

# **Acts of Faith**

Kingdom Advancement

Phillip A. Ross



Acts of Faith—Kingdom Advancement

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*Dedicated to those who want a  
biblical witness fellowship*

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## INTRODUCTION

This series on Acts was begun in Zion, Pennsylvania in 1993 for a church that had been stewing in theological conflict for decades. While there was a core of believers in the church, there were also Liberals and Charismatics who had fought each other for decades for control of the church. Over the years a kind of theological *laissez faire* had set in and the various groups had grown content to live together as best they could. The result was a lukewarm body that was self-content.

This series of sermons on Acts was intended to stir the pot, to plow under the lukewarm attitudes and sensitivities that maintained a shallow understanding of the message of Scripture. And it did.

The essential presupposition underlying this series suggests that Modern and Postmodern Christians in America have misunderstood something very basic with regard to Christianity. This is not an accusation but an observation made after many years in the ministry. My years of study and experience have led me to the observation that the model of ministry and church that are currently being used is broken. My conversations with people of various denominations suggest similar problems in virtually every church.

The reason that so many different and diverse churches experience similar problems is that the problems have a common source. It's not so much the structure or polity that is giving rise to the problems, but rather the fact that the acids of Modern and Postmodern culture have eaten their way into the hearts and minds of contemporary people—both Christians and non-Christians alike—and eroded the fundamental beliefs and structures of the churches.

The present treatment of Acts, completed in Marietta, Ohio, attempts to look at the events of the Early Church as if they actually happened just the way they are described by Luke, the author. It is a continuation of the story of the gospel that I began in my book, *Marking God's Word—Understanding Jesus*, Pilgrim Platform,

Marietta, Ohio, 2007). There we saw that Jesus had been severely misunderstood by everyone, including the disciples. Did Paul suffer the same misunderstandings? That is the concern of this book.

The present volume continues that story and demonstrates that people only understood the gospel as Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit upon them. Prior to regeneration or the dispensation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, there was no understanding. Paul was as misunderstood as Jesus had been, but he persevered.

This story really begins when opened the eyes of two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, and then filled a room full of disciples in Acts 2. It was Paul who accepted the burden to carry the message of Jesus forward. And Paul soon found himself as misunderstood as Jesus had been.

I pray that the Lord will bless you, the reader, and give you eyes to see. You will need them to see what Paul and the Apostles were doing as they spread the gospel far and wide. This story is probably not what you think it is. At least, that is what I found out as I plowed my way through Acts.

Phillip A. Ross  
Marietta, Ohio  
2007

## I. NOW WHAT?

*36 And as they spoke this, Jesus Himself stood in their midst, and said to them, Peace to you! 37 But they were terrified and filled with fear, for they thought they saw a spirit. 38 And He said to them, Why are you troubled, and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? 39 Behold My hands and My feet, that I am He! Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see Me have. 40 And when He had spoken this, He showed them His hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe for joy, and wondered, He said to them, Have you any food here? 42 And they handed to Him a piece of a broiled fish and of a honeycomb. 43 And He took it and ate before them. 44 And He said to them, These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses and in the Prophets and in the Psalms about Me. 45 And He opened their mind to understand the Scriptures. 46 And He said to them, So it is written, and so it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be proclaimed in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And you are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I send the promise of My father on you. But you sit in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high.*

—Luke 24:36-49

**W**hen we look backward a few verses at the story of Cleopas and the other disciple on their way to Emmaus, we see that Jesus met them on the road, talked with them, and had supper with them. But they didn't recognize him. Then He "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." And in the breaking of the bread, their eyes were opened and they finally recognized the resurrected Christ.

Then at the very moment they recognized him, He "vanished from their sight." Prior to recognizing Jesus they were broken and defeated. When they recognized Him, they realized that He had risen from the dead, and their faith was renewed. They returned to Jerus-



alem to tell the other disciples what had happened to them. This renewal experience filled them with enthusiasm and hope, and they returned to the mission of Jesus Christ.

But in the beginning of Acts we find them in confusion about what they should do next. The confusion existed not only in the minds and hearts of the disciples, but it is reflected in the biblical text as well.

In order to see the problem we look to Mark 16:6-8. We pick up Mark's story as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome had gone to the tomb and found it empty. There a young man spoke to them.

"Do not be frightened. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen, He is not here. Behold the place where they laid Him. But go tell His disciples and Peter that He goes before you into Galilee. There you will see Him, as He said to you. And they went out quickly and fled from the tomb. For they trembled and were amazed. Neither did they say anything to anyone, for they were afraid."

Some manuscripts end the story there with a brief suggestion that the disciples went out and proclaimed the message of eternal salvation. This is known as the shorter ending of Mark. This shorter ending of Mark is used primarily by modern translations, but was included in the *Textus Receptus*, the Greek Bible that has been in common use for well over a thousand years.

This ancient manuscript has the longer ending to Mark, where Jesus appeared to Cleopas and friend, and later to the eleven disciples, to rebuke them for their lack of faith, and finally commanded them to "Go into all the world, proclaim the gospel to all the creation" (Mark 16:15).

Compare Mark to Matthew's version of the resurrection story, which has the angel in the tomb instruct the women to go quickly and tell the disciples (Matthew 28:7), "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." The resurrected Jesus himself then met the women on the way to tell the disciples, and repeated the message, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28:10).

These stories in Matthew and Mark have come to be known as the Galilean tradition because Jesus tells the disciples that he will meet them in Galilee, and give them further instructions there.

The confusion is this: Are the disciples to go immediately to Galilee to proclaim the good news, as the Galilean tradition seems

to suggest? Or are they to remain, as Luke's story says? Luke 24:49 reads, "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Should they go to Galilee right away? Or should they stay in Jerusalem?

Here is their confusion: Finally they had recognized the resurrected Christ. Seeing the resurrected Lord was essential to their faith. They found renewed strength and encouragement in it. They now had a renewed enthusiasm for the mission of Jesus Christ. But what should the disciples do next? What were the disciples to do once they understood the story of the resurrection of Christ? Should they go immediately to Galilee? Or should they remain in Jerusalem?

Turn back to Luke 24 and let's look carefully at what Luke says. In verse 36 Luke connects the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to all the disciples with the preceding story of his appearance to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. The two stories run together.

It was Sunday night, three days after Jesus had died on the cross. The Emmaus disciples had returned to Jerusalem, and were telling their story, when Jesus suddenly appeared again to all the disciples.

Verse 37 tells us they were scared to death, terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost. Luke wants us to understand that this apparition was not a ghost. His point is that Jesus' resurrection was not just some spiritual fantasy—not a dream, but was the actual body of the crucified Jesus. Not a ghost, but a body brought back to life. Jesus had them look and see his wounded hands and feet. They could see the nail holes. And if that wasn't enough, he invited them to touch him. He was real, and very much alive.

Another traditional test to determine if an apparition was a ghost or not was to offer the suspected ghost something to eat. Apparently, it was a common understanding at the time that ghosts don't and/or can't eat. So, if it eats, it isn't a ghost. Jesus ate some broiled fish in their presence, further establishing that he was not a ghost.

Having firmly established the reality of his bodily resurrection Jesus proceeded to further instruct the disciples "to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). The resurrected Jesus again pointed out that his fate had been predetermined in the Old Testament, in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Jesus showed them that his crucifixion, death, and resurrection were not freak accidents or isol-

ated miracles, but were integral parts of God's plan to bring salvation to the whole world.

Jesus had not been resurrected just to prove the mere fact of life after death, or to establish the reality of eternal life. Rather, a substantial part of the purpose of Jesus' resurrection involved His teaching the disciples about the necessity of His crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus appeared to them, and established that He was not a ghost. They saw with their own eyes that the same Jesus who had been crucified was now resurrected. He had something to eat, and engaged the disciples in Bible study. It is a shallow reading of the resurrection story that sees only the establishment of the reality of eternal life.

Yes, the fact of eternal life was established beyond a doubt in the minds and hearts of the disciples because of Jesus' resurrection. But the resurrection also serves a larger purpose: to instruct the disciples in exactly what they were to preach when they went out to share the good news of Jesus Christ. The purpose and function of Jesus' mission was established as the fulfillment of the scriptures. And as the fulfillment of the scriptures, Jesus Christ—crucified and risen—was firmly established as ground zero, the center of a shock wave that would transform history.

### **GO OR REMAIN**

Let's come back to our problem of whether the disciples should go to Galilee or remain in Jerusalem. At this point the disciples had experienced the miracles of Jesus; they had sat at his feet as he taught about the Kingdom of God. They had received the tradition of the Eucharist (Holy Communion). They had been broken by Jesus' death, and renewed by his resurrection. And now had been taught the purpose and function of his mission as established in the Scriptures. Surely, now they were ready to go, and make disciples of all nations. They had been through three years of rigorous training, surely they were ready to hit the streets with the message of salvation!

And sure enough in Luke 24:49 Jesus said, "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father had promised..." Remember when he first recruited Peter and Andrew, Jesus had promised to teach them how to share the gospel effectively. Jesus had promised to make them "fishers of men." Now, after three arduous years they were ready. Sure they were scared. A lot had happened to them. But Jesus was alive! And he had come back to life to put His broken and defeated disciples back together. All was not lost. They could con-

tinue their mission because Jesus was alive, because Jesus had come back to give them further instructions about exactly how to proceed with their mission to save the whole world.

I can hear them thinking, “Yes, Lord, bring on the promises of your Father! We’re ready to share them with the world!”

And what did Jesus tell them next? He said, sit tight. “And behold, I send the promise of My father on you. But you sit in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

Sit tight?!

But Jesus, we’ve been trained! We’re ready to take your gospel to the world. We’re ready! We’re willing! And we’re excited! Let’s get going while the excitement lasts. Sit tight? Did he say, “sit tight?”

Stay here in Jerusalem until we have been clothed with power from on high? What in the world is Jesus talking about? Shouldn’t they strike while the iron was hot?

No, Jesus said to stay, wait, tarry in Jerusalem. But wait for what? Why wait? The gospel of John is instructive at this point. John’s version of this same story begins at John 20:19:

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After He said this, He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

Jesus indeed sent them to proclaim the gospel. And when He had said it He breathed on them. The resurrected Christ breathed on them, just as God had breathed upon the clay in Genesis 2:7 when God first created man. Now, the resurrected Christ, who is God Incarnate, breathed on the disciples, and created them anew. As humankind had been born in Genesis by the breath of God, so now the disciples were born-again by the breath of Jesus.

The Hebrew word in Genesis that is translated as *breath* is *ru-ach*. It means breath, or wind, or spirit, depending on its context. It is the action of blowing. Knowing this, we can see that Jesus blew his Spirit on the disciples. How can we be sure that this was Jesus’ intended meaning? The last part of John 20:22 after (or as) Jesus

“breathed on them” He explained what He was doing when He said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The disciples needed to wait for the Holy Spirit to give them power. Power is the ability to act, the ability to accomplish something. Jesus was sending the disciples to act on his behalf, so they had to wait for the power that would give them the ability to accomplish what he wanted them to do. Jesus knew that the presence and power of the Holy Spirit was absolutely necessary for the disciples to fulfill their mission. Without the Holy Spirit they could not act on Jesus’ behalf. So, Jesus told them to wait for the Spirit.

But they didn’t know what he was talking about because they had not yet received the power of the Holy Spirit. And because they didn’t know what He meant, they were confused. But by now they at least knew to take Jesus at his word, so they waited. They didn’t know what they were waiting for, but they waited anyway. And Luke leaves them waiting.

In the next chapter we’ll begin a study of the Book of Acts, the second half of Luke’s gospel. There we will find the continuing adventures of this little band of disciples. There we will learn why the disciples had to wait, and we’ll discover the ongoing blessings of Jesus Christ, and the fruits of faithfulness.

Lord, give us the wisdom to recognize Jesus, the courage to obey him, and the patience to wait for further instructions.

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