

Chapter 28 – New Beginnings

Acts 1:1-11 – Pages 323 – top of 324 – Jesus ascends to heaven

The title that the early church (not the author) gave to the document we will be looking at today and next week is “The Acts (or Deeds) of the Apostles.” The word “apostle” in Greek means an emissary, literally, “one who is sent” out with an assignment by one in authority over the “sent one.” With the exception of one reference to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:4), the author of Acts limits the word “apostle” to “the Twelve,” including Matthias, whom God chooses in Acts 1 to replace the dead Judas.

Again, as in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, the author begins with a formal literary preface often used in the ancient world. Theophilus means “Lover of God” or perhaps “Loved by God” or “Friend of God.” This person is otherwise unknown in the New Testament but may have been a wealthy person who commissioned the writing of Luke and Acts. Before the printing press, writers, like musical composers, needed sponsors in order to make a living, since they could not make much money by selling books. On the other hand, some think that Theophilus was not an individual at all and that the author was addressing his work to all those who love God.

When reading Acts, it is helpful to look back at the Gospel of Luke to see the ways in which the author has prepared the audience for future developments. The first thing that the author reports Jesus saying in Acts picks up on the last thing Jesus says in Luke: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (24:49, NRSV). Jesus’s reference to baptism with the Holy Spirit is a quote from the preaching of John the Baptist in Luke 3:17. We have seen how some of the disciples of Jesus are quite slow to understand what his mission is all about. For example, in Luke 9:51-56, James and John, whom Jesus nicknamed “Thunder’s Boys,” want to “call down fire from heaven” on a Samaritan village because the Samaritans refuse them hospitality. So now, Jesus tells the disciples, in effect, “Don’t do anything; don’t go anywhere; don’t say anything, until the Holy Spirit takes control of your lives.” He knows what they will do on their own!

Jesus’s caution is justified by the disciples’ question, “OK, so NOW will you restore the Kingdom to Israel? Are you FINALLY going to smash those nasty Romans?” Jesus responds, “What God is going to do and when

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is none of your business. What you are to do is be witnesses (the Greek word is “martyrs”). THAT’s what the power of the Holy Spirit will do for you.” The list of places (Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth) serves as an outline of Acts.

What church tradition has come to call “The Ascension” is an odd scene. The text in Acts suggests that Jesus is seen levitating higher and higher until he gets above the clouds. The other account of the risen Jesus’s departure from earthly reality is in Luke 24:51, which is less explicit: “While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” And some manuscripts of Luke say only that “he withdrew from them.” There are two points being made by the ascension stories: (1) for forty days after his resurrection, Jesus’s appearances to his followers were fairly regular, but after that his appearances (and there are more appearances in Acts) were quite infrequent (2) Jesus’s permanent location, prior to his return at the end of history, is in the presence of God (“at the right hand of God” Acts 2:33, page 325). The transition is not narrated anywhere else in the New Testament, but it is assumed. How literally one wants to imagine “the ascension” is up to the individual believer.

Has a literal ascension above the clouds been problematic for you as a believer? Or is it a problem to think that a person can be a Christian and not imagine Jesus’s transition from the physical world to the presence of God as a literal event?

Acts 2:1-24, 32-33, 36-47 – Pages 325 – second paragraph on 326 – Pentecost

Pentecost was one of the pilgrimage festivals prescribed in the Torah. It celebrated the end of the spring wheat harvest, fifty days after Passover. Later, like the other Old Testament celebrations, it gained a historical meaning; it was associated with the giving of the Torah to Moses. This was the festival that, according to Acts 2, became the birthday of the church.

The 120 disciples gathered in prayer were filled with the Holy Spirit just as Jesus had been at his baptism in Luke 3. In keeping with the prediction of John and Jesus, the Spirit is represented by fire. Remember that in the Exodus story the presence and power of God were visible as cloud and fire. Those who are filled with the Holy Spirit carry the presence and power of Christ into the world ever since this first-century Pentecost.

The “other tongues” here are not like the “tongues” that Paul talks about as a spiritual gift. In Paul’s writings the phenomenon is prayer, which has to be interpreted for other worshipers to know what is being prayed. Here, the phenomenon is a miracle of communication with the result that all the different language groups living in Jerusalem hear and understand the disciples’ testimony about Jesus. Some, however, hear only the babbling of drunks. In other words, even a big public miracle like the one portrayed here wouldn’t convince everybody.

This scene is followed by a long sermon by Peter, just as, in Luke, Jesus’s baptism is followed by a sermon in the Nazareth synagogue. Peter begins with the claim that he and the others don’t get drunk that early in the morning. Quoting from the prophet Joel, Peter acknowledges the new situation in which both men and women are equally Spirit-empowered. He proclaims Jesus crucified and risen as “both Lord and Messiah” and the source of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When the (apparently exclusively Jewish) crowd hears that they failed to recognize the Messiah, they ask, “What shall we do?” Peter’s answer is that they need to change their life-direction (“repent”), be immersed (presumably in water) in the name of Jesus Messiah.

What are the two results that Peter says will follow from this repentance? In the paragraph on page 326, that begins “They devoted themselves. . .” what are the various components of church life that are summarized?

Acts 3:1-20; 4:1-21, 32-35 – Pages 326-middle of 328

In the healing of the man who was unable to walk, we see the beginning of a pattern in Acts: the apostles are able to perform miracles that are parallel to the miracles done by Jesus in Luke. Jesus healed a man unable to walk; Peter and John do the same. This is also true of other behaviors. Jesus stood up to the religious authorities; the apostles do the same.

Acts 5:12-42 – middle of page 328 – top of 330.

Just as Jesus walked right through a crowd that was determined to kill him in Luke 4:30, so his followers are miraculously delivered from prison.

Look at the paragraph on page 329 about the advice of Gamaliel, which saves the lives of the apostles. Gamaliel is talking about how they should

handle the words and behaviors of Jews who are radically different from their own group of Pharisees. How might we apply this attitude to Christian groups whose message and behavior we find strange and even dangerous? What about the need to protect the reputation of the church from these people who might make “our kind of Christians” look bad?

Acts 6:8 – 7:1; 7:51 – 8:8 – middle of 330 – bottom of 331 – Stephen’s witness and martyrdom

Stephen was not one of the original apostles, but one of the church leaders chosen to do direct ministry so that the apostles, who had caused a church controversy by bungling the finances, could stick with their gifts of teaching.

As a result of his witness, he is brought before the religious officials and lynched, or rather, executed by stoning. Like Jesus as Luke portrays him, Stephen forgives his executioners and surrenders his life to God.

See bottom of 312 to top of 313 and Luke 23:46 (not in THE STORY).

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, or “Hellenist.” He did not fall under the protection of Gamaliel’s policy protecting the apostles, since they were not forced out of Jerusalem in the persecution of believers that followed Stephen’s death.

What is the immediate cause of the expansion of the preaching of the Gospel into Samaria? What does this suggest to you about the way God works sometimes?

Acts 9:1 – 31, bottom of 331 – top of 333 – Saul encounters the risen Christ.

In the middle of 331 Saul is placed at the execution of Stephen and is explicitly said to approve of his being killed. He is also portrayed as actively pursuing the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. Now he seeks permission to go all the way to Damascus to arrest more Jesus-followers. This would have taken maybe 5-7 days on foot; Acts does not mention a horse, despite the paintings by Michelangelo and Caravaggio.

The other accounts of this event in Acts are in Acts 22 and Acts 26. There are differences among the accounts but we won’t be distracted by those at this point.

What details do you notice about the story on pages 331-332? Ananias is an interesting part of the story. We often concentrate on the part about Saul’s experience on the road. What part does Ananias play

that is essential to the full account? Barnabas was introduced by the author of Acts in chapter 4 in a section not in THE STORY. What is his role in Paul's story here?

Acts 10:1-29 – pages 333 – 334 – Cornelius and Peter

The sermon for today is titled “The Shattered Assumption,” and it is the first in a sermon series on assumptions and how they affected the church in Acts.

What is Peter's assumption about the animals that he sees in his vision? Where did Peter get this idea? How would you spell out more fully the second command of the voice from heaven: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean”?

As the story goes on, what do we see about how Peter finally interprets the vision?

Discuss in your group: Do you think that God may still be making new revelations to God's people that cancel or reinterpret clear revelations in Scripture? How would we be able to tell if God were doing that? What if Peter had been wrong and God meant only that it was OK to eat “unclean” food, not that it was OK for Gentiles to be included in the people of God?

Acts 12:1-24 – pages 334-336 – Herod and Peter

Again, just as Jesus was threatened by Herod Antipas, so now Peter is imprisoned by a Herod. But this one is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great.¹ Notice that Agrippa dies a horrible death, not for persecuting Christians, but for allowing himself to be acclaimed a deity. The story of Peter's release is one of the funniest stories in Acts.

How much confidence do the Christians have that God is going to answer their prayers and deliver Peter? When Peter shows up at the door, what does the maid do, let him in? What is the reaction of the Christians to Rhoda's report that Peter is at the door?

¹ If you are really feeling brave, google “Herodian Dynasty Family Tree.”

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Reflections on Christian maturity

Sometimes the interpretation of Scripture can be a point of controversy among Christians, especially when some believers become convinced that certain Scriptural prohibitions were for specific times and cultures in the past and need to be understood differently in our present context. Of course, these disagreements are not merely about the interpretation of a text. When such debates become heated, it is because people's identities are threatened---there is something in the proposed interpretation that makes them fearful. In the middle of such discussions, it is often helpful to use sentences that begin with "I." "I'm afraid of the implications of that interpretation." "When you make that claim, I feel angry." "I think the passage should be interpreted as follows, for these reasons" Not, for example, "You are just twisting the Scripture to suit your own prejudices," or "You don't believe the Bible."

What are your views about how to have an appropriate discussion of a controversial issue within the church?