

## “Witnesses” (Acts 1)

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Brian Watson

*Acts 1:1-5 (ESV)*

<sup>1</sup> *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*

<sup>4</sup> *And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”<sup>1</sup>*

There’s a pop song that I used to listen to that said, “Sometimes you have to rewind to move forward.”<sup>2</sup> When people want to understand themselves better, it’s quite common for them to peer back into history. That’s why some people are interested in family trees and genealogies. That’s why some people get on Ancestry.com and figure out who their ancestors were. They think they’ll understand themselves better. That’s why some people are intrigued about human origins. If we know where we came from, we can know where we’re going. That’s why it’s common for people in therapy to talk about their childhood. If they can only figure out what happened when they were younger, they can figure out how to live better now.

We’ve been talking quite a bit about how to move forward as a church, and I think the best way to figure out how to do that is to look back. For the next six months or so, we’re going to be examining the book of Acts, which tells the story of what happened after Jesus rose from the grave and ascended into heaven. The book of Acts shows what happens for the next thirty or so years, as the message of Jesus spreads from Jerusalem all the way to the most important city of the day, Rome. The book of the Bible will show us how the message of Jesus was proclaimed in different settings. It will show us how this message was received by some and resisted by others. It will show us how early Christians did church and life together. Perhaps the book of Acts, with its depiction of the first-century church, will tell us how to do church in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> “Have You Fed the Fish?” by Badly Drawn Boy, from the album, *Have You Fed the Fish?*

Today, we're going to look at chapter 1 of Acts. But before we do that, I want to give us a little bit of background information. The book was written by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as we'll see, the book of Acts is a sequel to Luke's Gospel. Luke probably wrote his Gospel sometime around the year 60, about thirty years or so after Jesus' died and rose from the grave. He wrote Acts in the early 60s.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand why Luke was writing, we have to look at the beginning of his first book. This is how Luke begins his Gospel:

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

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There are always those who doubt the so-called "traditional view" of the authorship of just about any book of the Bible. Some believe that Luke didn't write the Gospel that bears his name, or the book of Acts, because, strictly speaking, his name doesn't appear in the text of either book. While that may be true, all external evidence in the early church points to Luke as the author. A number of second- and third-century Christian writers, such as Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.1; 3.14.1-14), Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 5.12), and Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4.2), affirmed Lukan authorship of the Gospel and Acts. Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, also affirmed Lukan authorship (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.4; 3.24.15). As far as internal evidence goes, we know that there are several "we" passages in the book of Acts. Beginning in 16:10, we find that the author includes himself among the subjects ("we sought to go on into Macedonia"). Since that is the case, the author can't be any of people mentioned by name in Acts. Since the author seems to have traveled with Paul to Rome, we would expect that he might be mentioned in the letters that Paul wrote in Rome (or, in general, toward the end of his life). Luke is mentioned in Col. 4:14 and 2 Tim. 4:11. Others mentioned in these letters are not likely candidates. So, given the internal and external evidence, it seems quite sure that Luke, "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14), is the author.

<sup>4</sup> A number of biblical scholars believe Luke wrote his Gospel sometime in the 70s or thereafter. Given that view, Acts must have come sometime later. Scholars who hold to such a view believe that Mark's Gospel must have been written in the mid-60s at the earliest. It is generally acknowledged that Luke used Mark as one of his sources. Therefore, Luke's Gospel must have been written later. Additionally, some scholars believe that Luke's account of Jesus' prediction of the fall of Jerusalem was too detailed to have been written before the fact (see Luke 21:20-24). I don't see any need to place Mark's Gospel in the 60s. There is no reason that he could not have written it in the late 50s. Luke may then have used it as a source along with his own investigation. Another reason people think Luke was written later is because Luke says that "many have undertaken to compile a narrative" of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He may be referring to Mark and Matthew, and perhaps others. The fact is that we don't know which writings Luke is referring to. It's safe to assume others were written and not regarded as authoritative or God-breathed. I believe Acts was likely written in the early to mid-60s because of the reasons offered by D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo: "(1) Luke's apparent ignorance of the letters of Paul; (2) Luke's portrayal of Judaism as a legal religion, a situation that would have changed abruptly with the outbreak of the Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66 [to which I would add the fact that Luke shows no awareness of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, something he could have included in his narrative]; (3) Luke's omission of any reference to the Neronian persecution [the emperor Nero's persecution of Christians following a fire in Rome in 64], which, if it had occurred when Luke was writing would surely have affected his narrative in some way; (4) the vivid detail of the shipwreck voyage narrative (27:1-28:16), which suggests very recent experience." *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 300. To add to point (3) above, Luke doesn't mention or hint at the death of Peter or Paul. Instead, he ends with Paul preaching freely (though under house arrest) in Rome.

This beginning of the Gospel of Luke applies to the book of Acts, too. We know from the Bible that Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14). Scholars say that his writing in Greek is the best in the New Testament. So Luke was obviously an educated man. In this introduction, he says that he is trying “to write an orderly account” of “the things that have been accomplished among us.” In Luke’s Gospel, he was writing about what God had accomplished in sending Jesus to live, die, and be raised from the grave. Luke was writing to a man named Theophilus. We don’t know much about this man, other than that he was probably someone of a high standing (he’s called “most excellent”) and he had already been instructed about the Christian faith (“the things you have been taught”). Luke’s purpose in writing is to give Theophilus greater certainty about Christianity. It seems that Luke had access to “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.” In other words, he probably interviewed the apostles and other early Christians. Luke didn’t witness Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, but he had access to people who did.

Ben Witherington, a New Testament scholar, believes that Luke set out to write a history of how Christianity changed the world. He thinks that Luke was writing in a style similar to the way Greek historians wrote. And that’s important, because it shows that what Luke is writing to us is an account of what actually happened in history. He’s saying, “I investigated what happened. I talked to people who were there. I put all of this into an orderly account so you would be more certain of the things you have already been taught.” A lot of the Bible is historical narrative. It’s a record of what happened in history. Of course, like any history, it’s told for a reason. Generally, the purpose of the histories told in the Bible is so that we would know what God has done. And that’s what Luke is doing for Theophilus and for us. In his Gospel, he recorded the most important aspects of Jesus’ life. In the book of Acts, he tells us how the message of Jesus went from Jesus’ Jewish followers in Jerusalem to Jews and Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire.

So, with all that in mind, let’s look at how Luke begins the book of Acts. Here are the first three verses:

<sup>1</sup> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

In the first book, the Gospel of Luke, Luke described what Jesus “began to do.” It’s possible that he means Jesus is continuing to do things and teach in the book of Acts. This book is called the Acts of the Apostles, but many people think it should be called “The Acts of the Spirit,” because the Holy Spirit figures so prominently in it. I think it would be better to call it, “The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ through the Apostles by the Power of the Holy Spirit.” Of course, that’s not a very catchy title. But that’s what’s happening in this book: Jesus acts through his people by the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 2 says that Jesus gave his apostles commands through the Holy Spirit, and he would continue to do so in the book of Acts. The word apostles refers to people who were sent—people who were commissioned. At this point in time, there are eleven of them who spent about three years with Jesus.

In verse 3, Luke says that Jesus “presented himself alive to [his disciples] after his suffering by many proofs.” If you recall from the Gospels, Jesus appeared to his disciples. They touched him. He ate with them. He proved he had risen in a physical body. That’s important, because Luke is testifying to the nature of Jesus’ resurrection. It actually happened. There were witnesses.

Jesus also spoke “about the kingdom of God.” This is a big theme in Luke’s Gospel and in the book of Acts. Later, in Acts 20, Paul says that he proclaimed the kingdom of God (v. 25) and that he didn’t shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God (v. 27). In other words, the whole counsel of God, the Bible, is the story of the kingdom of God. The best definition I’ve seen of the kingdom of God comes from a man named Graeme Goldsworthy. Here’s his definition of the kingdom of God: “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule.”<sup>5</sup> That bears repeating: “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule.” Of course, God is always King. And wherever his people are under his rule, that’s where God’s kingdom is. I’ll come back to this idea of the kingdom in a moment.

But let’s first look at verses 4-5:

<sup>4</sup> And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me;  
<sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

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<sup>5</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, “Gospel in Kingdom,” (1981) in Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 54.

Jesus had already promised his followers that the Holy Spirit would come (Luke 24:48; John 14:26; more generally, John 14-16). The New Testament reveals that though there is one God, there are three “Persons” of God: the Father is God, Jesus, the Son of God is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. In the Old Testament, there were many promises that one day the Holy Spirit would come to bring life, to cause people to have a relationship with God and love him and obey him.<sup>6</sup> So Jesus told them to wait for the Spirit. He said that they would be “baptized” by the Holy Spirit. I’ll explain more about that next week when we look at chapter 2. But here’s something interesting: At the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will become pregnant even though she’s a virgin because “[t]he Holy Spirit will come upon you” (Luke 1:35). And now Jesus is telling his disciples that the Holy Spirit will come upon them. From start to finish Luke emphasizes that it is the Spirit who causes things to happen.

Jesus is about to ascend to heaven, but before he does that, his followers have a question for him. We see this in verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Even though Jesus had taught his followers about the kingdom of God, they expected that Israel would have a political kingdom. They expected that since Jesus had come back from the grave, he would then get rid of the Romans, who occupied Israel’s land. They expected that Israel would return to the days of David and Solomon, when their enemies were defeated and there was peace. And it’s reasonable for the disciples to think this way, because there were many Old Testament passages that talked about a king who would come and bring in a new era of peace. He would destroy Israel’s enemies (see, for example, Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-16).

But I think Jesus’ disciples were wrong. John Stott, an English pastor and author, writes this about their question:

“The verb, the noun and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. For the verb *restore* shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun *Israel* that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause *at this time* that they were expecting

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<sup>6</sup> Passages such as Isa. 32:15; 44:3-5; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32.

its immediate establishment. In his reply (7-8) Jesus corrected their mistaken notions of the kingdom's nature, extent and arrival."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus doesn't answer their question directly. He doesn't say, "Yes, yes, that's going to happen, but not now." He doesn't say, "You guys just don't get it!" He answers in the brilliant way that only Jesus can. This is his answer, in verses 7 and 8:

<sup>7</sup> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This is what I believe Jesus is saying: "The kingdom that you're expecting, the one where I reign over everything and all your enemies are defeated, the one promised in Isaiah—that's coming at a later time. It will come when I return, and you don't know when that is. But here's how people enter into the kingdom of God now: you will go out and be my witnesses. The Holy Spirit will give you the power to tell people about me here in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. My kingdom won't spread through power, like the Roman Empire. It will spread by you telling others to come into it."

Really, that was God's plan all along. We see this in the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, particularly chapters 43 and 44. God tells his people that he will bring his people—"everyone who is called by name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isa. 43:7)—"from the ends of the earth" (Isa. 43:7). And then God says, multiple times, "you are my witnesses" (Isa. 43:10, 12; 44:8). When will this happen? God says, "I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants" (Isa. 44:3). In Isaiah 49:6, we read:

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Paul quotes part of that verse later in Acts (13:47). The point is that God always wanted Israel to be "a light for the nations," so that his "salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." And I think Luke wants us to see that. That's why there's this talk of the Spirit, and witnesses, and the ends of the earth. I think that's also why Jesus says, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all

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<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 41.

Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This describes the movement of the book of Acts. The gospel is preached in Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 2-7); then Samaria and the area to the north (Acts 8-11); and then it goes throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 13-28). But the phrase “Judea and Samaria” reminds me of the divided kingdom of Israel. In the Old Testament, Israel was first a united kingdom, but after Solomon died, it split into the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel, which was also known as Samaria.” So it seems that Jesus is saying the way Israel will be restored is through the preaching of the gospel, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I’ve said this a number of times: true Israel, the true people of God, is Jesus and everyone united to him by faith. So God is restoring Israel, he is bring people into his kingdom, by means of people telling others about Jesus. When people believe that Jesus is the King, the Son of God, the one who lived a perfect life and died a death that paid for the sins of his people, and when they trust that he is the only one who can make them right in the eyes of God, the only one who can restore that relationship, and the only one who can deliver them from eternal death, then they enter into that kingdom. And that is true today. Anyone here who hasn’t yet put their trust in Jesus can do so right now. If you’re unsure about what that involves, I would love to talk to you about it.

Let’s keep reading in Acts 1 to see what happens next.

<sup>9</sup> And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, <sup>11</sup> and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Jesus ascends into heaven. This reminds me a bit of a story in the Old Testament when Elijah ascends to heaven and he is succeeded by his follower, Elisha, who receives a “double portion”—the great portion of an inheritance—of his spirit (2 Kgs. 2:9-10). Here, Jesus ascends and his followers will inherit the Holy Spirit. In other words, the apostles are going to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Jesus’ ascension has a lot of theological meaning. I preached a sermon last year on his ascension, which is available online at our website, under the series of sermons called “Who Is

Jesus,” in case you want to know more.<sup>8</sup> Very quickly: Jesus ascended to present himself as an eternal offering for sin to the Father. He ascended so he could send the Holy Spirit. He ascended to heaven so he can pray for us. And the ascension also shows that he has ascended to the throne in heaven. In Daniel 7, there’s a passage that describes “one like a son of man” who comes to the “Ancient of Days” on a cloud (Dan. 7:13). And it says,

And to him was given dominion  
and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:14).

The King is on his throne. And peoples of all nations and languages will be part of his kingdom. And the way that happens is through the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ.

There’s a lot more to say about the ascension, but I want to point out just one more thing. When Jesus ascended, the disciples stood there looking at him. When he disappeared from sight, they were still looking. So two angels said, “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” They told them Jesus would return some day. The implication of the angels’ question is that the disciples have a task to do. They’re not supposed to be sitting around waiting for Jesus to return. They were supposed to wait for the Holy Spirit to come, and then they would be Jesus’ witnesses.

I point that out because there are Christians today who talk a lot about Jesus returning. And they try to figure out when he’s going to return, or they’re simply biding their time until he returns. But that’s not what we’re supposed to do. We have a job to do. Part of that job is to tell others about Jesus. We’re certainly not supposed to just wait.

But the disciples *were* told to wait for the Spirit, and that’s what we see them doing in the next few verses:

<sup>12</sup> Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. <sup>13</sup> And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. <sup>14</sup> All these with one

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<sup>8</sup> “Jesus Ascended into Heaven,” April 12, 2015, <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>. See also “Jesus Is Our Great High Priest,” April 19, 2015.



accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Jesus ascended to heaven from Mount Olive, east of Jerusalem. And the disciples went back into the city, which was a “Sabbath day’s journey away,” which was roughly three-fifths of a mile.<sup>9</sup> The eleven apostles were with Mary, some other women, and Jesus’ brothers, who now believed in Jesus. Before Jesus died and rose from the grave, his brothers didn’t believe that he was the Messiah, the Son of God (John 7:5). But after Jesus rose from the grave, he appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7), and probably his other brothers. James later became one of the leaders of the church, as we’ll see in Acts. All of these people were devoted to prayer and they were of the same mind, of one accord. They were united not because they all agreed on everything, but because they were all united to Jesus. They were all following Jesus, and that led them to live in harmony with each other.

Then, in the rest of the chapter, we see something interesting: Peter tells the group that they need to replace Judas, the disciple of Jesus who betrayed him and then killed himself. This is what we read in verses 15-20:

<sup>15</sup> In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, <sup>16</sup> “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” <sup>18</sup> (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. <sup>19</sup> And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) <sup>20</sup> “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

“ ‘May his camp become desolate,  
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;

and

“ ‘Let another take his office.’ ”

Peter, the leader of the apostles, says that “Scripture had to be fulfilled.” That’s a big theme in Luke’s writings. God has a plan that he is unfolding throughout history, and certain events were prophesied ahead of time in Scripture. In this case, Peter says that someone had to betray Jesus so that he would die on the cross, and that person was Judas. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says, “For

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<sup>9</sup> “This was a distance of 2,000 cubits [3,000 feet] or around one kilometer, ingenuously reckoned by interpreting Ex. 16:29 . . . in the light of Nu. 35:5.” F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 39.

the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that many by whom he is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22). Here, as in many other places in the Bible, we see that God’s plans for everything were predetermined and yet Judas is still guilty for his sin.

After Judas betrayed Jesus, he committed suicide. Matthew (27:3-10) says he hanged himself. Here, Luke gives us a parenthetical note to tell us that his body fell and burst open, apparently after hanging too long. At any rate, Luke tells his readers that the place where Judas died is called Akeldama, which is an Aramaic word that means “Field of Blood.” It got that name because it was purchased with the “blood money” that Judas received for betraying Jesus. Luke the historian is identifying locations where events occurred.

Peter then quotes a couple of Psalms in verse 20. The first passage is from Psalm 69:25 and the second one is from Psalm 109:8. Both are Psalms of David. In both of them, he talks about being surrounded by wicked people who betray him. David, in his suffering, foreshadows the Son of David, who was truly betrayed by a friend.

Before we move on, I want to point out something important about verse 16. Peter says that “the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David.” He means that the Psalms that David wrote, the ones he quotes in verse 20, were really the work of the Holy Spirit. That’s how God is the author of the Bible. Men like David sat down to write a poem or a letter or a book of history, and it was the Holy Spirit who was working through them to write what he wanted written. The same is true for Luke. He worked hard to write a two-volume work of history, and the Spirit was guiding him the whole time to write the words that he wanted written. That’s why we call the Bible “God’s Word.”

In the last section of Acts 1, Peter finishes his speech. He says that because Psalm 109:8 says, “Let another take his office,” they should select someone who had been with them from the time the beginning of Jesus’ ministry until now.

<sup>21</sup> “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” <sup>23</sup> And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” <sup>26</sup> And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

It seems that only two men qualified for the job: Joseph and Matthias. The apostles had to choose between the two. How did they do it? First, they prayed. They asked Jesus to show them which person he had already chosen. This shows that Jesus is God, because he is omniscient—“he knows the hearts of all”—and he’s sovereign—he reigns over everything and he has a plan for everything. Then the disciples cast lots. This is a very Old Testament way of deciding something (Lev. 16:8; Num. 26:55; Josh; 18:6, 10; Chron. 24:5, 31; 25:8; 26:13-14; Jon. 1:7-8). They probably marked two stones, put them into a container, shook the container, and then picked a stone. We might say they rolled the dice to see who would win.

That might seem random, but it wasn’t. Again, the way they prayed to Jesus shows that they knew he had already picked one of these men. Surely they knew what Proverbs 16:33 says: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”

Now, I’ll say this: Part of the difficulty of going through the book of Acts is knowing what is merely history—something that happened one time in the past—and knowing what is prescribed for the church today. Some people might read this passage and think, “Oh, so that’s how we’re supposed to make decisions today.” I don’t really think that’s the point of the passage. But to understand whether a passage in Acts is normative—a description of something we ought to do today—we have to consider what letters in the New Testament say. And nothing in the rest of the New Testament suggests we make decisions this way.

I think the point of the passage is that this story of Acts is a continuation of the story of the Gospels and even a continuation of the story of the Old Testament. As I just said, the casting of lots reminds us very much of the Old Testament. Also, why do there need to be twelve apostles? Because there were twelve tribes of Israel. Why does the gospel go to Judea and Samaria? Because God is restoring Israel—his people—through the preaching of the gospel. The good news is that the Messiah, the anointed king, the Son of David, has come. He is like no other king: he is perfectly righteous. He does what none of us do: he perfectly represents God and he is perfectly obedient to the Father. Yet this king died for the sins of all who come to him and find refuge in him. And he rose from the grave, to show he has power over death, and to show that all his people will one day have their own resurrection. Anyone who hears this news and responds by following Jesus is part of this kingdom. They are part of the one people of God.

The book of Acts isn’t just the continuing story of Jesus. It’s not just the continuing story of the Bible. It’s our story. This is where we live in history: between the first and second

comings of Jesus. And we are witnesses to Jesus. We haven't seen Jesus. We didn't see him die or see him alive again after he rose up from the dead. But Luke didn't see that either, and he is still a witness. He did the hard work of researching, of interviewing eyewitnesses, and writing down an "orderly account" of what happened. Now, we don't have to write history. But we do have to do the work of reading the Bible and knowing what happened. When we witness to people about Jesus, we're telling them about something that really happened almost two thousand years ago. We need to know what happened. We need to know why someone should believe this story. We also need to have the Holy Spirit in our lives. You can't be a witness to Jesus unless God has first caused you to be born again into a new creation. He does that through the Holy Spirit. And if you're a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit inside of you. Sharing your testimony isn't the same as sharing the gospel, but if God has changed your life, you can also witness to that. You can tell people what really happened to you.

There are a lot of ways to witness. You can simply tell people about Jesus and why they should trust him. You can ask people to read part of the Bible with you, perhaps one of the Gospels. You can give them a Bible, or a book about Jesus. You can post a link to a sermon on Facebook, or you can email someone a link to a sermon. If you're not on the Internet, I would be glad to make CDs of my messages available to you. You can also invite someone to church so they can hear about Jesus. There are a number of different ways to witness to Jesus. The point is that we are witnesses and that it's our job to point others to Jesus. And to be a witness, you need to know what happened and you need the Spirit at work in you. That's really another way of saying you need to be a Christian.

What's interesting is that so many Christians bear more witness to politics—or sports or their favorite television show—than they do to Jesus. We're tempted to think like the apostles that God's kingdom will come through human power and through the government. We expect a political kingdom. But that won't happen until the King himself comes and defeats all his enemies. I think politics is important. The government has a God-given role: to restrain and punish evil and provide order. But it's not the most important thing. No politician will save this country or save your soul. As I look at what happens in politics and in our government, I am reminded of Psalm 146:3-4:

- <sup>3</sup> Put not your trust in princes,  
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.
- <sup>4</sup> When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;

on that very day his plans perish.

God's kingdom comes through gospel witness, not the ballot box or the courtroom. We don't wait for a godly government in order to witness. The disciples learned their lesson after Jesus told them that their job was to be Spirit-powered witnesses. They didn't say, "If only we could get the right emperor in power, then we could have the kingdom of God." No. They went out and told people about Jesus, even when the government told them not to.

Things are no different for us. If you're a Christian, you are part of this story. You're a witness. You know what God has done in history, and you need to tell others about what he's done. If our church is going to move forward, we need to do that. We need to emphasize the gospel. And we need to do what we can to make sure that our church is in a place where we can go out and share the gospel. We need to make sure this is a place where people feel comfortable coming to hear the gospel.

If you're not a Christian, I would urge you to consider the claims of Luke. Jesus died and rose from the grave. He demonstrated to his followers that he really came back from the dead. They saw him. They heard him. They touched him. He ate and drank. This really happened. There's much more to the story of Jesus, and if you keep coming back, you'll learn more about him. I would love to tell you more about him, because I am a witness. There are many others here who can bear witness to Jesus.

We are witnesses.