

# The Acts of Jesus

By Dr. William W. Goligher

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Acts 1:1-8

**Preached on:** Sunday, May 15, 2011

## Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

**Website:** [www.tenth.org](http://www.tenth.org)

**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/tenth](http://www.sermonaudio.com/tenth)

Well, do keep your Bibles open at this little section in the book of Acts. We are starting tonight a series on Sunday evenings in this book which I don't now how long it is going to take us, but we will work our way through it. It might not always be me that is preaching on it. Maybe most of the time. I will see what I can wangle with the authorities, see if they can let me do that. But I want you to look at this this evening because it seems to me that it sets in context the great mission that we have as God's people together as his Church, Luke's contribution to our understanding of Jesus and our understanding of Christianity, our understanding of what the Church is about and our understanding of the Christian mission as absolutely crucial. And Luke takes on more space in terms of words in the New Testament, I think, than Paul does and so therefore what Luke has to teach us is obviously intended to shape our thinking about the Lord Jesus and about the Church.

Over in the UK and I think it spilled over to hear professor Dermot McCullough through Oxford University has rocked, it think, would be true to say rocked the scholarly world by a number of his publications. He wrote a great book on the Reformation. He wrote a great book on Thomas Cranmer, the great Anglican theologian. And most recently he has written a book called *The History of Christianity*. And in a review on a very famous newspaper in the UK which is read, I know, by the more thinking and thoughtful Americans who have heard of it, especially the left wing Americans, so I don't imagine any of you have read it. In a review of this book Christina Widona wrote this.

“The sheer breadth of McCullough's chronicle is almost subversive. At a time when Christianity in the public arena is dismissed as the poor relation to be shunted off to the sidelines, here is a huge masterly chronicle that invites the Church center stage and celebrates its global influence and extraordinary vision.”

There is a secular observation on a secular view of the Church in which McCullough as a secular writer who is friendly, at least, towards Christianity is trying to show in the broad canvas of history the influence of the Church on the world, because, as he observes, Christianity is a phenomenon of history. The fact that from a handful of people most of whom were unlettered and came from an unimportant Roman province in the back waters of the empire, with no access to the levers of influence in the empire itself, bearing a message that offended just about everybody, they managed to turn the world upside

down. In fact, that phrase comes from Luke here in Acts chapter 17. And within two centuries it was this minority religion that becomes the dominant force in the Roman Empire.

And when you ask the question, “How did that happen?” I imagine as we ask that question we are also asking the question, “How can Christianity have a similar impact on our culture and our world today as it had at the very beginning?”

Now what Luke does—and this is his distinctive contribution is—what Luke does is give us a Christian view of the history of Christianity. That is what he is doing in Acts and in many respects as we shall see. And he is answering in the course of doing that... of course, we mustn't be anachronistic. We mustn't read back our times into his times. But in the course of doing it, I think he helps us to answer some of the questions that the Church is thinking about today, this church, every church that is a thinking church. What is the mission of the Church? Why are we here? Why has God left us on earth? Why is it that when you become a Christian you don't get beamed up into heaven? Do you remember the *Star Trek* movies or really old and you remember the remember the [?] *Star Trek*? When you got into trouble and you said, “Beam me up, Scotty,” you know, you got immediately on to the mother ship? Well, why is it we are not there? Why is it that when we become Christians we aren't just immediately beamed up into the mother ship, into heaven, into the presence of the Lord Jesus?

And so it helps to answer the question: What is the mission of the Church? Why are we still here? What is the essential message of the Church? And how should we adjust ourselves, our style, our manner of delivery or even the message to different audiences or should we not? These are some of the issues, I think that are addressed by this book.

Now one of the things that strikes you as you read the book of Acts—and we are going to look today, really, at the big picture of the book. I am not going to expound these verses we have read. We will look at these again next week and try to expound them in their context. But I want to look at the big picture of the book so that you get an idea of the global scene that Luke is giving to us here.

Now I am not a teacher. I am a preacher so what I am doing tonight is harder for me than it is for somebody who is used to lecturing or teaching. There is a difference and there is a reason why I have always had to bomb out whenever I have done any seminary teaching. It is because I get too agitated and excited and I start to preach to students and they don't like that, apparently. So there you go.

But one of the things that strikes you as you read the book as a whole, so I might start kind of preaching a little bit here. As you look at the book as a whole one of the things that strikes you is how offensive Christianity is in the context in which it bursts out into the world. I mean, just about everybody is offended by this message.

The Jews, for example, who hear the Christian message are getting all offended by the fact that the Jews get a bad report when it comes to getting rid of their Messiah. That is

not popular among a whole realm of people who are scattered right throughout the Roman Empire. And the Christians make it even worse because when they start preaching their message they go to the Jews first. So they go to the Jews first to tell the Jews that they are responsible for getting rid of their Messiah, not the best kind of approach to start off with. They offend the non Jews. They offend the non Jews at a number of levels. They insist on teaching non Jews from the Jewish Scriptures, especially the Greek translation of the Jewish Scripture. They use that Scripture even in the instruction of non Jews in what Christianity is all about. They offend non Jews, especially those who have a materialistic point of view. And there were a number of non Jews, an increasing number of non Jews in the world who were very materialistic. They offended them by introducing the supernatural elements that you find in the Christian message that obviously supernatural resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the supernatural miracles that were being performed by the apostles. These were things that were offensive to the materialists.

And then there were people at the opposite end of the spectrum, people who were insipiently, at least, Gnostic, that is, with a view of human flesh and the human body that was... that regarded the human flesh and the human body as offensive, as an evil thing, a thing to be avoided. The real development that you could have as an individual is at the spiritual level and that the flesh is something to leave behind. They are offended by the resurrection. Here is God raising the physical body of Jesus from the dead. They are offended about the teaching that, in fact, you can glorify Christ or glorify God in your body, that the body isn't evil and, in fact, the body becomes an instrument that you can use for righteousness and for the glory of God. They are offended as they listen to that.

They are offended by the language of exclusivity, that is, the language of Peter, for example, who stands up and says that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."<sup>1</sup>

You want saved, you want right with God, you want to have a relationship with God, well, you need to know there is no other name. There is no other way. This is the only way. And going into a multicultural, multireligious society such as the first century was with polytheism at the order of the day which the Romans could abide anybody and could put up with anybody so long as that person was not totalitarian in the way in which they expressed their faith.

Well, they really were offended by Christianity. Well, it is into that context that Luke, rather, writes this two part book that consists of two kitchen rolls worth of material. I don't know if you have kitchen rolls here or call it something else. Do you know what I am talking about? No.

See, we are going to have a problem here. So what I should really do is go around the stores, first of all, and learn the lingo for all these things that just come out of the air whenever I am talking without any preparation, which is a lot of these things. Well, if you can imagine stuff... if you don't have it, then you can't even imagine it, really. These

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:12.

are about 35 foot scrolls. They are 35 feet long all rolled up, ok? Each one of these books Luke and Acts. And toilet paper. You understand toilet paper, don't you? Yeah, that is good. I am glad to get it out. There, you have got the image. Oh, no, that is the wrong image to have in your mind.

Luke has got these two... he has got a lot to say. He doesn't fit it into one scroll, one roll of toilet paper. It has to fit into two rolls of toilet paper. And so you go and you get from Luke this double whammy. You ask for one and you get the two of them, the second one thrown in. And so it is a good deal and therefore something you as Americans would go for. And so he where he has given us this two part book.

And he tells us right in the very beginning of the book what his book is about. In fact, you can see it even here in Acts chapter one. He has told us that part one was about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. And the implication is that part two is going to be about what Jesus continues to do and to teach. So there is at the heart of it what is book is about.

First of all, this evening, this book of Acts is about the acts of Jesus. That is the first thing that I want to say about it. He is telling a story and if you have a moment just to turn to Luke chapter one or you can listen to me read to you. But in Luke chapter one he gives us the heading for the whole of the two volume work. He is writing to this man called Theophilus which as somebody said is the awfulest name you can come up with, but there you go.

Theophilus had to live with that awful name and he gets two books written to him and they are about Jesus. Listen to what it says in Luke chapter one.

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us...”<sup>2</sup>

I want you to notice that the tense of that, that the language that Luke uses there what he is writing about is about things that have been accomplished. That phrase applies to all that he is writing through Luke and Acts, to the one work that we want to call Luke Acts, ok? Things that have been accomplished among us...

...just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.<sup>3</sup>

Now here is Luke, then, giving us his stated purpose for his whole book. It is carefully researched. He has looked into the people involved. He has put it down on paper. And he has done so so that his reader, Theophilus, it doesn't much really matter whether

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:2-4.

Theophilus is an individual or a body of people or a group of people that he represents. I don't think that matters so much to us although the phrase "most excellent" it is often used in a formal sense of something dedicated to an individual, so it may well be an individual. But in that sense that is irrelevant, but this individual or group of people are people who need certainty, certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

And that is Luke's goal.

I would ask the question. I wonder if Luke meets that goal as he sets out to do that.

There is a famous story of professor W M Ramsey who was a scholar and an archeologist and a skeptic about Christianity and he set out to prove his own doubts by investigating the New Testament and in particular by investigating what Luke writes in his gospel and in the book of Acts. And what William Ramsey discovered as he set out to do that was this, that as he looked into Luke's description of tongues and titles of officials that he used and references to customs in the ruins of the landscapes and in the extant documents that he discovered in the Middle East, he discovered that all of the stuff that he was finding were confirming the claims that Luke in Acts is making and it was through that very investigation that this man this great professor was converted to Christianity.

So if Luke could reach one man and give him certainty about the things he had been taught, well, it works out in the life of William Ramsey.

Well, as we come to look at this we discover that the focus is on Jesus. It is all about Jesus in part one, the acts of Jesus, part two, the acts of Jesus. Luke is a christocentric theologian. And as a historian his declared aim is to write a history of all that Jesus began to do and teach in Luke and continued to do and teach in Acts.

Now let me point out some parallels between these two books. For example if you look at the structure of the books you discover that in Luke the movement is all of Christ's going towards Jerusalem. When you look at Acts you discover that it is almost a mirror opposite. It is a movement from Jerusalem increasingly out towards the world. You find, for example, that there are parallels between the two books. There are the prophetic voices of Anna and Simeon in Luke as they describe Jesus' birth and so on. And there is Peter's reference to the prophetic fulfillment of Joel at the birth of the Church in Acts chapter two. Both the gospel and the book of Acts begin with a period of waiting, prayer, anticipation. You find figures in Luke, for example, who are waiting for the consolation of Israel. You find the disciples in the beginning of Acts and they are waiting for the promise of the Spirit to be fulfilled.

In the gospel you find the coming of the Spirit at the baptism of Jesus. In Acts you find the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. And you find, as you look at both books together, you find Jesus is active in remaking Israel, Luke chapter six, in remaking the Exodus in Luke chapter nine, in remaking the Passover in Luke 22 and remaking the kingdom in Acts one, in remaking Sinai in chapter two, remaking the covenant blessing in Acts five,

remaking the covenantal curse in Acts five and remaking the government of the people in Acts six.

Jesus is remaking things. He is making all things new. It is all about the restoration of all things, the restoration of the people of God from their exile and their being brought into liberty.

So it is a book about the acts of Jesus.

It is a book about the acts of Jesus in fulfillment of Scripture. That is the second thing. The first part of the book of Acts is flooded with Old Testament references that are alert us to the fact that there are unique and unrepeatable things happening there that in many ways are a foil to things that we have read in Luke's gospel.

In Luke's gospel we find a transition taking place between the story of Israel on the one hand and the story of Jesus on the other. There are godly characters we find proclaiming the realization of Israel's hopes through the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah. There are angelic revelations combined with prophetic declarations that explain the significance of the great events that follow.

Jesus' sermon in Acts four is defining of the whole book, Luke Acts that is. It proclaims the fulfillment of prophecy. He says he is the servant of the Lord. He cites Isaiah chapter 61.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news.”<sup>4</sup>

And the opposition that Jesus receives, the suffering that he undergoes is all in fulfillment of Scripture.

“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the suffering servant of the Lord. And when you go to Acts you find that the apostle Paul uses similar language. He draws from the same sermon songs to describe his own sufferings and his own ministry and he says in some sense Paul as an apostle of the Lord Jesus like the other apostles is continuing some of that suffering of Jesus, the suffering servant. Jesus is still active. He is active in Acts for the ministry of the apostles, their ministry, their suffering is Jesus' suffering. When Paul is persecuted, Saul, rather, is persecuting the Christians Jesus says to Saul, “Why are you persecuting me?”<sup>6</sup> because to persecute Jesus' people is to persecute Jesus. Jesus is alive and well and active in the New Testament period through his apostles, through his Church at that point.

You see that as you see the connections that are made.

---

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:18.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:22.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14.

I think one of the best ways of seeing the connection between the two books is at the end of Luke's gospel which is a kind of lead in to the second volume where the Lord Jesus talks to his disciples and he says to them:

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them...<sup>7</sup>

Here is his summary of the Scripture.

He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead...”<sup>8</sup>

That is what the first volume is about, Luke, “that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”<sup>9</sup>

There is Luke at the end of his gospel setting us up for what is going on in the book of Acts. What is it about? It is about how Jesus, the reigning and ascended Lord completes his work by getting his message, his kingdom out to the nations. And it is no surprise to discover that Luke ends, as we will see in a moment, he ends with Paul in Rome. The gospel has succeeded. All the nations of the world now captured in the very idea of Rome using Rome as a metaphor for all the nations of the world. The gospel has gone out into all the world. It is claiming all the world. Here is King Jesus claiming all the world for himself from his throne starting with his ascension at the beginning of the book and ending in Rome at the end.

The book of Acts is about the acts of Jesus in fulfillment of Scripture through—this is a third point—through the ministry of the apostles.

You just see the Holy Spirit's footprints right throughout this book working through these key men who are eye and ear witnesses of all that Jesus has said and done. There they are now and they are spilled out into the world.

Now here is an interesting thing and it always surprised me. When I was growing up and I was a little boy and I first discovered that Luke and Acts were... belonged to the same man and had been written by the same man, I used to wonder why it was that in the providence of God in the compilation of the Scriptures as we now have them in the canonical context as we—the phrase is used—the way the canon has been formed, why is it that this has been separated from the gospel? Why is Acts and Luke not together? That

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:44-46.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 24:46.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 24:46-47.

would be more straightforward, more sensible. I wonder why it is that the Holy Spirit has superintended the work in such a way that John gets in the way.

Now I don't think there is any accident here, because it is in John that we have the clearest teaching, I think, in the New Testament concerning the role and the ministry of the apostles. What is their role and ministry? Well, Jesus says it is absolutely vital to the ongoing, his ongoing mission. He is going to come to them. He is going to be with them. He is going to make his home with them. He has revealed to them his work. He has given to them the glory that the Father gave him. He has given them the words the Father has given him to say. He will remind them. He will give them the Spirit of God who will remind them of all that Jesus said. He will give them the Spirit of God who will lead them into all the truth. He will give them the Spirit who will remind them or teach them things that are to come. And through their witness you and I come to believe. Our place is, we come to believe by believing the witness of the apostles. That is where we fit in the scheme of things.

So having understood that from John's gospel, we are then able to return to Luke's book and discover as we read the book of Acts this is what is happening. Here are the apostles. Signs and wonders are being done by the apostles. The Church is growing by the apostles. Paul or Luke, rather. I always say Paul because Paul always comes to my mind whether I am preaching on Isaiah or anything. So you will just have to get used to that.

But Luke says... Luke focuses in on the ministry of Peter and Paul. He kind of, you know, he mentions all the others, but he focuses on their ministry. They become the center of his thinking as he begins to focus in here. And there are parallels. There are parallels between Jesus and Peter and Paul. Peter and Paul do miracles like the Jesus miracles. And in the life of Paul, for example, I mentioned that there are some of Jesus' sufferings reproduced. Paul is first accepted and then he is rejected by the people. He visits the temple. He is opposed by the Sadducees. He is seized by the mob. He is struck by the high priest's officials. He experiences four trials as Jesus did. He goes through in similar kind of experiences to the Lord Jesus.

Now he isn't the Lord Jesus. He isn't the Savior, but he is an apostle. He is an apostolic delegate. He has been sent by Jesus. He has all of the authority of the Lord behind him. And in his experience, what we are led to see is the risen Lord Jesus from this throne is pushing now the message of the gospel out to the world.

Remember I said that this is a record. These two books together are a record of what has been accomplished, what has been accomplished among us. It is what Jesus has done. This is not a case of Luke writing a history and then stopping before the end. This is the way he wanted us to see it. This is it. This is his story. This is what he has to say. He is teaching the Church. This is what God in Christ has accomplished. Christ died and rose. Christ's kingdom is stretching from Jerusalem, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Now let me spill me... I had no idea when I started, so I don't know when I am finishing. Let me explain how this ministry of the apostles moves. It moves geographically. The



flow of Church growth goes from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria to the Gentile world and then to Rome. It goes numerically. In fact, the numerical growth becomes a kind of a punctuation point in the story. Those who received the Word were baptized and they were added 3000 souls. There were added to their number day by day those who were being saved. The Word of God continued to increase. The number of disciples multiplied greatly. The Church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up and multiplied. The Word of God increased and multiplied. The churches were strengthened and they increased their numbers daily. The Word of God continued to increase and prevail mightily.

These are the punctuation points of the story. We are meant to read them and see. Do you see what Jesus has accomplished? Do you see what he has done? The rejected carpenter of Nazareth, the crucified Messiah, this one who has been dead, buried has been raised from the dead and do you see how it is that the Lord is giving to his Son the nations for his inheritance? He is doing this. What the Lord said he is doing it. And Rome and Samaria and Jerusalem are the foretaste of a great harvest. The whole world is going to be impacted by what the Messiah has done.

And I think you can see this happening as the theologians as they begin to reflect on what is going on here. There are key markers that tell a theological story, a story about God. Jerusalem is where it all starts, the city of David. That is why Peter starts there. It starts by quoting David in his sermon on the day of Pentecost because there is this relationship between David and Jesus. And he is announcing the good news that the King has come, great David's greater son is on the throne. The King has come.

And when it says that the gospel is to go from Jerusalem it is reminding us the king has arrived in his holy city. And the gospel is to go to Judea and Samaria.

Do you know the background to that? You know that this is where the nation had split apart after the death of King Solomon, ripped apart by Rehoboam, never reconciled, never again one nation, frequently at war, driven into separate exiles. These two rivals had been promised in the prophet Isaiah and in other prophets. These two rivals had been promised that they would be reconciled. They would be brought back together again under God's new king. Jesus is proclaimed to Judea and Samaria and they are reconciled as people from Judea and Samaria are reconciled in Christ Jesus.

Here we have a visual aid of the future restoration of all things. Isaiah had said the Messiah's servant would reunite Israel and reach out to the nations.

The second Psalm had promised that God's Son and the world's true king would inherit the nations. The very last phrase that Jesus uses here about the ends of the earth is a quotation from Psalm 98.

“ Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 98:1.

“All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.”<sup>11</sup>

Luke is saying, “Do you see what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ? That is why I am telling you this story. Do you see what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ? The King has come.”

And there is another indication of this. If you look at the book ends of Acts. The book ends of Acts are references to the kingdom of God. It is not widely used in the book, but it is used, noticeably at the beginning and at the end. In the end of Acts, for example, in chapter 28 in verse 23 we find that the Jews “appointed a day for him, they came to him [Paul] at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.”<sup>12</sup> The kingdom of God.

And the very end of Acts ends like this.

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.<sup>13</sup>

And here is one thing that strikes you, you see. When you read the book of Acts the two main human characters of the book, Peter and Paul, kind of fizzle out. Peter disappears after making a crucial speech in Acts chapter 15. Paul kind of fizzles out and at the end of the story we are left with what? We are left with the kingdom of God.

It is mentioned at the beginning where the disciples are asking Jesus, “Is it now that you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” And they are thinking in, you know, political terms. They are thinking in military terms. They are thinking in their nationalistic way. And they are told... I am not going to go through all this again, but, I mean, you can imagine the Lord... well, I... maybe the Lord doesn't frustrated but that... he probably doesn't.

But you can imagine if it was you or me we would get frustrated. I thought you got the point by now. Just wait till the Spirit comes then you will get the point. And they got the point. At significant periods in the book of Acts we have reference to the kingdom, when the gospel is preached to Samaria.

It was the good news of the kingdom of God that is preached. When it is preached at Ephesus in the synagogue and outside Paul speaks, he argues persuasively about the kingdom of God. And when he is talking about the sufferings of a believer or a church must go through he talks about the many hardships that we go through to enter the kingdom of God. It was the kingdom of God that was preached to Jews, Samaritans and

---

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 98:3.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 28:23.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 28:30-31.

Gentiles, preached at the beginning and the end of Luke's story, found in the context of evangelism and church leadership. The kingdom of God is about believing in, submitting to the risen Messiah Jesus as our Savior and Judge.

What is Luke writing about? He is writing about what Jesus has accomplished. And we have to see Luke Acts together. This is what Jesus said and did in person and by the apostles. It is not a handbook. It is a history book. It is look what Jesus accomplished. He fulfilled Scripture. He is the exalted King. He reigns from his throne. Look at the record of this phenomenon that still captures the attention of an academic in Oxford University to this day. Consider this phenomenon and understand this is part of the legacy of grace to us.

So where are we in the story? Are we Acts 29? Are we outside of the story? I think we are inside the story. We are caught up into the story. We are part of this great enterprise of getting the gospel out to the ends of the earth so that King Jesus is seen, all his splendor by every nation under heaven and confessed by every tongue and language under heaven to the glory of his name. That is our great, that is our great calling and we will get beyond lecturing and we will find our way to preaching one of these days.

Let's pray.

*Father, we thank you that in your great mercy you have called us to this great task to which you have given to your Church in the world. We have the gospel, the apostolic gospel out. Thank you for those men who were the forerunners, the men to whom you gave your Word and who have given their Word to us. We have it here in our New Testament, an apostolic Word that is sure. Help us to rearticulate it, to respeak it for our day and generation knowing that the same Spirit that gave the Word to them, works with us to apply it to hearts and lives today. We pray in Jesus' strong name.*