ. The dispensational premillennialist teaches that there are two kingdoms of God, which are the kingdom of God during this church age and the kingdom of David in a future 1,000 year millennium. Although some dispensationalists teach that Jesus is presently reigning in the kingdom of God, He is not yet reigning as the Son of David, for that will be a different, future, earthly kingdom.
- (4) The amillennialist believes that Jesus Christ is now ruling as the king over the kingdom of God, although His kingdom will be manifested to everyone at His second coming, when He puts down all rebellion. Traditional dispensational premillennialism teaches that because of the Jews' rejection of Jesus as their king, God postponed His promised kingdom, that He will not become the king as the Son of David until His second coming, at the beginning of the 1,000 year millennium.
- (5) The amillennialist understands the prophets to foretell spiritual promises for a spiritual people—the church—in this current age. The dispensational premillennialist teaches that the Old Testament prophets foretold physical promises to a physical posterity of Jewish people in a Jewish state—"Israel." They argue that there are no promises given to Israel in the Old Testament that are realized by the New Testament church.
- (6) The dispensational premillennialist claims they interpret the Old Testament prophets literally. The amillennialist understands the Old Testament prophets to be veiled as to their true meaning and that they can only be understood when one sees Christ proclaimed through them, even as the New Testament writers provide an inspired interpretation of the prophets.

In conclusion, the amillennialist argues that the Old Testament means what it says, but that the New Testament says what it means. The divine order is first the natural which gives way to the spiritual. The Old Testament is filled with types which give way to their anti-types in the New Testament, or that which was physical in the Old Testament gave way to that which is spiritual in the new. In coming weeks we will be addressing these matters more clearly and fully, Lord willing.
