

From 21st September we begin a new series on Sunday mornings in the book of Acts. Acts is part two of a two-volume work along with the Gospel of Luke. At the beginning of volume 1, the writer Luke explains his reasons for writing.

Luke 1:1-4

'Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the 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 of the things you have been taught.'

Theophilus is probably Luke's patron who sponsored the writing project. Luke's stated intention is to write an orderly account, based on eye-witness testimony, that his readers might have certainty. Certainty about what? Luke refers to 'things that have been accomplished among us' (in other words, things that have happened) and 'things you have been taught'. If, as scholars believe (and there is no reason to doubt their conclusions), Luke wrote his two volume work around 60AD (just after the events described in Acts 28 where Paul has reached Rome and is preaching the gospel), Luke-Acts covers the birth of Jesus, his ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit and birth of the Church and the spread of the gospel out from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the Gentile world. Luke wants us to have certainty about these facts. And so he writes an orderly account of what happened. Luke himself was an eye-witness as a travelling companion of Paul. He had Paul's first hand testimony. And he would have known personally the apostles like Peter – 'those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word'. John Mark (companion and scribe for the apostle Peter), whose Gospel was the first to be written (mid to late 50s AD), would have been well known to Luke and Luke used Mark's Gospel as a source document and corroborative evidence.

Luke's intention, however, is not simply to give us certainty about what happened, but also certainty about what was taught by Jesus and the apostles. And so much of what we read in Luke-Acts is the recorded teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

Why do we need certainty? And Luke is writing primarily with Christians in mind, that they will have certainty. It is a great encouragement to be reminded that Christian faith is based on facts, verifiable facts recorded by eye-witnesses. Christian faith is not subjective, based on opinion, or sketchy vague knowledge. It is grounded in historical fact. That gives us real confidence, not only in relation to our own convictions, but in our evangelism. As we tell people the gospel, we are asking people to respond to evidence.

As Christians, it is so important to know exactly what the gospel is. And the certainty we have is the gospel taught by Jesus and the apostles. That's the true gospel, the only gospel. We don't need to work out what the gospel is. We're taught what the gospel is, and Luke wants us to be sure, to be certain. At *Chalmers* our life is rooted in the foundations of Bible, simple gospel and prayer. The message of the gospel in the Bible is that God has acted to have a people for himself, to live with him forever. Although this gospel action is founded in God's eternal grace, it is focused around the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in history. Jesus died once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God. This gospel is the heart and core of all God says in Scripture, and therefore the heart and core of our church life together. There is nothing simplistic about this gospel, but we use the phrase 'simple gospel' to express our commitment to keep on emphasising what the Bible emphasises – the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This also helps us guard the gospel against false teaching that changes the gospel.

Moreover, it is instructive to know how the gospel advances. For example, the book of Acts records in detail how gospel advance is opposed, both from outside the Church and inside. We need to be alert to these threats, not surprised when the opposition comes, and most importantly, not deflected from the task of proclaiming the simple gospel.

Above all, though, we need *certainty that the gospel will advance through Spirit-empowered witness*. At the beginning of Acts, the Lord Jesus makes a promise to his apostles: '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.' (Acts 1:8) Acts tells us how that promise was gloriously fulfilled. The book ends with Paul in Rome (the centre of the Ancient World) with Paul 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness and without hindrance' (Acts 28:31). Today, as then, in spite of everything that humanly speaking is stacked against it, the gospel will advance. That promise is a great encouragement to our gospel partners around the world. It is a great encouragement to us as a church family as we respond to the Lord Jesus' commission to go and tell the gospel.

You can follow the series on Acts on-line. Catch up on talks you missed.