

Book of Acts

The Apostolic Commission

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Today we begin a new series on the Book of Acts. It is a provocative, often surprising and exciting book to read. I encourage you to read it (and re-read it) as we embark on this journey together.

There is no shortage of action. You have miracles, preaching, theological disputes, public confrontations and social convulsions. It is a unique glimpse into what we might call “ground zero” of the Christian church. Or at least ground zero of the church in its New Covenant form. And while it is easy to misuse the book, to assume, for instance, that everything today should look just as it did then, I trust it will be something the Lord will bless and encourage us with. I pray, and I ask you to pray, that the Spirit will give us a fresh vision of the life and mission of the community of disciples, followers of the Way, as Acts puts it.

So, this morning, we will make three points. Kingdom in verses 1 through 3, Commission in verses 4-8, and the Ascension in verse 9-11.

I. Kingdom (1:1-3)

Our author is, of course, Luke, the writer of the third gospel. Both Luke and the Book of Acts, are addressed to one Theophilus. We don't know who he is, but in prologue to Luke's gospel we learn that he had received some instruction in the Christian faith. And so, when, in v.1, he speaks of his former book, in which he wrote of all that Jesus BEGAN to do and teach, until the day he was taken up into heaven (that is, until he ascended), it is the gospel of Luke that is being referred to.

Jesus began “doing and teaching” during his earthly life, but the Book of Acts is what he continues to do and teach AFTER his ascension. Thus, as has been said, the Acts of the Apostles, could perhaps better be called the Acts of the Ascended Christ, through the Holy Spirit. But there was, Luke tells us, a forty-day period between the resurrection and the ascension. During this period, Jesus instructed the apostles through the Spirit, presented himself alive giving, Luke says, “many convincing proofs.” He appeared to them and spoke of the kingdom of God. Can you imagine? A forty day period of impromptu seminars from Jesus on the kingdom of God!

It was the central theme of his preaching ministry on earth. It is the central theme he wants to talk about when he appears from heaven. It is here at the beginning of Acts, and at the end of the book, when Paul reaches Rome, the kingdom is what he is proclaiming.

Now, of course, God has always been king of all and king over Israel especially. So what is new, then, about this kingdom of God? Well, we can speak here of realm and rule. The kingdom is a realm, a space, if you will, over which God reigns. In this sense he always has, and does, reign over all.

But kingdom also means the place where one's rule is accepted and embraced. That's what's in view here. The kingdom of God is the sphere where the Spirit has brought about new life. It doesn't come with signs that can be observed, rather it is within you Jesus says. Paul says the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the HOLY SPIRIT.

The kingdom, in this sense is not everywhere, its where the redeemed people of God are. Unless you are born again you can see or enter the KINGDOM OF GOD. Calvin, for example, says, the beginning of this kingdom is regeneration (born again), the end and fulfillment of it is blessed immortality (consummation). It is a heavenly, spiritual kingdom, he says, perfected when we participate in the coming glory of God. The kingdom of God is the life of the Spirit, which is the life of the age to come, breaking into the life of the chosen people of God here and now.

For this reason --- and Acts shows us this wonderfully – for this reason, kingdom and church cannot be separated. As they proclaim the kingdom, the apostles plant churches. As our Westminster Confession of Faith says: the visible church IS the kingdom of God. That's why she is given the keys – not of the church – but of the kingdom. Entrance into the church is entrance into the kingdom, exclusion from the church is exclusion from the kingdom. All of this, and we can be sure, much more, Jesus instructed his apostles on during the 40 days. And one of these post-resurrection appearances, brings us to verse 4, and our second point, the commission.

II. Commission (1:4-8)

On one occasion, while he was eating/staying with them, he gave them this command: Do not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which you have heard from me. What is the gift that the father has promised? It is, of course, the Holy Spirit. After ascension, (10 days later) comes Pentecost (50, fifty days after Passover). The Spirit is promised in the prophets, in the book of Joel and Ezekiel for example. Five times in John's gospel, in his upper room discourse, at the end of his earthly life, Jesus speaks of the coming of the Spirit

from the Father. And of course, John the Baptist, spoke of the One who would come after him, who would baptize in the Holy Spirit. Thus, in v.5, Jesus reminds them: John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

So that is the first piece of instruction: don't leave Jerusalem. Wait for the gift of the Spirit. Then, our text proceeds to the last conversation Jesus had with disciples. Verse 6: Then they gathered around him and asked him: Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Calvin says: there are as many errors in this question as there are words. They seem to have misconstrued the kingdom They are waiting for a political, national, earthly kingdom. They want an imminent theocracy, in which Israel is exalted over the nations (liberated from Rome), and (probably one) in which they are the chief executives.

Remember the mother of James and John? She wanted her sons to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in his kingdom. In any event, Jesus' rebuke focuses on the question of timing. He starts with: it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. It is not for you to know. It's a rebuke to our ungodly curiosity, to our presumption, to our intruding into things God has hidden. Not a single question about the text of the Law or the Prophets, or the covenant, or the being of God. Just – Lord, when are we going to have power again? When's the glory coming? So, after "it is not for you to know," Jesus says: BUT – you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. The word BUT indicates a contrast to their question. You want earthly, political power? You will receive power, but it will be of a different kind. You will receive power – meaning you will be passive and receptive – the power of the Spirit. The power of love, the power of weakness, the power of faithfulness unto death. The power of a different kingdom. Christ himself was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, and the apostles too, as must be anointed with the HOLY SPIRIT and power.

There are a lot of enterprises which can do just fine with human moral effort and discipline. This calling, however, collapses without this "best of all donations God can give, or man implore." In John's gospel, the risen Christ breathes on his disciples, and says receive the Holy Spirit. And in that context, he says: As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. In other words, the Holy Spirit is given for mission! You will receive power when the HOLY SPIRIT comes upon you, AND you will be my witnesses. Stop worrying about the times when the kingdom will be restored. You have work to do, Jesus says. In fact, you have a worldwide mission. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, then in all Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. To the Jews first, then to the Gentiles. From Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Right here, I want to pause. So we don't run too far ahead of ourselves. Jesus talking here to the apostles. All of the "you's"—you will be baptized, it is not for

you to know, you will receive power, you shall be my witnesses... All of the “yous” are directed to the apostles. Not to us. To the apostles. And the apostles are once for all, foundational, unique witnesses to Christ’s resurrection. In this sense, there are no apostles today. They are receiving a commission here. Yes, the church after them has a commission as well (not denying that), but it’s important to see Acts as the Acts of the APOSTLES. And in taking the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, they complete their foundational, unrepeatable mission. Think theologically, not geographically here. The gospel moving from Jew to Gentile, makes it ethnically universal. From Israel and beyond is, in a foundational way, the whole world, the ends of the earth.

In Colossians 1 Paul says the gospel is bearing fruit in the whole world (Israel and beyond). He said it was preached to every creature under heaven. He says in 2 Tim 4 that he has “fully proclaimed” to “all the Gentiles,” the gospel. The “world” means a representative sampling of the world. The “nations” means Gentiles from among the nations. The ends of the earth, means Israel and a smattering of nations outside Israel. The point is --- there is a uniquely apostolic commission here, and they did what they were commissioned to do.

So they are called to be worldwide witnesses, by the proclamation of the Word, in the power of the Spirit, but also through miraculous signs which confirm their apostleship and the divine authority of the gospel. That is the commission.

III. Ascension (1:9-11)

Our final point is the ascension. In v.9, very briefly and matter of factly, Luke records the ascension. Luke repeatedly, in these few verses speaks of the disciples eyes, their looking and seeing. He was careful to consult eyewitness, he told us at the beginning of his gospel, and to investigate carefully, and this whole report here – as spectacular, as unique as it is – is given in an almost journalistic, understated way.

So, he was lifted up before their very eyes, and a cloud took him from their sight. This cloud is not a mere rain cloud. It is the portable throne of God, it is a miniature replica of the highest heavens, where God is worshipped by all his heavenly hosts. It is the immediate visible presence of Yahweh, the cloud which followed Israel in the wilderness, the shekinah glory which dwelt in the most holy place. The is the same cloud which overshadowed Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration. It indicates his final departure, for he must, as the second Adam, enter the glory that the first Adam would have entered had he been obedient, namely, the heavenly Sabbath rest of God.

Back to the disciples: they were looking intently into the sky as the Lord was departing, and two men dressed in white appear. These are angels. They announced and attended his birth, strengthened him in the Garden of GetHoly

Spirit came, and proclaimed his resurrection to the women at the tomb. The glory cloud of God, for example, when Ezekiel sees inside it, is flooded with hosts of angels, and so it's no surprise that they appear in this connection. And they speak to the disciples: Why do you stand here looking into the sky? Bodily, Jesus will now be absent. The time of sight with respect to Christ is over. The era of faith has begun.

This same Jesus, they continue, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back, in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. Notice the ascension is visible, bodily, and attended by God's glory-cloud and angelic hosts. In the same way – the text stresses this – in the same way, Christ will come again: visibly, bodily, and attended by the hosts of heaven, and the departed saints. Here's Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4: For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus, those who have fallen asleep in him.

Later in the same chapter: For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

And relief comes to his afflicted people, Paul says in 2 Thess. 1, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. Visible, Bodily, Glorious, with all the saints, and the angelic hosts, the Lord who ascends, will return. The ascension assures us of the Second Coming. This same Jesus, will come in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. That being established, the church is not a collection of stargazers. She has a mission to undertake, in the power of the Spirit.

Besides the already mentioned craving to know times and seasons, there are two additional errors rebuked by this text. The first is the lust for earthly political power – the disciples' concern about Israel and her international prestige.

The second is gazing into the sky longingly. Both pious retreat from the world, and a utopian activism-- where it's all politics all the time – both of those things are deep distortions. The ascension makes us heavenly-minded people, with an earthly mission. People who long for the second coming and know how that longing should express itself in the interim – between the Ascension and the Coming of the Lord. The apostles finished their task. They laid the foundation. So we now engage the Great Commission until the end of the age, until this same Jesus comes in glory to consummate his kingdom.

Leslie Newbigin was a well-known 20th c Anglican bishop and missionary to India. He writes: The church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth, to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord... It cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological.

He said eschatological. Not me. But there is no better way to end than that. The ascended Jesus makes us a heavenly, people, AND, through the coming of the Spirit, a missional people, whose passion is the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

The times and seasons will be obscure and dark, but our duty is clear. Like the apostles, but not AS apostles, by the Spirit's power, we, too, are called to bear witness to the ascended Christ. The One who continues to act in the life of the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Amen.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).