

Dear Friends,

You occasionally meet very devoted believers who seem to have adopted their favorite church history or their favorite confession of faith as the sixty-seventh book of the Bible. While we may wisely learn from both, nothing can--or should be allowed to--replace those unique writings we call our Bible, especially the New Testament portion which was written to us and with us in mind, "Us" meaning all believers from the first century till the Second Coming. The Lord never promised any additional writings that would be described as Paul described our Scriptures, "by inspiration of God." Lord help us to learn more about these amazing writings and to frame our whole lives around its teachings, and its teachings alone.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

The Gospels—What Next?

The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:1-3 KJV 1900)

When we compare the opening verses of Luke's gospel with these verses, it becomes obvious that the same man wrote both documents. We cannot spend too much time in the gospels and the life and work of God Incarnate, Jesus' time as a man. However, He came with the intent of returning, not remaining permanently on earth in His physical body.

The time gap between Passover and Pentecost in the Jewish calendar was fifty days. Jesus arose immediately after Passover. According to Luke's account, He remained with the disciples for forty days, leaving approximately ten days between His ascension and that first Pentecost after His resurrection and ascension.

According to Luke's words, Jesus did three things during those forty days after His resurrection.

1. **He taught the disciples** (Primarily the eleven whom we know as apostles) and gave them "commandments." However, we must not forget that He also taught others. *After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.* (1 Corinthians 15:6 KJV) "...above five hundred brethren at once," not only did He appear to five hundred, but Paul refers to them as "brethren," believers in Him. While all the countless people who knew Jesus, heard Him teach, and perhaps were healed by Him, believed in Him, truly and profoundly so, they all didn't leave their families and careers to follow Him as the twelve did.
2. **He repeatedly "...shewed himself alive...by many infallible proofs."** The eleven (Judas Iscariot is no longer) needed to be wholly convinced of the reality of His literal bodily resurrection, so fully that they would witness His resurrection and godhood to others, even in the face of suffering or death at the hands

of hostile unbelievers. Their testimony in Acts 2 on that first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection affirms His success. How could they question His resurrection after those forty days? Impossible. Study the fearful Peter on the night of Jesus' betrayal with the fearless Peter who was the first to defend the eleven and their bold and supernatural speech (Study Acts 2:6-11. Notice the specific description included of real Biblical "Tongue-speaking." No mystical speech that requires an interpreter. "...**every man heard them speak in his own language.**" Acts 2:8 KJV) According to these verses, stated simply and undeniably, the eleven spoke in their native Galilean dialect, not in a mystical language, and people in each of some seventeen different dialects heard in their own native language. The miracle was that the Holy Spirit provided simultaneous immediate translation of their words. Peter had no fear when he spoke of Jesus' resurrection, quite likely to some of the very men who demanded that Pilate execute Jesus.

3. ***His teaching the disciples during His forty days with them after His resurrection related to "...the things pertaining to the kingdom of God."*** By the time Jesus ascended, the first event Luke includes in Acts after his introduction, He left these eleven men well equipped and prepared for their divine assignment. They were well prepared for Pentecost, and for their ever-expanding ministry recorded in Acts. Many years ago, while attending a graduation ceremony for someone very special to me, I heard the seminary president publicly state that the men his school graduated that day were far better equipped for their work than the men who followed Jesus during His personal time as a man, the height of arrogance—or perhaps ignorance—to so diminish Jesus' ability to teach and to prepare those men. No, they were fully trained and prepared for their divine assignment, as no human school could prepare them.

For the first fifteen chapters of Acts, Luke consistently writes in the third person, what "They" did and where "They" went." In the middle of Acts 16, for the first time in Acts, he writes of what "We" did. It appears that Luke first actively joined Paul and his work as Paul traveled to Greece to preach there for the first time.

The Book of Acts is the only inspired history of the faith in print. Church histories abound. However, to some extent or another, they all were written with a bias. The authors wrote with an objective and included facts that supported their purpose while omitting other facts that might not have supported their bias. For much of the era of the Christian faith, the New Testament Church has lived with fierce persecution. If you live daily with such pressure and danger, you hardly have time to write your own history. Most church history was therefore written about "Them" more than about "Us."

Not only does Acts provide us with facts, divinely inspired facts, but it also includes the specific facts the Holy Spirit knew believers in all future generations of the faith would need to help them learn those three important truths that Jesus taught, and more.

As we read Acts, we should take special note. It reports what really happened during the first few years after Jesus ascended. The Holy Spirit provided many unique blessings on that first and second generation of believers that were necessary to confirm their faith, to affirm in undeniable truths that Jesus was everything He claimed to be and to teach. Nothing in Acts or subsequent New Testament writings suggest that believers in future generations would continue to duplicate all those special gifts or powers. A few examples.

1. **Speaking in tongues.** Acts 2:6-11 cited above provides a detailed and undeniable description of precisely how those first eleven men spoke. The details provided bear their own testimony; the Spirit gave immediate and direct translation of Galilean dialect (Native to the eleven who were speaking). Men from some seventeen different dialects each heard in his own native dialect. Yet each man was aware that the eleven spoke in their native Galilean dialect. This is the true miracle of that first Pentecost and the power the Holy Spirit gave to accompany the testimony of the eleven. Take special note. The eleven didn't make their supernatural manner of speech the centerpiece of their work on Pentecost. They kept their minds and words keenly focused on Jesus and His resurrection. A few short years later, Paul thoroughly defines a normal multi-cultural, multi-language church gathering where members in the congregation do not understand all the different dialects represented. He required a translator, or interpreter, and only allowed two or three men to speak different languages in one service with an interpreter.

If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God. (1 Corinthians 14:27-28 KJV)

Clearly by Paul's extensive teaching in this context in the verses leading up to these two verses, that supernatural immediate translation of tongues by the Holy Spirit had already ceased, and anyone speaking in a foreign tongue or dialect in the church Paul required to speak with a translator or interpreter and limited such speech to three people at the most in a given public gathering of the church. What Luke described in Acts 2 bears no remote similarity with the speech of contemporary believers who claim to speak in tongues. They do not speak in any known human language, and no one hearing understands what they say. This Biblical miracle, fully affirmed in Acts, no longer exists in our time.

2. **Miraculous healing.** One example. In Acts 19:11, we read that God wrought "special miracles" at the hands of Paul. In this case the miracle (Acts 19:12 KJV) was that a handkerchief or a piece of Paul's clothing might be taken to a sick person, and the person was healed. No such miracle exists in our day. Just a few years later, James wrote that, when we become ill, we should call for the elders of the church to pray for us. He made no mention of handkerchiefs or pieces of our pastor's wardrobe, or any of the special miracles described in Acts. Thank the Lord, I have witnessed—and likely experienced—the Lord's special blessings of restored health because of the faithful prayers of godly people, precisely as James described. (James 5:14-15 KJV)

What then should we seek to learn from Acts? It provides us with an inspired account, no less than the gospels, of what the apostles and early believers were uniquely blessed to say and do by the intervening power of the Holy Spirit in undeniable affirmation of their testimony. Even in those examples, the spotlight, the emphasis, is always on what they taught, "Jesus and the resurrection," never on the miracles they were empowered to perform. The miracles in Acts were never the highlight event; they served to empower and accent the preaching of Jesus.

What should we learn? Just as the Holy Spirit provided His presence and power to affirm the teachings of that first generation of believers, even so He continues to provide affirmation—in His way for the occasion and the time—of the truth that we strive to teach. A simple example that most men who have preached for any time will likely affirm. I can't recall the many times when, after I had preached, someone in the congregation would approach me and start talking about "What I taught them" in the sermon. However, **what they said taught me!** The Holy Spirit gave them fruitful thoughts far beyond anything I said, or even thought during my sermon.

Some wise Bible students have observed; Acts is **to** us, but **not for** us. In other words, it records actual events that occurred during the first or second generation after Jesus ascended to confirm both their faith and ours. However, Acts is not for us, meaning that we should not read Acts thinking or expecting to duplicate the miracles of speech, healing, or other things recorded there. If we seek New Testament instruction regarding what we should believe and do, go to the subsequent letters written by some of these men to first century churches. Learn from them there. In this way, Acts provides us with an important transition from Jesus' personal presence and teaching to specially chosen men and their teachings and work, to how we should "Do our own faith" according to the teachings we read in those letters that specifically relate to us as subsequent believers.

Luke begins Acts with a formal introduction. However, he ends it rather abruptly.

And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him. (Acts 28:30-31 KJV 1800)

Many years ago, a friend and I were talking about some of the events recorded in Acts. He asked me how I regarded Luke's ending to the Book. Why did he end Acts so abruptly. I thought for a moment and replied in the words of a popular song, "And the beat goes on." While Luke's writing of the events of the apostles and early believers in Acts, the ending in an action setting reminds us. The Lord didn't cease blessing His people at the end of Acts. He continues to this day abiding with us, guiding us to a more devoted and prayerful study of Scripture, and to a more faithful practice of it in our lives. And for those who follow Scriptures strong admonitions to continue faithfully, they shall realize the indescribable blessings of the faith-way of living. "Be thou faithful!"

Elder Joe Holder