

ACTS 1:1-5

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts records the story of the gospel and the establishment and development of the church. Within the book we see the church expanding from a small group of Jewish believers gathered in Jerusalem to embrace thousands in dozens of congregations throughout the Roman world.

We see the church moving from Jewish members to include many Gentiles and we learn from this book that the reason for the church's growth and development is because of the work of the Holy Spirit. The book is called the Acts of the Apostles but it probably is more accurate to call it the acts of God or the acts of the Holy Spirit through the apostles.

The book of Acts is a significant book to study for a number of reasons. First the book gives us the history by which we can understand the epistles better. We have a core history in this book around which we can assemble the data that we find in the epistles therefore enriching our comprehension of them. The book of Acts follows the ministry of Peter then Paul and from it we learn principles for disciplining believers, building the church and evangelising the world. Although the book of Acts is a work of history and not theology Acts nevertheless emphasises the doctrinal truths' concerning salvation. Jesus is boldly proclaimed as the Saviour of sinners and the only hope for mankind.

The book also teaches us about the Holy Spirit who is mentioned more than 50 times. The Holy Spirit regenerates hearts, baptises, fills and sanctifies believers. He chooses and sets apart missionaries and guides and directs his people and is seen directing and controlling all operations of the church.

The book is written by Luke who wrote the gospel and Luke was a close friend and travelling companion of Paul and an eyewitness of many of the events that we read about in this book (for example the "we" passages Acts 16:10-17).

Now the work of Jesus Christ is both finished and unfinished, His great work of providing salvation is finished and nothing needs to be added to it but the application of that work is unfinished. His work on the cross needed to be proclaimed and made known and in many ways the book of Acts follows the proclamation of the gospel throughout the Roman world. In Luke's gospel he composed for Theophilus all that Jesus began to do and teach during his life on earth (v.1). The rest of the New Testament describes the continuation of Jesus work by the early church and that work goes on today and will continue until Jesus Christ comes back. (v.1). As soon as Christ's work of redemption is completed the church's work of evangelism begins.

The book of Acts chronicles the initial stages and features of that unfinished work and it sets out for us the path that the church is to follow until the end.

As the book of Acts begins an important transition takes place. During his ministry on earth the work of preaching and teaching was done primarily by our Lord himself. During his life he trained and instructed his disciples now it is time to pass the responsibility on to the apostles before Jesus finally ascends to his Father.

The responsibility for preaching the good news of the gospel to the world now rests on their shoulders. The Apostles will not only be responsible for preaching the gospel but for teaching gospel truths to the church who will then carry on Jesus work until He comes. But how could such a weak body of men fulfil such a task and how can the church continue on such a task in future generations. The answer lies in the fact that they will be empowered with the Holy Spirit, therefore

they will carry on Jesus work but Jesus by his Spirit will carry on his work through the apostles and then through the church. So as we look at these opening verses let us notice:

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING JESUS MESSAGE (vs. 1-2)

Luke wrote his gospel to Theophilus in order to teach about Jesus. There were two aspects of Jesus that Luke was keen to pass on His acts and his words (v 1). In other words Jesus message that Luke tells us is a message of action and a message of words. Luke wants to cover all of Jesus' life from His birth to the inception of his earthly ministry right through until his ascension.

Jesus taught his disciples both by word and deed. His miracles were designed to strengthen their faith, his teaching was to formulate their thinking and theology and his parables were to clarify spiritual truth to them. In other words Jesus revealed to his disciples the truth that they would need to carry on his work on earth. It was vital and still is today that those who belong to Jesus Christ by faith and are charged with the responsibility of carrying on His work know the message that they are to present to the world. If Jesus work is going to be carried on through the church then it is essential that the church and by that I mean you and me must know what Jesus message is.

There must be an accurate understanding of Christian truth if the church is going to continue preaching and presenting God's gospel on earth. This is why when God established his church he immediately gives to them as a gift Pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11), Elders who know the truth of God and are given the task of teaching and instructing his church in His truth.

If any church is going to know God's power at work through them then there must be a clear understanding of God's truth. That is why God's truth is at the centre of all true church activity. We must persist in teaching God's truth and in seeking to understand God's truth better.

In an age when truth is overlooked by many churches and replaced by feelings and emotion and common opinion, then it is important to understand why Luke went to all the trouble to record Jesus' words and deeds. He knew that if the church was going to be effective then it needed to know what Jesus message was so that they can present it to others.

But Jesus message was more than mere words, which is why Luke taught not just his teaching but his life. Jesus sets the perfect example of ministry and that involves both words and deeds. The church of Jesus Christ are to follow his pattern and we must proclaim his message but we must do more than that we must also live out his teaching.

The church is to evangelise by telling people that only God can save from sin but what makes this message attract and believable is a holy life, a life that demonstrates that God saves from sin. It is hypocritical to present the gospel of a Saviour from sin while living a sinful life. There is no point in a message that says that Jesus breaks the power of sin and yet those who proclaim such a message are consistently held in the grip of sin.

As servants of this glorious gospel we must manifest the power of the message that we are proclaiming through a consistent holy life. Jesus preached righteousness but he also lived it perfectly.

It seems to me that there are two major factors that contribute to the church's powerlessness today. First there are too many professing believers who are ignorant of biblical truth. Secondly there are many that know biblical truth but all too often fail to live by it. Luke wrote his gospel so that the church would learn from Jesus, that they would embrace his teaching but also that they would follow his example.

In many ways the book of Acts is evidence of what can happen when a church that knows God's truth and lives it out in everyday society. This truth is so vital that Jesus chose the apostles (v 2) and taught them through the Spirit so that they in turn will teach the church and leave us with a record of God's dealings with them and with the church.

We have that record in the bible and therefore we must endeavour to know this book and live by this book so that we will be able to effectively proclaim its truth to our town and to our society. This leads me to my next point.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CONVINCED OF JESUS MESSAGE (v 3-5)

The apostles needed not only to know the Jesus message so that they could proclaim it but they needed to be convinced of its importance and its truthfulness. They needed to have the confidence in the message for they knew that such a proclamation of Jesus radical message could lose them their lives. They needed proof that Jesus did rise from the dead and that he would fulfil his promises. This is why Jesus presented himself to the apostles after his resurrection (v 3).

His purpose was to give them convincing proof that he was indeed alive. The proof that Luke was talking about was when Jesus appeared to his disciples when the doors were locked (John 20:19), when he showed them his crucifixion wounds (Luke 24:39) and when he ate and drank with them (Luke 24:41-43). However what must have convinced them most of all was his appearances to them over a 40-day period.

He was not with them continuously throughout that period but he did appear to them throughout that period of time.

The result of all these appearances was that the apostles became convinced of the reality of Jesus' physical resurrection. Therefore they were able to preach the good news with boldness being convinced that Jesus had died and rose again on behalf of sinners. During these many appearances Jesus spoke to them about the kingdom of God no doubt teaching more truth about what that kingdom involved and how he would rule in the hearts of his people.

But knowing the message and even being convinced of the truth of the message did not mean that the apostles were ready to go out with this message for they needed the help of the Holy Spirit. Now the disciples no doubt were fired up by Jesus resurrection appearances and would have been full of enthusiasm yet they are commanded to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come upon them to empower them (v 4).

But Jesus was highlighting a very important point. All the preparation and training and knowledge or experience we might have are useless in proclaiming the gospel without the power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles heard the message and were convinced by the evidence of the resurrection but they needed power to proclaim this message so that others would be convinced.

Jesus had repeatedly promised his disciples that after he left them the Holy Spirit would come and empower them (John 14:16). Of course the disciples knew something of the power of the Spirit for they would not have become followers of Jesus without the work of the Spirit nor could they have ministered in the way they did without his help. But Jesus is pointing to the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would empower and indwell them in a way that was new. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the apostles did know the work of the Spirit but in a more limited way. It was limited in power and scope.

Before Pentecost the work of the Spirit was primarily among Jews and power was given for specific ministry but since Pentecost the full measure of the work of the Spirit is known. All who

come to Christ know his work whether Jew or Gentile and the work of the Spirit is more powerful since Pentecost for that power is available all the time and for every believer.

This is seen in the fact that although the apostles knew the work of the Spirit they would only be baptised with the Spirit at Pentecost.

Now I must be clear here for despite the claims of many today the Apostles and the early disciples experience of the Holy Spirit is not the norm for every Christian today. They were given a unique enabling of the Spirit for their special duties as apostles. They also received the general and common baptism of the Spirit in an uncommon way; they received it subsequent to conversion. This is because this is a transitional period when the Old Covenant is being replaced or superseded by the New Covenant. When the work of the Holy Spirit within the Old Covenant is being replaced by his work within the New Covenant.

All believers today are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and to keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). Yet these apostles are told to wait showing the change that would come about with the coming of the Spirit. As I said the apostles were in a transitional period in our day baptism of the Spirit takes place at conversion (1 Corinthians 12:13).

At that point the Holy Spirit also takes up his permanent residency in the converted person's soul, so there is no such thing as a Christian who does not have the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit is not a special privilege for some believers or a subsequent blessing after conversion but it is part of and essential to the work of regeneration and conversion itself.

We are never encouraged in Scripture to seek it, it is a divine activity, God sovereignty pours out His Spirit on those that he has chosen to save, he baptises us in his Spirit by grace it is not our work.

Now the lessons for us from these verses is that, not only are we to know God's message of salvation and be convinced of it, but we need to rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit for proclaiming it. This is good news for every Christian no matter how shy or timid you may be by personality.

If you are a Christian then you have the Holy Spirit indwelling you and his power will enable you to proclaim his word in your own way and he will empower us to live out that word in practise. There is no such thing, as I can't witness, for every Christian can with the help and the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no such thing, as I can't live it out when you have the Holy Spirit indwelling and empowering you.

We have His power helping us to overcome those sins that once held us captive, that power is like dynamite (v 8). So every believer has spiritual dynamite to help us live godly lives and to help us understand his word and to help us proclaim and witness to his gospel within our world.

As I finish let us remember that every person who is a Christian here today has the Holy Spirit, we are baptised or immersed in Him. We have all the resources we need to live for God to overcome the many temptations that we face to proclaim boldly His gospel. Every church needs to realise the resources that we have and the power that is at work in us and for us.

We need to learn not to depend upon ourselves but to depend upon the work of the Spirit in order to fulfil our responsibilities to our world. Far too often churches are self-sufficient but self-sufficient churches will fail. We need to come to the end of our own resources in order to help us to depend upon the Holy Spirit, for churches filled with the Holy Spirit will be powerful churches.

Churches that see God at work in the proclamation of his word and in lives that truly seek to be like Jesus Christ

Therefore let us rely upon the Holy Spirit and let us pray for and seek his power as we seek to live and proclaim His glorious gospel to the people of the Dales.

Amen