

So this morning we turn to the book of Acts. It is the recording of Luke, in this second book which he wrote after his Gospel. And, as is the tradition of the church, it has been divided in our Bibles: Luke, then John, then Acts, but these were intended to go together. The way he ends the gospel of Luke and the way he begins the book of Acts of the Apostles is for the purpose for us to see the continuity, the goal for which he was writing. And it is for us an instruction, a hope of what the Lord plans to do with the church of Jesus Christ, now in its most infant form, beginning with this small band of men, beginning in a small place, that will extend to the end of the world.

At the beginning of the gospel of Luke, Luke records the reason that he has set about to do these things. It is for the purpose that Theophilus---whom he calls the 'most excellent Theophilus,' most likely a Roman official---it is for the purpose that he would be certain of the things which he had been taught. So Theophilus was a convert to the Christian faith. And what he describes in the opening pages of the gospel of Luke is that he has set out to put down in summary form all the things that Jesus said and did.

In this book it is somewhat different, yet to have a continuity with what he wrote earlier, and in this it is not just what Jesus has said and did....[child cries....(It's all right. It's all good. I know the feeling. Yes, I know the feeling. God bless him. God bless his mother.)] His purpose is no different in this book of Acts. He wants Theophilus to be certain of the things which he had heard and he had received. But you must know that the one of the things that sticks out in this writing is this: It begins in weakness but it ends with boldness. Indeed, as you will hear in a few moments, what you see in the minds of the apostles is that they're still not fully comprehending what is going on. And so they're asking Jesus, 'Surely you're going to do this, and you're going to restore Israel,' and so they're not getting it. And so Jesus says, 'Listen, you're going to receive power, and then I'm going to send you out as witnesses.'

But what is the goal? The goal is for us, what we hear in the very last verse of Acts, chapter 28. And it says this in verse 31 of that final chapter, speaking of the ministry of Paul: "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." Luke is setting out what for Theophilus and for us what begins in a small way---seemingly in weakness and misunderstanding---will end towards the ends of the earth with boldness and without hindrance, the Gospel of Christ. That is to be for us a hope, because it is for us the power of the church.

The power of the church is not in her buildings. The power of the church is not in our programs. The power of the church is not in all the things that we can so easily become wrapped up in. The power of the church is Jesus Christ and his Gospel being given by the Holy Spirit, and then those who have received this message are sent out to be witnesses of Christ. It is for us to be reminded and equipped that the power of the church is in our mission, because the Lord has given us a mission. So let us hear of what this mission is. Acts 1:1-14, but my time will be spent in verses 1-11.

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions to the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men 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. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.:

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James, son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Pray with me. Now, Lord, direct our attention by your Holy Spirit and Word to the power for your church, the person of Christ and his Spirit who directs us again and again and again to the place of truth, the seat of power--- Christ alone. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

So as I entered the worship service earlier this morning I was greeted by one of our ushers who said, "Hey there's something wrong with your outline. There are only two points." And so I said, "That's right. There are only two points. That just means I get to have more sub-points. But I hope to finish more quickly." But there are two points. Much I will also continue in next week. But this morning is an introduction to the book of Acts, but these two points will be for us foundational as we continue through the rest of this book. They are truth and power. These are central to Luke. It is central for us. And it is indeed the foundation upon which we do all of our ministry.

So let's look together, then, at these two points. Let's look at the nature of the truth that Luke directs our attention to. We will see this truth declared first, by convincing proofs; number two, apostolic ministry; and third, empowerment for witness.

First, convincing proofs. We hear in the earliest portions of this, that Luke begins this much like he did his Gospel. But his point in establishing a number of different things, he establishes not only in his Gospel what Jesus said and did, now he begins this Acts of the Apostles, as it came to be known. He's writing it some thirty years after the resurrection of Christ. And he's now writing it again to Theophilus, as he did his Gospel, to give him not just what Jesus said and did while he was on earth--he's wanting to unpack for Theophilus what Jesus continues to do.

And he begins by giving a little bit more information that he did only in summary form at the end of the gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 24. He now gives us a little bigger window into what transpired, and that was by giving these convincing proofs. But he did this, he tells us, by investigating. He goes---much like he did with his Gospel---and he did any he simply learned what happened during the time in which Jesus had appeared to these chosen ones, the apostles he had brought to himself. And he tells Theophilus how they had been given the Holy Spirit. But then he says in verse 3: "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave them convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God."

And what he's establishing for us is this important truth. That we need to think about how do we learn of events that have taken place in the world around us? You can pick up any newspaper today and learn of different events that happened the day before. Maybe it was a car accident. Maybe it was a fire. Whatever it might be, you can read about the story because a reporter has gone and investigated. Perhaps went to a police report, went to the scene of what took place, talked to

witnesses, talked to those who are directly involved. Tell me what happened. He takes that information and by strict rules he simply sits down and retells the story. Yes, it might be a vantage point or a way of writing that is unique to him, but nonetheless he's telling the story of what took place. We see those things as convincing proofs that something of an accident or a fire took place. Take the Olympics, for example. While we're not watching them live, we can certainly hear the reports---sometimes well ahead of time of being able to see it---by listening to the news. Because someone saw it, someone recorded it, and now they're telling us.

What we need to be reminded of is that this is what Jesus did for his disciples---to give them convincing proofs that he was indeed not still buried in the grave, that he was indeed alive. This is to be for us the rock bed foundation, because this truth on which we stand and on which the faith of the church is built needs to be guarded, because it is not based on our opinion, on our experience alone with Jesus Christ. While our experience of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, or walking with him and trusting in him, knowing him personally---as powerful and as important as that is, it is still built on something greater, even something bigger. And that something bigger is the authority and the truth of God's Word. Luke tells us he investigated these things, he went to talk to the eyewitnesses, and he wrote it down for Theophilus, and therefore for us, that we might have certainty---not alone in our testimony or in our experience, but in the truth of God's Word displayed through convincing proofs, which had been written down by a man named Luke, who went to talk to other people.

If we cannot read the Bible this way, and if we do not point people to the Bible this way, we will have missed something that we experience every day. If we cannot take Luke at his word that this is something that he went and investigated and wrote it down, as incredible as the story may be, how can we ever claim to know anything that has happened in history? We were not alive when so many of the events that have shaped this country's life took place. But we've read about them. They're incredible stories, incredible dramas, but we believe them because someone went and investigated, talked to the eyewitnesses, and set it down.

The same is the case for this, God's Word, God's truth, upon which our faith is built. Not the other way around. This is not truth because of our experience first. This is something which the church must hold to fast, particularly in our day. It cannot devolve into, 'Well, this is truth because it works for me.' If that is what we devolve to in defending the faith of Jesus Christ, then it's no different than anyone else who simply says atheism works for me or Buddhism works for me. No, it is. It may work for you, but that doesn't make it truth. It's truth because it has been written down and investigated.

Secondly, it is also a truth which we must hold to and that is to the uniqueness of apostolic ministry. If you are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is appropriate to say that you are a disciple (lower case 'd'). You and I are apostles (lower case 'a'). But there's only one set of twelve capital-letter Apostles, and their ministry was unique, and their eyewitness is authoritative in ways that yours and mine are not. Because why? Because we hear that in these verses when we hear Luke record (verse 3): "He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God." In other words, they are unique, and their testimony is authoritative, and what they have written can be trusted. Why? Because they received the extensive leadership training. We may be able to read the Bible, we may be able to know its truths, and we can study it for the rest of our lives, but none of us can claim to have been together with Jesus for a period of forty days to receive face-to-face instruction from the living Son of God, raised from the dead. This is important, because no pastor, no elder, no leader of the church is on the same level as the unique Apostles, who were given a particular ministry, who were to be particular witnesses at the very beginning. And from there they were used as an ignition point, but it cannot be overshadowed by the modern witness of the church.

Our witness is built on their apostleship, and the fact that they were led by the Holy Spirit to recount it, you see. We need their ministry. We need to know that they received training that you and I have not

received. It's because the Lord Jesus, particularly with them (Luke 24:45): "He opened their minds..." What a Bible study that was! And he walked them through the Old Testament all the way to his active work post-resurrection. And that, my friends, is what we have recorded for us in Scripture. And it is their apostolic ministry. And Luke's talking to them, though he was not directly an eyewitness, though he investigated it. The books that you have in your Bible are there not because a group of people decided to get together in the early centuries of the church to decide what books got in and what books didn't, as some mystery problem to solve. It is because the church from its earliest days passed around these different gospels, these different letters as they were set down and investigated and recorded, and they were shared, and they were received as God's Words to them because of the apostolic ministry.

So my question is for us, are we giving ourselves to this apostolic ministry? What are we filling our minds with? What are we soaking up? What is reorganizing the internal furniture of your mind and heart and relationships? Is it the true apostolic testimony of the Scriptures? There is no other truth, there is no other book that is as important as this. And I say this to you as one who walks alongside you, who recognizes that I also need to absorb more and more of this Word, that it must increasingly become a delight to my soul, that it might reorganize my internal life and my external life. Why? Because this is what we've been given as the foundation for our faith.

But not just confirming proofs, not just apostolic ministry, he also gave them empowerment for witness. And what is so important about this is, that this truth that is being declared here is a truth that indeed these disciples were promised. He tells them first in verse 5, "John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." And then he says in verse 8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;" and now notice what it says, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Here is what we must remember as the modern church. What we want to do is we want to go back to the book of Acts and try to say okay, we need to be just like they were. And we will discover as we go forward in this book that there are many things that we are called to apply, and to look at, and ask the Lord to work out, much like he did in the earliest days of his church. But I must tell you there was also a uniqueness to that time and a uniqueness to this empowerment. When we talk about the Holy Spirit today, and when we talk about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, so often times our discussion around the Holy Spirit---even as I say that word, I'll bet you many of your minds began to think of two gifts that we think about: tongues and healing. Or what has been come to known as, unfortunately, the charismatic gifts. I say unfortunate because 'charismatic' means gifts of grace, so therefore all of the gifts of the Lord are gifts of his grace, not just those two. But we also must remember that we can't reduce it to those two things. Why? Because ultimately, oftentimes, when the church begins to think about the Holy Spirit, it becomes hyper-individualized and about what can Jesus do for me by his Spirit.

Now there is a place for the unique, individual, and personal witness of the Holy Spirit, as we will see as we go through the book, but that is not where Luke begins. It is not where the Lord begins. Listen to what he says. I'm going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit. In a few days you're going to be filled, which is an ongoing filling, and in being filled with the Spirit for the purpose of what?---Witness. (Thank you. We're going to get all call back and forth here, right? There we go.) That's right. It's for witness. Please hear this. I am not saying that every individual who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ does not receive the Holy Spirit. You absolutely do by the promise of your Savior. And there is a personal witness, there is a personal power, there is a personal presence of God with you. But I will tell you, friends, it is not for you alone. It is for the witness of the glory and the work of Christ Jesus alone.

Because here's the kicker. When the Holy Spirit comes into the apostles and they are declaring the majesty and the glory of Christ, guess what happens to them. They are filled with joy. They're not worried about what is God going to do for me. It's no...I get to worship! Isn't that what they do at the end? They gather together and they pray. They haven't even received the Spirit yet. Watch what happens when they receive the Spirit. They want to pray. They want to worship. They want to be in each other's houses. It's electrifying community and witness, you see.

The truth that Luke is unpacking for us through the words of Jesus is that this truth is rock foundational for us by his convincing proofs, the apostolic, unique ministry of the twelve apostles, and it is, as well, the empowerment for witness. And let me link this with the gospel of Luke. If, then, the gospel of Luke was to give certainty to Theophilus of what Jesus had said and done, then this book is about what Jesus is doing, has done, and will do by his Spirit.

And that's where we turn next. We not only need truth, we also need power. Friends, the Scriptures do not understand a Christian who tries to have power without truth or truth without power. You can know the Scriptures, but not know his power. The disciples knew the Lord, but they still had lots of questions, they still had confusion. They needed the gift of the Spirit to give them depth of insight and knowledge.

A few years ago while traveling back home on a plane, I was sitting next to a woman who was probably close to twice my age at the time. We began talking. She asked me what I did...I was a pastor. And we began talking about Christianity and the faith, and she then shared something with me that was both humbling, but also instructive. She said at that point in her life she had read through the Bible some thirty to forty times. At the time I was in seminary---I had not read it through that many times. And so I was humbled, but it was also instructive. While she had read through the Bible some thirty or forty times, she was clear that she denied the divinity of Christ, his work on the cross, and that it was simply for her a really great book to read. Yet she knew it. She knew the truth. She read it. But the power had not entered in.

The disciples are much the same. They had been taught. They had received the convincing proofs. They knew their ministry was an apostolic ministry. They knew that it was unique. But they were still confused about power. Let's look at this together. What is the power that Luke talks about here. He first does it through two negatives, as I see it, and then two positives. What it's not; what it is.

Let's look together at two things that it is not. We learn this in verse 6. First, it is not a superpower. Means this. They say to him. "So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" They are still trying to figure out what is this going to mean? And so what they are still thinking is you're going to restore Israel to be a superpower. That's completely understandable, is it not, if we think about it. Because they were members of the nation, the people of God, that were once the most mighty of nations, but now they're barely a second-class nation underneath the rule and thumb of Rome. And so they thought, Ha ha! After they've already been with him for forty days, they've heard what he has said, they are still trying to connect what he's done and what he has taught with what they think is going to happen with the nature of Israel. The reason why I'm so happy this is here is because Jesus addresses his kingdom. It has nothing to do with being a superpower. I can understand that.

Imagine for just a moment, ten years from now the United States is no longer the superpower, but under the rule and thumb of another nation: China, India, Iraq, Iran, who knows? But imagine in a very quick, short amount of time if that had happened, what would our thought be? This has been a difficult thing for many Christians throughout history who believe that their nation was going to be the 'city on the hill.' Parts of Europe, England, United States was believed that this was going to be God's special providence to be a city on the hill. But the Lord's kingdom was not about being a superpower.

It was about a supernatural power. And I am glad that it is here because Jesus says to them, I'm not going to do this now. I'm not going to restore Israel to the way you think it should be. And it's not going to be about just a race of people. What he is going to do is going to be global. What he is going to do will be supernatural. But they can't understand this yet.

But they also have another thing, when they asked Jesus of this, Jesus's response, he then says, okay, so it's not about a superpower. It's also this power is not about knowing the time in which all of this will take place. This power is not about knowing the time. Now hear the words of Jesus. He says, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." That translated in English as 'times and dates' can be translated as 'epochs and seasons.' So it is vague. Consistent with what Jesus is teaching is that we are not to know the epoch---whenever that might be in the future---or the season in which it will come. Except that it will. The disciples and the apostles now needed to hear that.

We, too, need to hear that, and let me just apply this in this way in this section. I have come into relationship with families that had been ripped apart on this question. I planted the church in New Jersey. There were those who came as the walking wounded as Christians to our church at times, because their families had been ripped apart because someone was convinced that this teacher was right about that Jesus would return on this date in this year and at this time. Children were bound up in fear of what that was going to mean. And then when it didn't happen, families who were cloistered in basements on the day in which it was going to happen, were convinced it was going to take place, but then the next morning the sun came up, and nothing changed----except their faith became shipwrecked. My friends, there are charlatans who are still today taking this word, trying to find some secret math or some secret formula to determine exactly when Jesus is coming back. Friends, the Word tells us---it is not for us to know! And that has opened up a whole arena of specialty Bible math. I just heard an ad this week about some guy who wants to give me my biblical investment plan according to his biblical formula of numbers. Do you see?

And this is all being hidden behind the guise and the shield of the gospel of Christ. It is falsehood. May it not lead you into that trap. But it's meant to lead us into freedom. I don't have to be worried about knowing the time. I just need to expect it could happen today. So therefore, since I don't have to worry about the time, then I can begin to enter into what the real power is---the power for witness. And that's where he turns next.

He says to them, verse 8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses." This is yet a further statement of what Jesus said earlier when he said, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." He's referencing back to John chapter 14, when he said to his disciples: When I go, I'm going to send another counselor---the word *paraclete*---who will be an encourager, who will be a comforter, who will empower you. But it's that word 'another' which we must pay attention to. When we hear the word 'another,' we think of 'a different kind.' That is not what Jesus means. What he means is it's a different person. It's the person of the Holy Spirit, but his comforting, his power is the same as with mine. Because when Jesus says I will send 'another counselor' to you, he's referring to 'another counselor like me.'

He then furthers that when he says it is better that I go, otherwise the Holy Comforter will not come to you. So Jesus is declaring that this Spirit will come, and that it is better for us that he does. Why? Because Jesus, when he took on a human nature, was locally confined. And he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father, and he---Jesus the Son---is not everywhere present, except by his Spirit. And he sends forth third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who is with us anywhere we go, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ. No matter where the church gathers to glorify the Lord, the Spirit is there also. That is the promise. And when he comes, he will teach us and remind us of everything

that Jesus taught. He will convict us of sin. He will bring judgment in the world, in that the world will know that Jesus is the Son of God and no other salvation is possible except through him. This is the role of the Spirit.

But notice, it is the Spirit who brings attention to the Son, and not to himself. Nowhere in the Scriptures does the Holy Spirit draw attention to himself, because Jesus teaches us he takes nothing that is his own, only that which is given to him, and he will give it to you. And what is it that he gives? The focus on Jesus Christ. So the Holy Spirit is not the third person of the Trinity coming in to drum up all this excitement about himself and just for you as an individual or for me as an individual. He comes in to the church, individually and corporately, to focus us on Christ and for his witness. That is what the Spirit comes to do. Please know, as we will see, there is much to be gained from the personal ministry of the Spirit, but that is not where Luke begins.

But I end with this. The final part of the power isn't just that, indeed, we receive a Holy Counselor that links the ministry of the earthly Christ to now, and he is seated at the right hand of the Father. It is also the position. And that position is where Jesus is. Perhaps I'm repeating what I said last week, but it is worthy of repeating---that this is the most descriptive of Jesus's ascension. Verse 10: "They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven,' (that's where he is), "will come back to you in the same way that you have seen him go." That position is one of authority. He is seated at the right hand of God the Father, and from there he will come again. The time is up to the Lord, but he is coming. But between the time in which he ascended until the time he comes again, Jesus holds a position that is our power that the Spirit unites us to. And that is the power of his intercession. Hebrews 7:25: He---Jesus---always lives to intercede for you.

This morning Jesus, in all of his authority, in all of his power and glory, is praying for this church. He's praying for you and interceding for you. And what is he pleading? He is pleading what we will celebrate in the Supper: His blood and his body given for those who he has called to himself by his Spirit, that we might know that we have a high priest who ever lives to live and to intercede for us. These are the words, and I was reminded of the commentator Derek Thomas, the words of this great hymn written by Charity Bancroft. It's called, "Before the Throne of God," and these are the lyrics: Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea: a great high priest whose name is love, who ever lives and pleads for me. My name is graven on his hands. My name is written on his heart."

And he is interceding for us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, through the intercession and power and glory of your Son, through the gift of your Holy Spirit, may you now through the sacrament of your Supper feed your people, the body of Christ, to direct our gaze and our attention at the glory of Christ and of his position and power from which he reigns. Lord, enable us, then, to be sent out, the sent ones, to be witnesses to Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen