

Acts 1

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 30 July 2009 08:45

The Acts of the Apostles follows on from the earthly life of Christ. For a very short while, almost no time at all, the followers of Christ had only their memories and Jesus' teachings to rely on. We are talking about a few days. But, Jesus promised He would send Another to take His place. The Holy Ghost, or Holy Spirit, would live in the hearts of all who belonged to Christ. As a man, Jesus could only be in one place at a time, but the Holy Ghost could live in every saved person's being at the same time. And it is this same Holy Ghost Who lives in us today.

The title of this book ('Praxeis Apostolon' – still used by Roman Catholics) was first coined by Irenaeus at the end of the second century. He was bishop of Lugdunum (Lyons) in Gaul, a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, who claimed to have been taught by John the Evangelist. There is argument about who actually wrote the Book, though the AV Bible usually states that it was Luke.

Some insist the Book should be titled the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit', or the 'Acts of Jesus'. In a sense both 'Acts of the Holy Spirit' and 'Acts of the Apostles' can be counted as one, because both are joint actors in the accounts given.

The pressurised time of Jesus on earth is now over, and it is time for His Church to take root and flower. Because the Holy Spirit can be everywhere at the same time, His presence is with every Christian who witnesses and preaches. So, the Gospel can be swiftly spread, which is why this Book relates to what has come to be called 'missionary' activity. This is the account of how that Gospel reached the world, and what happened in early Church history.

The Book begins its narrative in 33 AD, and finishes close to the last days of the old Jewish nation; Jerusalem and Palestine would be a battleground where Rome wins, and the Jews would be dispersed (the 'diaspora'). But, for now, the first followers of Jesus had to spread the Gospel and establish the earliest churches in many places around the Mediterranean. After that, the Gospel went everywhere. Britain appears to have heard the Good News within the first century, but the formal history begins when Augustine was sent there by the then pope in 596 AD, to be Bishop of England.

So, from 33 AD to 70 AD there was a great movement of teachers, apostles and preachers, as the Holy Spirit prompted each one to tell the world, with power, what Christ had done. The first heresies were already existant, and many more would arise, as Satan attempted to pervert the

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truth of God.

Verses 1 - 5

1.

The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,

2.

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:

3.

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:

4.

And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.

5.

For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.

The 'former treatise', is usually taken to mean the Gospel of Luke. This is an educated guess rather than a fixed answer, though it is reasonable to say it. For the purposes of these studies we will assume Luke was the author of the Book of Acts. He was writing to a man named Theophilus ('friend of God'), who we know nothing about. There are speculations but no final answer as to his identity... not that it matters much.

Luke refers to his 'former treatise' which relates what Jesus did, from the time He was baptized by John to the time He arose and ascended into heaven. He speaks of Jesus giving the

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Apostles 'commandments' to obey and follow, and confirms that Jesus showed himself after his 'passion' by many "infallible proofs". This is an assurance that what happened was taken as fact at the time. Jesus was seen on the earth for forty days after His resurrection, during which time He taught the Apostles and other disciples further. Others saw Him, too.

Many have tried to diminish the post-resurrection days by making them out to be a delusion or hallucination! Today, men who live 2000 years after the events, try the same inane things, as if they know better than eye-witnesses at the time! There is no more reason to reject the resurrection and ascension as historical events, than there is to reject that the events of the Second World War are real! Or, any other historical events throughout the ages.

As commentators note, there are thousands of records to prove the historicity of Christ, as opposed to a mere handful or even one, in support of other historical events that people accept without question. The reason for this constant denying of God's work as historical fact, is that people are sinners who hate holiness and God, and Satan is very good at his work of blocking the presentation of truth to the people. By any normal historical rules, the Bible has more proper resources in its support than almost any other book or event in history.

Jesus taught and was seen for forty days, so this was more than enough time for the disciples and others to verify that it was indeed the Master, and not an imposter. They recognized Him by His appearance, His manner, His speech, His teaching, His authority, His power! This was not some look-alike acting a part! It was Jesus Christ Himself, raised from the dead and very much alive! Significantly, no Pharisee or other enemy of Christ, is on record as saying He was not there amongst them.

Jesus commands the disciples not to leave Jerusalem once they got there. This was because they had to wait for the "promise of the Father" (the coming of the Holy Ghost), which He had already told them about. To emphasise what this meant, Luke says that John the Baptist "baptized with water", but that the disciples would be "baptized with the Holy Ghost" within a few days. The physical would give way to the spiritual, the old to the new. The expectation of the disciples must have been extremely high, with a palpable excitement. They would receive something from the Father, but did not yet know what it really meant. Yes, they could talk about the Person of the Holy Ghost, but did not really know what He would do with them or through them.

Note that we have an indication that water baptism is by full immersion and not by sprinkling...

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the Holy Spirit does not enter us in part but in whole. Therefore, the water baptism of John was also full.

Verses 6 - 8

1.

When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

2.

And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

3.

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

After His resurrection, Jesus taught His disciples many things, and they were able to ask Him questions. They asked if Jesus was going to restore national sovereignty to Israel at that time. That is, was He going to rid Israel of Roman occupation? They were still unclear about Jesus' mission!

His answer was intriguing because He did not dismiss the question, but sidelined it by giving an answer to a different, unasked question. He told them their question was inappropriate because they should not know about such events, or the times they should occur. Only the Father knew those details. Though He did not answer the question directly, His answer intimated that Israel would one day be restored as a nation with its own sovereignty. This was later confirmed by Paul in Romans.

Jesus then went on to the more important matter of personal power (verse 8). "ye shall receive power". It is important to give the correct interpretation of the phrase "ye shall receive", *lambanō*, because charismatics have given it a wrong meaning. It does NOT mean we can take it of our

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own volition, or gain it ourselves, though such meaning is generally possible as one of many meanings for the phrase. The phrase can be applied to anything received or given, not just spiritual power. So, how do we know which meaning applies in this text?

As I always say, we begin with truths we are sure of; those with a definite and fixed meaning, and relate everything else to them. In this case, we know predestination is the foundation of everything we are and have. We also know we are given salvation and gifts by grace and mercy, and not because we demand or request them, or because they are 'offered'. Spiritual power is no different, and we must interpret the phrase "ye shall receive" in that light. The most accurate definition, found in the Greek, is that of receiving a person, Who has access to you; to receive. We must resist the temptation to define the phrase as taking something for oneself or to lay hold of, because these are actions instigated by the person and not by God.

Therefore, the 'power', dynamis, is received passively, without any action on the part of the one receiving it, whether by asking or demanding. We cannot claim that prayer gains this power, for true prayer is itself from God and is a returning to Him what He says to our souls. It is not prompted by our own desires.

One attribute of 'power' is that it resides in one by virtue of its own nature. Given the above facts, the power does *not* reside in our human nature, which is tainted with sin, but in the nature of the Holy Spirit Who resides in us. It is inherent in Him, not us. 'Power' can also mean the ability to perform miracles. Many reformed Christians refuse to accept this meaning and prefer to say the word refers to moral power and a holy state of soul. It does indeed mean that – but it also means the ability to perform miracles! It cannot just be ignored! Not everyone will perform miracles; that is up to God. In everyday language, the word incorporates both, the greater portion being moral excellence, simply because the condition of the soul is permanent and continues second by second, but miracles are occasional.

The presence of power includes the idea of strength. It is evident in the way a man conducts his life and the way he stands before others, who notice such strength, which exhibits in proper confidence (in God) and results in confidence in life, preaching, teaching, etc. It is also strength to stand against error and assault. It is the kind of strength that the unsaved and the saved can find attractive, especially if they have no real holiness to display in their own lives. They tend to follow such men, almost like sheep. The true man of God who has this power should dissuade them from simply following, because it prevents the need to become holy oneself. He must teach them how to stand on their own spiritual feet, for the holiness and power of another cannot be used by someone else.

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Because of this power, such men tend to be teachers, and so they gain disciples. This does not mean they are substitutes for Christ, but that others recognize in them the same power as is in Christ, and hear the same spiritual truths in their words. So, they 'sit at the feet' of the genuine teacher until they are themselves in a position to live in their own strength given by God. Paul reflects on this in his letters, saying that Christians may follow him only insofar as he teaches the truth of God.

This divine power would be given to the disciples, but not yet. They had to wait for it... yet another indication that the power is *given* and not just taken by human choice. They would receive the gift of power "after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you". To "come upon", *eperchomai*, means to arrive in the future, with the idea of overwhelming, of the Holy Spirit descending and operating in someone. Even an ordinary reading of the phrase suggests that the persons receiving the power are overcome by God and are not choosing what is to happen.

Note that this 'descending' of the Holy Spirit happens only once in the lifetime of individual Christians. There is no 'topping up' process, and so prayers that call on the Holy Spirit to 'come down' on individuals or groups are false. He is either in a Christian, or He is not, and no unsaved person can call upon Him anyway. Or, rather, they can call, but they will not get an answer.

In meetings of Christians it is unholy to beg God to give what He has already given. When large congregations seek this 'extra' intervention, they act without knowledge of Who God is and how He operates. They do not understand that the Holy Spirit is already within, so how can He possibly 'come down' again?

As for seeking a 'second blessing', this is also false, for a man automatically receives the Holy Spirit when he is saved! What many wrongly call a second blessing is merely the man giving in to God totally instead of trying to act in his own strength. When he hands over his life fully, the Holy Spirit can then live through him. It is this sudden realization of what he already has, that floods the soul.

It is NOT a new or unknown experience, because the Holy Spirit is *already* within the hapless person! It is as if the man has kept God in a box. Then, by handing over his life to God fully, he

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opens the box and the Holy Spirit can operate. The Holy Spirit will not operate in a life that is not given over to Him, because He does not force Himself on anyone.

Very often the person thus freed from his own self will display a flurry of spiritual activities, such as zeal and desire. If he does not follow it up with genuine teaching he will fall back again into despair, thinking God has left him. But this cannot happen, because God promises to be with us always. Bad teaching can take us farther from God, and it is this that is felt by the man who relies on experiences rather than on solid teaching and holiness.

Once they received the Holy Spirit the disciples would be able to witness successfully. If they tried without God within they would fail (as is implied by Jesus' words). They would firstly preach the Gospel in Jerusalem, which, at that time, contained possibly over a million visiting Jews, there for the Passover, and then they would move out to all of Judaea, Samaria, and to the whole earth. This was prophetic, because the disciples with Him could not reach everywhere themselves, so the task fell on all disciples who were to be born in the future.

Verses 9 - 12

1.

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

2.

And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

3.

Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

4.

Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey.

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When Jesus finished speaking, another incredible thing happened. He was taken up into a cloud and disappeared from view! This was actual, and He ascended bodily. What kind of body? It was new, yet looked like it was before. He could move easily in space and time and yet looked the same, which gives us a clue as to our own future bodies. The term 'raised up' implies He was taken up by someone or something else. That is, His own power as God.

As the disciples gazed up at this wonder, they were spoken to by "two men (who) stood by them in white apparel". It is obvious from what they said that they were angels. They asked the disciples why they stood gazing up, when Jesus would return again in the same way – in the skies, a reference to His Second Coming in power, might and glory.

Very often, as Christians, we tend to look at the past and at what Jesus did in His days on earth. We preach what He did and said. But we fail to take it dynamically onwards into the future and into our own lives, and make excuses as to why we do not see the miraculous and the power of God in our own day and own lives.

If you listen carefully to radio 'God slots' (how I hate that term!) or look at most paper tracts, you will find references to bygone ages and saints of the past, usually several hundreds of years previously. Preachers hearken back to those who went before us. The reason is simple: they dare not assume God works in them today, and, they do not display the power of God in their own lives, despite their many allusions to holiness and power! What they are portraying is a people without power, without strength, without actual belief in what they are saying, though they proclaim it with much zeal... a zeal that hides their disappointments and lack of real godliness and real power of the Spirit.

The disciples went back to Jerusalem to Olivet, which was a "Sabbath day's journey". It is where Jesus went to pray - mount of Olives - just before He was taken captive. Only travel of necessity was allowed, for Jews were supposed to remain at home on the seventh day. The wearing of special clothes (suits, ties, 'best clothes') on a Sunday, today, is a Jewish tradition. Reference to a "Sabbath day's journey" was to the religious command not to travel more than 2000 cubits or about half a mile from the city on a Sabbath. This was the 'sabbath limit', or *tehum Shabbat*.

Verses 13 - 22

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1.

And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James.

2.

These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

3.

And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,)

4.

Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus.

5.

For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry.

6.

Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.

7.

And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood.

8.

For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell

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therein: and his bishoprick let another take.

9.

Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,

10.

Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

They went from Jerusalem to Olivet on Saturday, the weekly Sabbath, and entered a house, going to the upper room. The eleven apostles remained there, waiting, along with the 120.

The next verse (14) is usually misrepresented. The disciples “continued with one accord in prayer and supplication”. The women were there, together with Jesus’ mother, Mary, and all his brothers and sisters.

Though a popular interpretation, this is *not* simply a ‘prayer meeting’, nor is it proof that corporate prayers are to be a regular part of church life. It states that they prayed together with ‘one accord’. It means to be of one mind and one passion – something we rarely find in any church today. It is a unique word meaning to pray in unison... one theme, with words given by the Holy Spirit. No praying randomly or vaguely, but with only one prayer said in harmony about just one single thing.

After that, Peter stood up and said to all present, that Judas Iscariot’s actions were prophesied, and his fellowship with them terminated in wickedness and suicide; the field he killed himself in became barren. Peter then added “his bishoprick let another take”. That is, his office as apostle and elder of the church.

Peter called for a replacement for Iscariot, chosen from amongst those who followed Jesus from

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the beginning. Two names came up, Joseph and Matthias.

Verses 23 - 26

1.

And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.

2.

And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen,

3.

That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.

4.

And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

They prayed to God to show them who should be the twelfth apostle, and “the lot fell upon Matthias.” This ‘lot’ consisted of names written on bits of wood and placed into a jar. The jar was shaken and the name that fell out first was the one chosen. This should not be taken as a normal way of making decisions in churches, for it was an unique, one-off event.

Peter alluded to Iscariot as one who “fell” through sin, and “went to his own place”, which appears to speak of hell.

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