

# The Importance of Historical Testimony

Acts 1:1-3

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As you open your Bibles to the New Testament, you will find the order of the New Testament Books as it has been preserved for us in God's providence in the following general categories: (1) History (the Gospels and Acts); (2) Instruction (Romans-Jude); (3) Prophecy (Revelation). I submit that this order is not arbitrary at all, for it parallels the Protestant order of the canonical Books of the Old Testament: (1) History (Genesis-Esther); (2) Instruction (Job-Song of Solomon); (3) Prophecy (Isaiah-Malachi).

Now why would I draw your attention to this observation? As we begin our study in the Book of Acts (which is a historical book), notice the place that historical books of the Bible have in the order in which they appear in our Protestant canon of Scripture. In the Old Testament canon the historical books come first (Genesis-Esther), so likewise in the New Testament canon (Matthew-Acts). Note as well that the historical books in the English Bible comprise about 58% of the written space of the Protestant canon in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

Dear ones, this is not just interesting Bible trivia—it has significance in our understanding of the importance of history in God's revelation to us. Doctrine and prophecy are not taught in a vacuum, but are taught within a history of God's redemptive plan. Remove a man from history and he will not understand who he is, why he is here, where he is from, and where he is going. Remove a man from history and he will not even know who his parents are, who he is married to, who his children are (think of one with amnesia from an injury). Without history, we are simply like a computer who spouts out information in response to certain stimuli.

Dear Ones, God eternally exists outside of time and history (for before creation there was no time, there was no history—there was only God and eternity). However, God created time and history in order to glorify Himself by revealing His justice in righteously punishing sinners and by revealing His love in graciously redeeming sinners. The God who created history then condescended to step into history and to become flesh, which is the central focus of all history as God has ordained it. God did not create all things and then leave everything to natural causes to wind itself down like some great clock that ticks itself down eventually to nothing. There is a reason and purpose to history (just as there is for your life and mine) because God created all things and has ordained all things for His glory.

We are therefore to be historical Christians—not merely doctrinal Christians or prophetic Christians, but historical Christians who know who we are as Reformed and Covenanted Christians, where we have come from, why we are here, and where we are going (and to communicate this to our children as well, Psalm 78:6-8). We are to follow the inspired example given to us in the pages of Scripture (wherein the Lord has provided for us in the Books of the Bible and particularly in the Acts of the Apostles) in walking in the good old paths of our faithful forefathers who followed Christ and His truth and shunning the broad paths of those who followed the world and compromised the truth of Christ.

So as we begin our study in the Acts of the Apostles, let us recognize that this inspired history of Acts is firmly united and indissolubly connected to the inspired history of the Gospels. The Gospels give the true historical and inspired account of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ in accomplishing redemption for His elect (chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world,

Ephesians 1:4). The Book of Acts continues that true historical and inspired account of Jesus Christ (which is in a very real sense the Acts of Jesus Christ) as He reigns at the right of God in sending forth the Holy Spirit to apply His redemption and His power to His Church through the ministry of His apostles. The fact that the Acts of the Apostles is history does not mean however that there is not doctrine, worship, government, or discipline brought forth in history—as we shall see, it is the fact that doctrine, worship, government, and discipline are specifically applied in history and not simply taught in a letter that we see who was faithful among God’s people and who was rebellious.

The main points for the sermon this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) The Human Author of the Book of Acts (Acts 1:1a); (2) The Acts and Teaching of Jesus Christ Together Form the Gospel (Acts 1:1b-3).

## **I. The Human Author of the Book of Acts (Acts 1:1a).**

A. In these few opening words in the first chapter of Acts, there is sufficient information to identify the human instrument used by the Holy Spirit to pen the inspired and infallible words found in this historical book of Acts.

1. The human author had written a first volume history of all that Jesus did and taught (Acts 1:1). In other words, one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark Luke, or John) was written by him.

2. As we turn to the third Gospel, the Gospel of Luke, we find the same person referenced, Theophilus, as is referenced here in Acts 1:1 (Luke 1:1-4). The Gospel of Luke is then “the former treatise” that is indicated in Acts 1:1, and Luke is the human author of the Book of Acts. Where the Gospel of Luke leaves off, there the Acts of the Apostles continues in regard to waiting for the promise of the Father (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). Theophilus (which means lover of God) is mentioned nowhere

else in the New Testament, but was likely a notable person with some degree of social or political status (Acts 23:26).

3. Although Luke was not an apostle, he was a very close co-worker and fellow minister with the Apostle Paul. As Luke gives his inspired history of Christ's work through the Spirit in the lives of the apostles (and other Christians), the historical record in Acts 1:1 through Acts 16:9 is written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person (as Luke relates his account from those who were faithful witnesses). However, in Acts 16:10-17 (Acts 20:5-Acts 21:18; Acts 27:1-Acts 28:16) there is a noticeable change to the first person (as Luke includes himself in the accounts as an eyewitness).

4. The human author of the Gospel of Luke and of the Acts of the Apostles is also identified as being a physician (Colossians 4:14), which means he was an educated man and due to his medical background would also be very careful in his historical accounts of Christ and the apostles. Thus, the Book of Acts is the second volume in a two-volume history authored by Luke under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and was most likely written about 61 a.d.

B. Luke has divided the Book of Acts into basically three parts (Acts 1:8): (1) The mission to Jerusalem and Judea (the Jews) in Acts 1-7; (2) The mission to Samaria (the Samaritans) in Acts 8; (3) The mission to the Gentile nations (the uttermost parts of the earth) in Acts 9-28. Luke begins his history with just over 100 Christians in Jerusalem (in Acts 1) and thirty years later ends his history with thousands upon thousands of Christians (Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile) having been brought into the Visible Church as Paul and others take the gospel throughout the Roman Empire—the Book of Acts ends in Acts 28 with Paul imprisoned and awaiting his trial before the Emperor for having been faithful to Christ and His truth.

C. And the history of Christ's Church did not end with Paul in Acts

28, but it has continued for the past nearly 2,000 years. You are a part of that ongoing history of Christ's Church. You, dear ones, are included in that history in having received by faith alone the gospel of Jesus Christ. The struggles and temptations that you presently face in a hostile world and with the lusts of the flesh are the struggles and temptations that the apostles and Christians of the first century faced. The victories and blessings in Christ that you presently enjoy are the same as the apostles and Christians in the Book of Acts received and enjoyed through a victorious Christ in heaven who freely gave His Spirit to enrich and to empower those who trust Him, love Him, and obey Him. Thus, as we proceed on this historical journey through the Book of Acts, it is important that we see and understand it as fixed and certain history inspired by the Holy Spirit, but that we also apply what we read to our Christian lives each day as well. We are not an isolated island (small as we may be), but are connected historically and doctrinally to Christ and the apostles and to the faithful covenanted church of our forefathers that stood in the face of much opposition to the truth.

## **II. The Acts and Teaching of Jesus Christ Together Form the Gospel (Acts 1:1b-3).**

A. In the history of Jesus Christ which Luke recorded in his Gospel (and as we shall likewise see in his history of Christ working through the Apostles in the Book of Acts), there is emphasized by Luke the following two aspects of Christ's ministry: (1) What Christ did; and (2) What Christ taught (Acts 1:1)—the works of Christ and the doctrine of Christ. What we believe concerning the truth cannot be cut off from what we practice concerning the truth (James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:18-19). And what is true individually is also true corporately, which is why the faithful church not only confesses what is true in Scripture (and in scriptural Confessions and Creeds), but also walks in an uncompromising way in that truth (following

in the footsteps of the faithful before them). Before considering from our text what Christ taught, let us look at what Christ did, which Luke recorded in His Gospel.

1. What Christ did in the Gospel history (I'm putting these acts of Christ in chronological order).

a. What did Jesus Christ do? He suffered for all those who would embrace Him by faith alone as their only righteousness ("after his passion" Acts 1:3). The eternal Son of God did not become man and suffer the wrath of God for His own sin, but for the sin of man who justly deserved God's everlasting condemnation in the lake of fire. Jesus suffered God's unfathomable wrath that you who believe might never suffer the condemning wrath of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). That's what Jesus did (once and for all) for you who trust Him. Will you receive Him and then live in unrepentant sin? Will you make a profession of faith and then walk the broad path of the world or the worldly church that seeks to fit in and be comfortable in this world avoiding any offense for the sake of Christ or the gospel?

b. What did Jesus Christ do? He was gloriously raised from the dead ("to whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days" Acts 1:3). This is a major theme in the preaching of the apostles in the Book of Acts. Jesus is not in the grave—the grave could not hold Him. He is risen, and all the demons and Satan alike know He is risen. But they blind the unbelieving to this fact and they dim our faith in the power and reality of Christ's resurrection, so that we walk around as defeated beggars, when in reality we are by faith united with Christ in His resurrection over all His and our enemies that attack us. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus proves we are forgiven, declared righteous, adopted, sanctified, and glorified through faith in Christ. There is no hope for us without the resurrection of Christ, but our hope is unbounded in Christ because He lives (1 Corinthians

15:17-20). All of these blessings are secured for us by His death and testified to be true by His resurrection.

c. What did Jesus Christ do? He ascended in His resurrected body to heaven on high to be seated and to reign over all at the right hand of God (“until the day in which he was taken up”). We are told in Acts 2 and in Ephesians 4 that the sending forth of the Holy Spirit to apply Christ’s redemption in giving to His church the gifts of the Spirit to lead and edify it prove that Christ has been exalted to the right hand of God. First comes the exaltation of the King—Jesus Christ; then comes the outpouring of royal gifts to His people. All the power you need to overcome sin, to live a holy life, to walk in loving obedience to Christ, to build up and encourage one another is yours in the royal King; and all things have been subdued unto Him to the glory of God and to the benefit of the church (regardless of the false religion or political system).

2. What Jesus Christ taught in the Gospel history.

a. What did Jesus Christ teach? He taught His commandments (“after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen” Acts 1:2). There is a perversion of God’s grace that would lead us to believe that to strive by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to obey His commandments out of love for Him is legalism. But the Lord instructs us that it is those who break and teach others to break even the least commandment of God shall be least in the kingdom of God, but those who keep and teach others to keep even the least commandment shall be great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19). It was the beloved disciple, John, who states so clearly what it means to love God (1 John 5:3). And Jesus says to us all, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

b. What did Jesus Christ teach? He taught “the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Whereas the apostle had expected Christ to set up a political kingdom here upon the earth, to deliver Israel from the Romans, and to reign upon an earth throne from

Jerusalem, Jesus had to teach His apostles that His kingdom is essentially spiritual in nature (it is a heavenly kingdom that comes from above by God's grace in changing and transforming the wicked hearts of men, women, and children, so that they willingly submit to the rule and reign of Christ over their lives). Christ's kingdom is manifested in His church of which He is the Head (not popes or kings). This kingdom of Christ through the power of the gospel subdues enemies and makes them subjects, subdues kings and kingdoms of the earth by the almighty power of Christ (Revelation 11:15).

3. Dear ones, just as Christ in the gospel both acted and taught, so shall His ministers both act and teach as Christ did (not in absolute perfection, but in faithfulness). In speaking of false prophets and false teachers that would seek to mislead the sheep, Jesus simplified how to know the faithful from the unfaithful when He said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16)—the fruit of their godly life and practice, and the fruit of their sound doctrine and pure worship. Jesus warned His people not to follow ministers on the basis of great signs and wonders they claim to perform, for those will deceive and mislead (Matthew 7:22-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

In closing, I would like to apply the truth concerning history in Scripture to the importance of tracing Christ's path in act and teaching in history after the closing of the canon of Scripture.

Just as we are individually sanctified as Christians as we act and teach (as we practice and profess) what is faithful and true to Christ and His Word, so likewise churches are corporately sanctified as Christian churches as they act and teach (as they practice and profess what is faithful and true to Christ and His Word. That is what we pray for—reformation! That is what we look for in faithful Christian churches from the past—reformation! Those Christian churches that are both acting and teaching



what is faithful and true (rather than declining from what is faithful and true, or compromising what is faithful and true) are to be followed with all due diligence (1 Corinthians 11:1). And that which the faithful covenanted churches and forefathers have left behind for us to follow is their historical testimony in which they have written out in history their acts and have written out in history their teaching for us to follow (just as Luke was doing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts). Dear ones, this is not following the human tradition of the Roman Catholic Church who do not believe that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, but is rather following the faithful as they follow Christ and His Word. This is not popular today among Protestant Churches or even Reformed Churches, and yet it is biblical. Let us not be ashamed of being historical Christians, for biblical Christians are historical Christians. I close with the following quote taken by Abraham Van De Velde (*The Wonders of the Most High*, p.4, 1675—concerning the marvelous works of God in saving and preserving the United Provinces of the Netherlands):

History is the cord that connects us with our ancestors—the beacon that points to the rock where at one time we ran aground and suffered shipwreck—the lighthouse that illuminates the safe harbor to which we have directed all our hope. She is the teacher, who declares the Word of God, and applies the first principles of His ways. That is how it was understood by Asaph [i.e. Psalm 78—GLP], that is how the Fathers perceived it.

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