

Dr. Jack L. Arnold Lesson #1

ACTS  
Book One Volume Two  
Acts 1:1

One of the most exciting books of the Bible is the Book of Acts. It is a book filled with action. The title “The Acts of the Apostles” was added sometime in the second century and we can not be sure of the official title. The Apostles are only mentioned in Acts and only John, Peter, James and Paul have any prominence, so perhaps “The Acts of the Apostles” is not a good title. A better title might be “The Acts” indicating how God is actively at work in Christians. Acts is a book of action! It is not a doctrinal book but a book on practice. Doctrine is in the book but it is in the background. The doctrine in Acts is exemplified more in life than developed in systematic statement. It is doctrine in practice. Acts shows us what men can do in the power of the risen Savior.

The Book of Acts gives us a history of the first century church up until around 63 A.D. when Acts was written by Luke. This is the only inspired history of the church of Jesus Christ, and what it has to say in the areas of evangelism, church planting, discipleship, church government, missions and personal conduct is just as valid today as it was then. The Acts is inspired history and therefore profitable for doctrine, faith and practice. It stands to reason that the closer we pattern our twentieth century churches after the first century church the greater will be our blessings. The goal of every Christian should be to capture the spirit, dynamic and power of New Testament Christianity and put it to work in everyday life. Each of us needs to study the Book of Acts carefully and prayerfully.

#### IMPORTANCE OF ACTS

A Bridge. The Acts is a bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles. While chronologically Acts was written even before some of the Gospels, it is in its logical order in the New Testament. We must believe that the compilers of the New Testament were divinely guided by God in placing the Book of Acts between the Gospels and Epistles. The Gospels tell us what Christ accomplished while on the earth and the Book of Acts tells us how Christ continues to work in the affairs of this world through the church. The Epistles tell us about the doctrine and problems of the early church, but Acts puts the Epistles in their historical and chronological setting. It is questionable whether we could ever understand the Epistles without the Book of Acts.

A Transition. The Acts is a transition book from Judaism to Christianity and from the Law of Moses to the Law of Christ. Acts is transitional from Jewish exclusivism to the world-wide preaching of the gospel to Gentile nations. For thousands of years God had been dealing primarily with one nation, the Jewish nation. After the Tower of Babel, God left the nations and gave them up because of their sin. He could not use any of them for His purpose so God chose Abraham and made out of him the Jewish nation. For thousands of years, God dealt almost exclusively with Israel. Think of it! There was no salvation, no redemption and no Savior message to the Gentiles. The only way a Gentile could get blessing was by renouncing his Gentile status and becoming a Jewish proselyte. For thousands of years, there was no salvation message to Gentiles, but in Acts we have the gospel moving from the Jews as a nation to the Gentile nations. Israel rejected Messiah and God turned to the Gentiles. The Book of Acts tells us how the Gentiles heard the message and became part of the Body of Christ, the church.

“And when they (Jews) did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, ‘The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, Go to this people and say, You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn again, and I should heal them.’ Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen” (Acts 28:25-28).

Multiple millions of Gentiles in the last two thousand years have been saved by Christ. This is the age of Gentile salvation. The Jews can be saved individually, but as a nation the Jews have been set aside by God. When was the last time you thanked the Lord for sending you, a lowly Gentile, the gospel?

A Birthday. The Acts records for us the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost. Something new and different came into existence on the Day of Pentecost. God's church, the Body of Christ, with Christ at the head and every member of the universal church vitally connected with Christ in spiritual union, had its birthday. The church is born and brought into existence by God's Spirit. The true church, the universal church, is only made up of true believers in Christ who have been touched sovereignly by the Holy Spirit. It is the true church which has the joy of knowing the Spirit's control and the Spirit's guidance. The church will be led by the Spirit and the church should constantly seek the leading of the Spirit. If an individual, who calls himself a Christian, knows nothing of the Spirit's control and leading, he has reason to wonder whether the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in his life.

A Force. Acts gives us a record of the extension of the church. It is a book of evangelism whereby men through the power of the Holy Spirit were turning the world upside down for Christ. The gospel message in Acts was preached to every class of people and not to the Jew only as it was preached in the Gospels. In Acts, the message of Christ and salvation was preached to "whosoever will" - to beggars, kings, governors, Jews, Gentiles, rich, poor, bond, free, slave and master. The gospel of Christ was spread to the world by the Apostles and by the common Christians who were filled with the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Acts, one hundred ten persons are mentioned by name, besides the references to multitudes and crowds. While we cannot be sure, it is estimated that there were millions of Christians by the end of the first century. It is amazing that without organized programs, ecclesiastical hierarchy, buildings, vast budgets and denominational headquarters, these New Testament Christians reached a world for Christ. What was their secret? They were a group of passionate, burdened and dedicated witnesses who knew they were in touch with the risen Lord of the church and things happened spiritually in their lives by the power of the Spirit.

Many Christians suffer from a horrible inferiority complex when they must confront the unsaved world with the claims of Christ. They have bought the lie that the church is irrelevant in the scientific age. How wrong this thinking is! The church is the most important body in the world today. All of God's plans for this present age revolve around the church and as goes the church so goes the world. The true church will always make an impact on this world because it has the risen Christ at the head.

A Manual. The Book of Acts is an authorized manual on church principles and conduct. Acts tells us how a church should live, act and minister. Acts is a book for the church in any century and it should be the desire of every Christian to conform as nearly as possible to the ideal pattern and organization of New Testament Christianity. The New Testament church was very simple - no pomp, no splendor, no magnificent ceremonies, no costly elaborate buildings. What we see in Acts is men and women who had yielded their hearts to Jesus and wholly surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

A Challenge. The Book of Acts also records for us the power of the Holy Spirit moving in the lives of Christians who are in the midst of great persecution. It is the story of ordinary men and women who were sustained by the Holy Spirit in persecution and who were able to give a dynamic testimony through it all.

## INSIGHT INTO ACTS 1:1

"The first account I composed, Theophilus," -- Although a few people question whether Luke, the Beloved Physician, is the writer of the Book of Acts, most scholars agree that Luke is the author of the Book of Acts. The words "the first account" directs us back to the Gospel of Luke where Theophilus is also mentioned.

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

While Luke's name is not mentioned in the third gospel or Acts, the internal evidence seems very definite that Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. There are at least fifty words and phrases (many are medical terms) used in the two books which are not found in any other books of the New Testament.

It is fair to say that Luke made Acts Volume II. He had one book but two volumes to the book. Perhaps Luke would have entitled the book "The Works of Jesus Christ". Volume I would be "The Work of Christ on Earth" and Volume II, "The Work of Christ from Heaven." New Testament scholars feel that originally these two volumes circulated together as a complete and independent work, but soon after the completion of John's gospel, there was a move to put all the Gospels together; therefore the Gospel of Luke and Acts were separated.

Luke. What do we know about Luke? Dr. Luke or as he is called "The Beloved Physician" was evidently a Greek rather than a Jew, for he is distinguished from those who are said to be of the circumcision (Col. 4:11-14). Of necessity, he would have received his medical training in one of the three universities in Alexandria, Athens or Tarsus. While we know nothing of his conversion, it may well be that he was led to the Lord by Paul. While Luke is remembered as the physician, he was primarily an itinerant missionary. He was a doctor who was saved and God called him into full-time Christian work. What Luke should also be remembered for was his ability as a historian. He wrote the Gospel of Luke and Acts. His thoroughness as a physician fitted him well as a historian. He "investigated everything carefully" as he wrote the Gospel and the Acts (Lk. 1:3, 4). When he wrote the Acts, he was guided and borne along by the Holy Spirit, but he also used eyewitnesses, the personal testimonies of Paul and probably Peter and other recorded material to write the Book of Acts. Luke "investigated everything carefully" which means he sifted the facts before he wrote and made accurate use in his writings of those sifted facts. The physician's diagnostic skills were applied to the sifting of the source material by means of the Holy Spirit in thorough preparation for writing an accurate historical account of the church. It is also interesting that God chose Luke, a Gentile, to record the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles, realizing that from a human perspective he might be more fair in dealing with the Gentiles than a prejudiced Jew. Surely a history written by a Gentile might be more readily accepted by the Gentiles.

Two of the leading preachers of our day were trained as doctors. Martin Lloyd Jones was a practicing doctor when God called him to preach. John R. W. Stott finished medical school and God called him to preach. Both of these men have a tremendous ministry among doctors today.

Theophilus. We know very little about Theophilus. His name means "beloved of God." We may get some hints, however, from Luke's gospel about this man Theophilus. In Luke 1:3, he is called "most excellent Theophilus." The words "most excellent" may be a title for a very prominent and influential person. Church history tells of a man by the name of Theophilus who lived in the city of Antioch. He owned a beautiful palace called the Basilica, which palace he dedicated to the preaching of the gospel. The words "most excellent" may also be used in addressing a Roman official. This man Theophilus may have been an official of the Roman empire, probably a governor of a province, who had an interest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel, Theophilus is addressed, "most excellent," an official title and in Acts he is addressed, "Theophilus", a more casual and warm title. Could it be that this prominent man or Roman official came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as a result of reading Luke's Gospel? Perhaps because of his stand for Christ, he either resigned or was dismissed from his office and was no longer addressed as "most excellent" but simply as a brother in Christ. Whatever, Theophilus was a "lover of God." We should be thankful that God in His providence saw to it that Theophilus was willing to share the Book of Acts with others because we have it today as part of our inspired canon.

"About all that Jesus began to do and teach," -- In the Gospel of Luke, the author Luke instructed Theophilus about "all that Jesus began to do and teach" while on this earth. The obvious implication is that in Acts Luke continues to instruct Theophilus on what the resurrected and ascended Christ continues to do and teach from the right hand of the Father in heaven. Luke is just the beginning and Acts picks up where the Gospel of Luke ends off. Luke's Gospel records for us the life, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father in heaven, but this was just the beginning of His work. Christ continues His work on this earth which will culminate in the second advent of Jesus Christ which in turn will result in the establishing of the kingdom of God on earth which will ultimately lead to the eternal state when Christ shall deliver the earthly kingdom up to the Father.

A New Title. In light of the fact that Acts merely continues what Christ “began to do and teach” in Luke's Gospel, it may be that a new title should be put on the Book of Acts. The title “The Acts of the Apostles” really does not declare what the Acts is trying to convey because only the acts of four of the apostles are mentioned. Some have therefore entitled the book “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Others have titled it, “The Acts of the Risen Christ” which is more accurate. Perhaps the best title is, “The Acts of the Risen Christ which He Did through the Apostles in the Power of the Holy Spirit.”

A New Power. How does Christ continue to do and to teach? Jesus Christ does this through the power of the Holy Spirit whom He sent to this earth after He ascended bodily to the Father in heaven. Christ had to ascend in order to have the most effective ministry on earth. He told the disciples that He had to go away so the Holy Spirit would come.

“But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7).

In His body of flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ was limited and constrained from carrying on a full ministry. It was only after the Holy Spirit came who Christ sent that He would be able to carry out His ministry to the maximum. When Christ was on this earth in a human body, He could only be in one place at a time, but now that Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to carry on His works and teachings, Christ can be everywhere at once. He can dwell in the hearts and lives of millions of Christians at the very same time. Christ dwells by means of the Holy Spirit inside of every believer in Christ, giving each believer a new power to live the Christian life.

A New Strategy. The new strategy of Jesus Christ on this earth deals with the concept of “incarnation“. The gospel of Luke is the record of the incarnation of the Son of God. In a very real sense, Acts is also dealing with incarnation. Acts is not the acts of Christians but the continuing acts of Christ in the Christian. The life of Christ is carried on in the bodies of true Christians. Incarnation is the secret strategy by which God plans to reach and change this world. The Book of Acts is a record of men and women possessed by Jesus Christ, owned by Him and manifesting His life to the world. This is the secret to authentic Christianity. Anytime we find a person who claims to be a true Christian and is not manifesting the life of Christ, it is false Christianity. No matter how much we adapt the garb and language, it is phony Christianity unless there is the divine activity of the risen Christ in our lives. The life of Christ will go on and on in true Christians until Christ comes for His church.

This is why the Book of Acts is an unfinished book. It has never been officially ended but is still being written today. This book closes rather abruptly with an account of Paul in the city of Rome. It just seems to end there as though one might expect to turn over the page and begin the next chapter. Luke’s Gospel was Volume I; Acts was Volume II and today we are writing Volume XXI, for we are recording the works of Jesus Christ in the twentieth century. Who knows, this may be the last volume in the series of Luke's book “The Work of Christ.”

A New Desire. Because Christ is alive and carrying out His plans and purposes on this earth by the Spirit in the lives of Christians, every true believer now has a new desire to honor and worship the living Christ. He is alive, not dead. Christians learn of Christ, are attracted to Christ, drawn to Christ and love Christ because He is alive and at work in His people. The new desire of the Christian is love Christ more and to go forth in order to bring others to a knowledge of Him that they might participate in the life of Christ as well.

The Christian life is the most exciting life in the world. It is a life lived in union with the resurrected and ascended Christ who is doing things in His people and teaching His people through the Holy Spirit. Christ is guiding, leading, and caring for every true Christian and is reaching out to a lost world through them. Can you think of anything more exciting than being in touch with the risen Lord?

## CONCLUSION

What then is the message of Acts? The risen Christ whose life is made available through the coming of the Spirit. The risen Christ is carrying out His plans and purposes through Christians on this earth.

Do you know this risen Christ? Have you experienced anything of Christ's resurrected life? If your answer is no, my reply to you is that you can know Christ and you can experience His resurrection power. How is this possible? Trust Christ as your personal Savior from sin. Yield your will to Jesus Christ and make Him Lord of your life. The risen Christ must invade your life and He will do so when you say "yes" to Christ and His salvation and "no" to self and your own good works. Christ is alive and He will "do and teach" through you the moment you invite Christ into your life as your personal Lord and Savior.