

## Acts 1:1

### **I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach**

The early Christians who arranged the books of the New Testament in their present order

- Were faced with something of a challenge
- Three gospels offer a summary of the life of Jesus
- They are summary or as New Testament scholars say 'synoptic gospels'
- A word related to the word 'synopsis' or 'summary'
- What we call the fourth or John's gospel is different from the other three
- We are therefore accustomed to the order of the first five books of the New Testament
- Matthew, Mark and Luke (synoptic gospels), John (fourth gospel) and Acts

The sense of arranging Matthew, Mark and Luke together

- And the (probably) right decision not to put John first
- Has left later generations of Christians with John sandwiched in between Luke-Acts
- I say 'Luke-Acts' because the books that we call Luke and Acts
- Were both written by Luke and are really two parts of one longer work

New Testament writers wrote on papyrus scrolls

- In Luke's 24 chapters and Acts' 28 chapters we have two scrolls of similar length
- But these are not the only similarities
- Luke covers about 33 years of history, Acts covers much the same length of time
- And together Luke-Acts makes up one-third of the New Testament

Both parts of Luke-Acts are addressed to the same reader, Theophilus

- And while some have suggested that this is a literary device or made up name
- The general consensus of opinion is that Theophilus was a real person
- You can guess some things from a person's name
- When I was in Inverness the most popular name among my members was Mackenzie
- And we also got used to popular Scottish Christian names
- Donald, Alex, Murdo, Betty, Florence, Isobel
- When I was in South Wales the most popular names were Evans and Morgan
- And we soon got used to the popular Welsh Christian names
- Megan, Gwyneth, Blodwen, Ceri, Dewi, Gareth
- Now, you can take an educated guess that Donald Macdonald
- Is more likely to come from Scotland than Megan Morgan
- So with most excellent Theophilus – we cannot be sure
- But we can take an educated guess that he was a well-known Roman official

So to summarise

- We have a longer book Luke-Acts in two parts
- They are about the same length
- They cover about the same number of years
- They have same writer, Luke
- They are addressed to the same reader, Theophilus
- And they have the same subject Jesus

It is very important to say that the two parts of the one book have the same subject, Jesus

- In my childhood when nearly everyone used the AV
- The title given to this part of Luke's work was 'The Acts of the Apostles'
- Now it is fair to say that the Apostles, especially Peter and Paul, are in the frontline
- Often the instruments of God
- But thoughtful readers realise that the Apostles are not really the central figures
- More recently, Christians in the charismatic movement
- Have thought that they have come up with a better title 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'
- Among the first people to suggest this title was a German preacher, Johann Bengel
- Not exactly a new name then as he died in 1752
- But right at the beginning of this second part of his work
- Luke tells us what the book is about

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

(Acts 1:1)

It seems that Luke is telling the reader of the book that we call 'Acts'

- That a major clue to our understanding of this second scroll
- Is to remember its relationship to the first one
- The first one was about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach
- The clear implication is that this second one
- Is about all that Jesus will *continue* to do and to teach

'All that Jesus began to do and teach' sounds a rather extravagant claim

- After all, John concludes his gospel by saying that the whole world
- Could not contain all the books if he were to write down everything
- But these are merely two sides of the same coin
- One of my great regrets is that I don't know where my Dad left his copy of
- *All about Argyle* – a book produced for the club's diamond jubilee in 1963
- It was a lovely book and I cannot find it – I guess he had lent it to someone
- Nevertheless it was not really *All about Argyle* – not everything was in there
- But it was a full account of sixty years and worthy of the title
- When Luke says that he is recording 'all that Jesus began to do and teach'
- He is writing in the same way – the book he refers to we call 'Luke's Gospel'

Luke begins the gospel with chapters that preface the ministry of Jesus

- We are familiar enough with their contents
- The birth of John the Baptist, the annunciation, the song of Mary,
- The birth of Jesus, shepherds and angels, the presentation in the Temple
- John the Baptist prepares the way, the baptism of Jesus, his temptation
- And then the beginning of his public ministry
- And his inaugural sermon at Nazareth which Luke introduces in this way

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

(Luke 4:14)

In the New Testament there are two words that are often translated 'power'

- One is *exousia* from which we get the English word 'executive' power
- Another is *dunamis* from which we get the English word 'dynamite' power
- Now its really quite important to know whether Jesus is coming with authority
- Or with dynamite power – and the answer is that he is coming with dynamite
- And as the pages of the gospel unfold that is exactly what we find

Now Luke knows that there has been something of an interval, many years perhaps

- Since he sent Theophilus his orderly account of all that Jesus began to do and to teach
- So now he outlines the overview of his book (in the two parts)
- In the first book he has recorded all that Jesus began to do and to teach
- Now he continues with all that Jesus has continued to do and to teach
- In the first part Jesus ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit
- In the second part Jesus continues to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit
- Its not just simplistic but 'plainly wrong' to suggest that Luke is about Jesus
- And Acts is about the Holy Spirit
- Jesus tells the apostles they will receive 'power' (*dunamis*) when the Spirit comes

A quick excursion into the use of the word *dunamis* in Acts will help us along our way

- Peter and John are empowered to heal the cripple by God (Acts 3:12)
- By what power and in what name did they do it – the name of Jesus (Acts 4:7)
- Jesus was accredited by God by acts of power which God did through him (Acts 2:22)
- Luke uses the same word 15 times in the gospel to describe the works of Jesus
- And the same word 10 times in Acts to describe the continuing work of the gospel

In the gospel that bears his name, Luke is interested in what Jesus did and taught

- Now in part two, Luke is interested in what Jesus continues to do and to teach
- For the ministry of Jesus did not end at his ascension
- Indeed Luke implies that his ministry was just beginning
- The gospel was about what Jesus began to do and to teach
- And the Acts is about what he continues to do and to teach
- So if we are going to call the book anything more elaborate than Acts
- Let's be sure to know that it is, without a doubt, the *Acts of Jesus*

These early chapters of Acts therefore parallel the early chapters of Luke's gospel

- The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus to equip him for his public ministry
- Now Luke anticipates that the same Spirit will come upon the church
- We know from the record of Pentecost that Spirit brings certain gifts
- But none of these is the prime purpose for his coming
- Which is to empower the apostles and later the church to be the body of Christ
- Bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus
- Continuing the work of Jesus
- Proclaiming the word of Jesus

In Luke's Gospel, the descending of the Holy Spirit on Jesus bears witness to him

- 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22)
- In Acts, the descending of the Holy Spirit on the apostles bears witness to Jesus
- Peter's apostolic preaching begins with these words, 'Jesus of Nazareth'

## I WITNESS TO JESUS

Now it is well rehearsed that a witness gives testimony to what he or she has seen and heard

- Testimony is therefore a vital part of the witness of the Christian community
- When the world was being turned upside down by the mighty acts of God
- The essentials of the ministry of Jesus were being proclaimed
- In Luke we have a very full account of the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus
- In Acts, he simply alludes to these

After his suffering, he showed himself to these men (the apostles) and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

(Acts 1:3)

Luke is in no doubt as to the foundation of the faith, it is faith in Jesus

- Being a Christian is not revering a dead leader
- Rather it is being in the presence of a living Lord
- According to Luke, there are certain features in Jesus' ministry
- That are crucial to the advance of the gospel
- 'after his suffering' suggests that his passion and death are crucial to the gospel
- 'he showed himself ... alive' suggests his resurrection is crucial to the gospel
- 'he appeared to them' suggests that a 'knowable Jesus' is crucial to the gospel

If we turn back to Luke 24, we find there what Luke believes to be the essentials of faith

- the first resurrection narrative concerns the empty tomb
- 'He is not here; he has risen!' (24:6)
- the second resurrection narrative concerns the two disciples on the road to Emmaus
- 'were not our hearts burning within us ... (as he) opened the scriptures to us' (24:32)
- the third resurrection narrative concerns the Eleven in Jerusalem
- 'he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures' (24:45)

There is no authority, no power in a gospel that departs from the essentials of faith

- the passion and death of Jesus are crucial to the advance of the gospel
- the resurrection is crucial to the advance of the gospel
- and 'resurrection' does not mean some ethereal hope that Jesus is alive
- it means that the tomb was empty and that he appeared
- living, breathing, visible, audible, touchable, knowable
- eating – that most basic characteristic of living things
- throughout the scriptures the truth of the resurrection is maintained and evidenced
- at the beginning of Acts, Luke does not lose sight of the end of the gospel

The great evidence of the resurrection of Jesus was that he showed himself alive

- the proofs were 'many' and 'convincing'
- he appeared many times – walking, talking, eating and drinking with them
- he showed them, again and again, his hands and his feet – it was really him
- by the witness of his resurrection he confirmed the effectiveness of his work

## II THE WORK OF JESUS

Impatient for the action of Pentecost, we have often slipped over this but it is important

- In the second part of his work, Luke does not forget the earthly ministry of Jesus
- It is the earthly ministry of Jesus that has facilitated his heavenly session
- In other words, the sufferings of the cross must precede the exaltation of Jesus

It is because Jesus has been obedient to death, even death on a cross

- God has exalted him to the highest place and given him a name above every name
- For it is at the name of Jesus that every knee must bow
- When Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God we must not forget how it is conceived
- The kingdom of God is conceived in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
- The one whom the apostles testified as risen
- The one they said would come again to judge the living and the dead

From time to time, I meet people who imply

- That the cure for the ills of the contemporary church is more supernatural happenings
- But I cannot agree with this
- The cure for the ills of the contemporary church is to reinstate Jesus as Lord
- The sovereign power of God will deal with supernatural happenings

At the risk of contradicting myself – what is the greatest supernatural happening ever?

- It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – and his exaltation to heaven
- What is the greatest supernatural happening in the church?
- It is when the person who is dead in trespasses and sins passes from death to life
- In other words the reborn Christian is the greatest witness to the power of Jesus

Now, Christians have long disagreed about the importance of various spiritual gifts

- Such controversy need not concern us here for it is not central to my point
- Central to my point is that what will revolutionise the contemporary church
- Is men and women experiencing the ‘new birth’
- This need not always be the Damascus Road experience of Paul
- As far as we know, Paul is the only apostle who has such an experience
- If we call Paul the ‘thirteenth apostle’, one in thirteen is hardly normative
- But the difference between the apostles and today’s church is that testimony
- They all had ‘testimony’ that was the essential – they could tell of Jesus
- This is a fundamental weakness of the church today – we do not tell of Jesus

You say, but what shall I tell of Jesus?

- Tell how he came, how he was born sinless for you a sinner
- Tell how he lived, a life of love and mercy for sinners
- Tell how he died, upon the cross, to make peace with God, for sinners
- Tell how he rose again – so that we know that our hope in him is not in vain
- Tell how he appeared – it’s really true: Jesus is alive!
- Tell how he ascended into glory – where he prays and prepares for us
- Tell how he is coming again as king and judge and the need for everyone to be ready
- Tell how our hope is to share with him for ever in his eternal kingdom

The coming of Jesus changed the world for ever

- At his first coming the age to come invaded the present age
- At his final coming the age to come will supersede the present age
- But for now the two ages overlap
- Temporally the believer is of this age but spiritually we are of the age to come
- Now we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven
- Called upon to do the work of the risen Lord and proclaim the word of the Lord

In the opening of Acts, Luke is as clear as can be

- The first book is about all that Jesus began to do and to teach
- The doctrine he taught was confirmed by the works that he did
- It proved him to be a teacher who had come from God
- The apostolic commission is to do and to teach the same things
- In case we should feel it is a task beyond our human capacity, which realistically it is
- The Holy Spirit comes to empower and give testimony to Jesus

So the apostles and the fledgling church are commissioned to continue:

I THE WITNESS TO JESUS

II THE WORK OF JESUS

III THE WORD OF JESUS

When Jesus first came he spoke about the kingdom of God

- Not surprisingly the first question the disciples ask Jesus is about the kingdom
- ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’
- The kingship of Jesus had been a big issue at the time of his trial and crucifixion
- Now that Jesus is risen, the disciples want to know what will happen

People seem to get fearfully bogged down in what the kingdom of God means

- It certainly is not about geographical territory
- Rather it is about God’s sovereign rule in human life
- In short, ‘kingdom of God’ summarises the early Christian proclamation
- When the kingdom of God is proclaimed we find it is all about Jesus
- Take for example Philip preaching to the Ethiopian official (Acts 8)
- Philip preached the good news of the kingdom of God
- And the name of Jesus Christ
- And after he did so, men and women believed and were baptised
- These were not Damascus Road experiences as such, but they were real conversions
- Once these people did not believe in Jesus but now they believed

Jesus further instructed the apostles on the doctrine they were to preach

- There are some people around who imply that the preaching of doctrine is dull
- but that is not the case – some preachers are dull – but it is not doctrine that is dull
- doctrine really means Christian teaching – and Christian teaching is not dull
- for it is all of Jesus – and he is not dull – he is risen, ascended glorified
- now it our charge to witness to his resurrection, to do his work, to proclaim his word