

"THE ONGOING MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST"

**I. Introduction**

- A. As we all know, bridges connect things that would otherwise be kept apart.
  - 1. In the New Testament, the book of Acts serves as a sort of bridge, connecting the Gospels to the Epistles.
  - 2. Acts provides the historical background for the Epistles.
  - 3. It tells us how the New Testament church was established on its apostolic foundation, and how it began to spread out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.
  
- B. In English Bibles, the full title given to Acts is "the Acts of the Apostles."
  - 1. Theologian Richard Gaffin suggests that a more complete title would be, "The Acts of the Exalted Christ by the Holy Spirit in the Church Founded by Him through the Apostles."
  - 2. That may be a bit unwieldy, but it is a good summary of what the book of Acts is about.
  - 3. It calls our attention to the fact that Luke's account of the growth of the early church is presented as the work of Christ himself, which he carries out through his authorized agents by the power of his Spirit.
  - 4. The opening chapter of Acts sets the stage for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church on the day of Pentecost.

5. That event marked the dawn of a whole new era in the outworking of God's redemptive plan.
6. Once Christ finished his work as Mediator in the covenant of grace, he poured his Holy Spirit upon the church to empower it to proclaim the apostolic message and thereby apply his work of redemption to the lives of all his elect.

## II. The Beginning, and the Continuation, of Jesus's Ministry

- A. The book of Acts opens with Luke addressing a man named Theophilus.
  1. The same man is mentioned at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, which is the "first book" that Luke refers to in verse 1 of our text.
  2. While we do not know anything about Theophilus, it is likely that he was a man of considerable social standing in the first century church.
  3. He may have been a sort of patron for Luke's writings.
  4. Luke tells Theophilus that his Gospel dealt with "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach."
  5. The term "began" implies that Jesus continues to act and instruct, even after he physically ascended back into heaven.
  6. This ongoing ministry of Jesus is what the book of Acts is about.
  7. It is the story of how Jesus continued to act and speak through his Spirit-empowered witnesses in the first-century church.
- B. Jesus is still carrying out this same ministry today.
  1. While he is no longer physically present in this world, his presence is mediated by the Holy Spirit.

2. It may seem strange to say this, but we experience Jesus's presence in a manner that far surpasses what the disciples experienced during Jesus's earthly ministry.
  3. This is why Jesus told his disciples in John 16, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." (v. 7)
  4. The ministry that our Lord carries out in his church by the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than the ministry he conducted when he was physically present with his disciples.
  5. We should never think that the physical absence of Jesus in our era of history means that his ministry is less powerful and effective in the world today than it was in the first century, or than it will be when he returns at the end of the age.
  6. It can be easy to slip into patterns of living that reflect such a perspective.
  7. As theologian Dennis Johnson observes, "our meager prayer lives, our anxiety, our dependence on novel techniques in evangelism, ... our doubt that loving discipline can restore wandering brothers or sisters to repentance and reconciliation — all these testify to our unspoken assumption that God's real action is in the past and in the future, but not in the present." [*The Message of Acts*, 17]
  8. Jesus is faithful to the promise that he gave his disciples before he ascended into heaven.
  9. He really is with us always, even to the end of the age.
  10. Amid all the evil and upheaval of the world, Jesus is continuing to act and speak through the Spirit-empowered ministry of his church.
- C. The proof of this is seen in the fact that we are gathered here today, and that millions of other Christians are also gathering to worship the Triune

God today.

1. This is all the more remarkable given the secularization of our society.
2. While there used to be cultural benefits to being a part of the church, that is not the case today.
3. On top of that, our society's obsession with entertainment and its exaltation of self makes biblical worship extremely countercultural.
4. The only way to explain why Christians continue to worship and serve the Lord is because Jesus is still powerfully at work in this world.

### **III. The Authorized Agents of Jesus's Ongoing Ministry**

- A. This brings us to verses 2 and 3, where Luke speaks of the authorized agents of Jesus's ongoing ministry after his ascension.
  1. The ascension is what Luke is referring to when he speaks of Jesus being "taken up."
  2. An account of Jesus's ascension is given in verses 6 through 11 of Acts 1.
  3. A similar account is included at the very end of Luke's Gospel.
  4. Thus, the two volumes are connected by twin descriptions of the ascension of our Lord, calling our attention to the significance of the ascension for our era in the outworking of God's redemptive plan.
- B. Jesus's ascension was witnessed by his apostles.

1. The term apostle means 'one who is sent and commissioned by another.'
  2. Jesus's apostles were authorized to give the foundational testimony upon which the church is built.
  3. Because they were chosen by Jesus, they bore his authority.
  4. Luke tells us that, during the forty days between Jesus's resurrection and ascension, he appeared to the apostles at various points to instruct them and prepare them for their ministry.
  5. Jesus also presented the apostles with many proofs to confirm that he really had risen from the dead.
  6. This was necessary given that one of the things the apostles would bear witness to was Christ's resurrection.
- C. Another thing that Jesus did in between his resurrection and ascension was speak to the apostles about the kingdom of God.
1. When the Bible speaks of the kingdom of God, it is referring to the redemptive rule and reign of God. [Waters, 31]
  2. While God reigns over all the peoples of the earth, the kingdom of God has a particular reference to God's redeemed people.
  3. This kingdom has been inaugurated, but it has not yet been consummated.
  4. Christ is reigning at God's right hand and the gospel of the kingdom is presently being preached throughout the earth.
  5. This is bearing fruit in every land.
  6. But God's kingdom will not be fully realized until that glorious day when the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven

from God.

7. The coming of the kingdom is at the heart of the apostles' teaching.
  8. By telling us that Jesus spoke to the apostles about the kingdom of God before he ascended to heaven, Luke is stressing that the teaching of the apostles is none other than the teaching of Jesus himself.
- D. Another connection between the ministry of the apostles and the ministry of Jesus is seen in the fact that both ministries involved doing and teaching.
1. Jesus's "doings" were his miracles.
  2. The purpose of those miracles was to establish and confirm the doctrine he taught in his discourses and parables.
  3. We see the same pattern as the apostles carry out their ministry in the book of Acts.
  4. At multiple points, their authoritative proclamation of the gospel is confirmed by the miraculous signs performed by them.
  5. Still, the focus of Acts is clearly upon the spread of the apostolic message.
  6. A full thirty percent of Acts consists of sermons and speeches.
  7. Moreover, at three different points in Acts Luke uses the phrase "the Word of God was growing" to describe the expansion of the first century church. (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20)
  8. This tells us how Jesus carries out his ongoing ministry and builds his kingdom.

9. He does not work through earthly power and influence.
10. He works through the church's Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel.
11. Jesus is at work today wherever his gospel is faithfully preached.
12. We are assured of this by the fact that Jesus's choice of his apostles and his commissioning of them made them his authorized agents.
13. In the same manner, the church that holds true to the apostolic teaching bears the authority of the Lord Jesus himself and is his instrument.

#### IV. The Empowering Agent for Jesus's Ongoing Ministry

- A. We turn now to verses 4 and 5, where Luke speaks of the empowering agent for Jesus's ongoing ministry through his church.
  1. The Holy Spirit is the source of power for the church's ministry.
  2. It is noteworthy that Luke mentions the gift of the Spirit right after he refers to Jesus teaching the apostles about the kingdom of God.
  3. The Spirit's empowering of the church for its mission is the climax of God's kingdom-building plan
  4. The coming of the Spirit upon the church marks the advent of the final stage in the outworking of the covenant of redemption, the plan of salvation that was agreed upon by the Trinity in eternity past.
  5. Pastor and theologian Harrison Perkins explains the covenant of redemption by ascribing three triads of words beginning with the letter "a" to the three persons of the Trinity, saying, "(1) the Father *arranges* redemption by *appointing* the Son as mediator and *assigning* the elect to him; (2) the Son *accomplishes* redemption by

*accepting* the Father's will and *attaining* righteousness for the elect; and (3) the Spirit *applies* redemption by *accompanying* the Son in his earthly mission and *administering* Christ's benefits to the elect."  
[*Reformed Covenant Theology*, 132]

6. The risen and ascended Christ sends the Holy Spirit upon the church in order that the church might be his effective instrument for administering his saving work in the lives of those he was given to save.
- B. Jesus instructed the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father, which is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
1. The promise of the Spirit was an end-times promise.
  2. The Old Testament prophets connected the gift of the Spirit with the coming of the Messiah's kingdom. (Isa. 32:15; 42:1; 44:3; 61:1; Ezek. 36:27; 37:14; Joel 2:28; Zech. 4:6)
  3. The apostles needed to wait for the promise because it would be given by the Father in his appointed time, underscoring his sovereignty in the unfolding of his purpose in history.
  4. And they needed to wait in Jerusalem, because the gospel would flow out from there to ends of the earth, as Jesus tells the apostles in Acts 1:8. (cf. Micah 4:2; Isa. 2:3)
- C. Jesus teaches the apostles that the impending outpouring of the Spirit is connected to the baptism that was administered by John the Baptist.
1. Jesus says, "for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5)
  2. John himself noted that his baptism was preparatory for the greater baptism that Jesus would perform, a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire (see Lk. 3:16).



3. That baptism is what took place on Pentecost, marking the dawning of the age to come.
  4. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost empowered the apostles for their ministry, the ministry of giving the foundational testimony upon which the church is built.
  5. This is why the baptism with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost serves as the paradigmatic baptism of the New Testament.
  6. That is, all subsequent baptisms involve being made partakers of the same Spirit who was poured out upon the apostles on Pentecost.
  7. In the words of New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce, “The baptism of the Spirit which it was our Lord’s prerogative to bestow was, strictly speaking, something that took place once for all on the day of Pentecost when he poured out the promised gift on his disciples and thus constituted them the people of God in the new age; baptism in water continued to be the visible sign by which those who believed the gospel, repented of their sins, and acknowledged Jesus as Lord were publicly incorporated into the Spirit-baptized fellowship of the new people of God.” [70]
  8. In other words, Pentecost declares that the Spirit works through the proclamation of the apostolic gospel to apply Christ’s saving work in the lives of his elect.
- D. We should also note that the baptism with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was not a baptism by immersion.
1. The disciples were not immersed in the Spirit.
  2. Instead, the Spirit was poured out upon them, as Peter notes when he says of Jesus, “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit,

he has *poured out* this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.”

3. This is significant because Baptists typically claim the the Greek term for baptize means immersion.
4. Acts 1 and 2 shows that that is not correct.
5. In fact, there are no instances in the New Testament where the term ‘baptize’ conclusively describes someone or something being immersed in water
6. On top of that, there are instances where the term clearly refers to the application of water to something, either by sprinkling or pouring.
7. For example, in Mark 7:4 the term is used to describe the ceremonial washing of dining couches.
8. That was certainly not a matter of immersion.
9. And in Luke 11:38 the term is used to describe the ceremonial washing of hands done by the Pharisees before eating.
10. The typical method for washing hands is not to immerse the hands in water, but to pour water over them.
11. In light of these factors, it is clear that, in spite of the claims of our Baptist friends, the term baptism does not mean immersion.
12. Baptism by immersion is not necessary, because the sign in baptism is the water, not the mode of its application.
13. The fact that water baptism is rooted in the baptism with the Spirit on Pentecost, in which the Spirit was poured out upon the apostles, shows that baptism is properly administered by pouring or sprinkling.

14. This connection also helps us better understand the meaning of baptism.
15. When we are baptized in the name of the Triune God and by faith lay hold of what is signified in baptism — the cleansing power of Jesus's blood — we have a share in the same Spirit who was so powerfully poured out upon the church at Pentecost.

## V. Conclusion

- A. Jesus is by no means finished doing and teaching things.
- B. Jesus is right here with us, and he is active.
- C. He is at work in this church, and he is at work in his church all throughout the world.
- D. His hand is directing all the events of your life, as well as all the events of this world.
- E. The more we cultivate our awareness of this, the more will we be inspired to live with the kind of courage, zeal, sacrifice, and confidence that we see on display throughout the pages of the book of Acts.