

Book of Acts

We will turn to the Book of Acts today. I want to read a couple verses from the beginning of Acts. These can be considered thematic verses. From 1:6-8:

So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Let’s pray.

Lord, as we turn to the work before us here, we pray for Your guidance. May the Spirit, who was so obviously present in the early days of the church, continue to be powerfully present in our lives and our fellowship and our community, in the world, and in our studies. Bless our churches and the work that we are called to do in our various Christian fellowships, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

A joke has been made that I take my time in the first half of our lectures, and then I start speeding up. I know what I am doing. Maybe some of you think I should cut out a story, but we must not do that. I have found when I preach and when I lecture that the points I illustrate with a story are usually remembered better. But in this lecture, I hope to cover much material. I hope I have time at the end to do what I normally do at the beginning, to concentrate on that golden cable. “Is that really present in the Book of Acts?” we might ask. But the prior question is, “On what do we base a biblical, theological view of the Book of Acts?” In fact, can we even write a theology of the Book of Acts? Many biblical theologians, such as Ridderbos, have written much on the Gospels and Paul, but very little on Acts. Does the Book of Acts not play an important role in theology? In the whole biblical development as it is set before us, do we find the golden cable there, the covenant mediator? I hope I get to that by the end of this lecture.

Studies of the Book of Acts have been used to give emphasis to the great mission thrust. Acts is a book of missions. There is Pentecost in chapter two. In chapter 1 the commission is repeated, “Go to the ends of the earth,” and then we are told how to do mission work. It is a part of the New Testament witness. But is that the central part of Acts? Are you really using the Book of Acts properly when you use it as your mission manual? It can be used as such, I am not denying that, but is that the first and fundamental use? Is it a church-planting manual? Ladd, on page 11, says that Acts purports to give the history of how the church was planted.

What Paul was able to do in his day, in his context, and in his situation is quite different from what can take place in our present day and age. Our context differs, but the message does not. Sometimes our methods have to be adapted to the situation in which we are living. I found out when I went as a missionary to Australia that I could not act like a North American. Some of the methods that worked well in the United States did not work at all down there in Australia. You have to be aware of your context. Thus you have to be careful as to how you use some of the biblical historical material when it comes to mission work or church planting.

There is another critical question about developing theology on the basis of Acts. If Acts is a book of sermons, as some call it – and there are many sermons recorded there – are sermons a good basis for theology? Sermons are people’s opinions, aren’t they? Sermons constitute material that has been

digested and reworked, and made specifically applicable to a certain situation. And who knows what the situation is? Can we develop a theology on the basis of sermons? My reply to that is: the Book of Acts gives us more than sermons, but the sermons that are given were inspired, the same as the Psalms and the prophetic message were. So where is the difficulty with developing theology from Acts? There is only difficulty if you are critical.

Was Luke an historian or a theologian? Does it make any difference? Maybe he was both. What did he purport to do? Luke says that after Jesus suffered, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. Is it Luke's intent to prove that Jesus was alive? Before Luke says that, he says, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen." Yes, he wants to record some definite historical events, but are these events of any theological import? Of course they are. I do not like to call Luke a historian in the modern scientific way. And I do not want to call him a theologian in the systematic or even biblical theological way, the way we are doing biblical theology these days. I want to call him a prophetic writer or an apostolic writer. In the Old Testament, the writers were within the category of prophetic activity. Here in the New Testament, it is the apostolic group that is brought together and they do the writing. Luke worked with Paul and under the guidance and direction of Paul, Luke writes. Thus you have an apostolic presentation. Do not call him an historian and do not call him a theologian primarily, but this is an apostolic witness given through Luke. This is how I see it, and it is for you to consider how much you agree with me.

Two more things—First, I have said that the new covenant is introduced and initiated in the Gospels, and then realized with the Book of Acts. The new covenant is realized, it really comes to historic expression. Second, Ladd deals with the resurrection in chapter 24 of his book and he makes some good, valid points. I want to emphasize the importance of the resurrection. There is no avoiding how important the resurrection is in the New Testament witness. What can be shocking is to hear how people will slight it or reinterpret it.

When I was teaching in Australia, one of the professors of dogmatics at our Reformed Theological Seminary in Jalong, Victoria was challenged to a debate by one of the professors from the Presbyterian Theological Hall on the character of the resurrection. I thought our professor had done an excellent job in setting forth the New Testament against the Old Testament background, the New Testament witness to the truth of the resurrection. Then the Presbyterian professor stood up and said, "I do not know why he is talking so much about the factuality of the resurrection. I do not consider that to be the important issue. The important issue is, do you feel alive?" The rest of his discussion was very existential. He said, "Whether Jesus rose from the grave or not is not very important," and then a lively discussion followed. At the end, the moderator of the panel asked, "Now all those who think that the factuality of the resurrection is a necessity for the church today, throughout history, and for the future, move to the east wall. Those who do not feel that the bodily resurrection being an historical event is very important, go to the other wall." The majority of the audience sided with the Presbyterian, saying that the truth of the bodily resurrection is not important for the church. This was supposed to be an evangelical community audience.

In conducting various conferences I have been amazed at how many people are not at all sure that the resurrection was very important. When I ask them about I Corinthians 15 they reply, "Oh, that was Paul's opinion." The resurrection is very important. Without the resurrection, there is no living church. Without the resurrection, there is no ascended Christ sitting on the throne, reigning now and in the future and forever. The resurrection is pivotal for the Book of Acts. It is pivotal for Pentecost. It is pivotal for

the whole work of the church. The resurrection transforms the disciples. They received power through the Spirit, but the transformation came when they came face to face with the living, resurrected Christ. They became living covenant members, the covenant bond of love and life became a reality for them, when they stood face to face with the Lord of life, He who, having died, came back to life. Is it the heart of the message? As Ladd says (page 317), it is at the very heart. I will not say it is *the* heart, but it is at the very heart of the message. If you take that out, everything else becomes formal, dogmatic theology. Was it the disciples function to witness to the resurrection? Indeed it was, and it was a powerful, powerful factor in their preaching. Consider Paul on Mars Hill at the Areopagus when he spoke of the resurrection. The Greeks laughed and said, "We will see you some other time." It was a stumbling block, and it was at the heart of their message, but it was not the only thing they preached.

The possibility of resurrection became a crucial factor in the preaching of the apostles. Do you have any doubt about the resurrection? If we have a living creator God, need there be any doubt that we have a creator God who brought life to that which was dead? I mean real, spiritual, communal, personal life. He who created life, could He not restore it? The possibility of resurrection is there if you have a proper view of creation, and if you have a proper view of what the covenant really is. It is a bond of love and life, and the Lord of life can take it and give it: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." (Job, chapter 19). Job said that in a different context because Job's children were not raised and resurrected at that time. But there is no doubt that he believes in the resurrection, for he says that in his flesh he will see God. Job is Abrahamic or pre-Abrahamic in time, so this idea of resurrection, of coming to life, is not at all a new idea in the New Testament. But the possibility of resurrection takes faith to accept it. The possibility of the resurrection should never be doubted. Paul makes that so clear in I Corinthians 15.

As Ladd points out, the resurrection has an eschatological character; it is future-oriented and there is a future-moving power about it. The resurrection is for now, but it has a tremendous influence for the future. Our bodies will be changed. I will have hair again! I will not have to struggle with my weight problem. My arrhythmia will be gone too, and I will be resurrected bodily for eternity, glorified. Yes, there is a tremendous eschatological implication for the church and for me and for you personally. The resurrection, that reality, is there because our God is a covenantal God.

Did the resurrection give rise to the church? Well, as people believed it. They believed in Christ the living Lord and they became members of the new covenant, servants in the kingdom, and members of the church. The resurrection was vital in giving rise to the church, and we are wrong if we think we can witness or preach or do the work of the church and not talk about the resurrection. I spoke with a young woman from a Roman Catholic background who had hardly ever heard of the resurrection. We looked at different parts of Scripture and saw how John sets it forth so clearly and how the disciples struggled because they didn't believe it until they saw Jesus. When she was able to say, "Yes, I believe that Jesus rose from the grave," it was as if scales came off of her eyes, a burden came off of her heart. Then she could say, "I believe." The resurrection gives rise to faith. It gives rise to membership in the church.

We must put the resurrection in the full and proper context within the kingdom, within the church, and within the covenant. Ladd does not place it fully in the biblical context, as I refer to Job 19, Psalm 16, and Ezekiel 37. He does not put it in the context of the reigning Lord within the present kingdom. If you are pre-millennially inclined, you may not mind this.

We have to move on to another topic: the revelation of the kingdom, covenant and mediator in the Book of Acts. The story begins in the Jerusalem setting, which is according to what Jesus had said: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That is the way Acts is outlined. First, in the Jerusalem setting it begins with the question, "Lord, are you at this time

going to establish the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The disciples, faced with the living and resurrected Lord Jesus, were still confused on how the kingdom pertained to Israel as a nation. Am I being too critical when I say that some people still are confused about this today? We have to get away from that emphasis on an Israelite kingdom, on whether it played its role in the past. It has done its duty as far as I am concerned. We have to look at the Lord Jesus, the great King, who is King now and will be King forever and who will bring in His kingdom. Jesus does not answer the disciples when they ask Him this question. The disciples' ignorance is obvious, but did Jesus ignore the idea of a kingdom? No. Read 1:3: "He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God." Not the kingdom of Israel. Not a restored Israelite kingdom. Jesus talked to them in those 40 days about the kingdom of God. Was Daniel necessarily speaking of a restored Israelite kingdom or a restored physical throne for David?

What does Jesus do instead? He goes and takes over the throne of the kingdom. I wish Luke had said it specifically, because we read here, "After he said these things, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight." He went up, and what did He go up to do? Peter says in Acts 2:32:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

"The Lord said to my Lord:
 'Sit at my right hand
 until I make your enemies
 a footstool for your feet.'"

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this, God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

He is the king. When the disciples asked, "Are you going to restore the kingdom?" Jesus answered, "I am going to initiate the next great step, carry out the next great step of the kingdom. I am going to the throne. You who stay here will be given power, and it will come from Me, King Jesus, through My Spirit whom I will send to you." And then Jesus proved that He was king, that He was on the throne, after He sent forth the Spirit. He showed that He was Lord of not only the Israelites. The people from all the different nations who were there at Pentecost were able to hear the Gospel. I have heard many arguments about whether Pentecost gives us a miracle speaking or a miracle hearing. I think it was as much a miracle hearing as it was a miracle speaking. At Pentecost Jesus proved that He was king. The kingdom was coming to a greater, fuller realization and now the disciples could go out with the power of the king and with His strength and proclaim, "Jesus is Lord." He is the sovereign king, the crucified one who was resurrected from the dead. Thus the power of the kingdom under the rule of Christ comes through the Holy Spirit, and this becomes available to all nations according to the prophecy of Joel chapter two. It is the day of the LORD, that Joel 2:20 had spoken of. Jesus is on the throne. He is reigning and He has given us power that we may reign with Him, as Adam was called, in paradise, to reign with Christ. That has happened. The kingdom has come. The kingdom is realized. The kingdom is functioning. Jesus is on the throne. Jesus is reigning and He is giving us power. He is giving us the ability to carry out the command that He gave: "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations." That started there in David's city.

Jesus appeals to David, but not to the Davidic house on the physical throne. Rather, He appeals to the great Davidic covenant to give a basis for the fact that Christ is on the throne in heaven. That the kingdom, the real kingdom, the eternal kingdom, the kingdom to be concerned about in all ages, has indeed come. The kingdom power that is available gives good evidence of this. We read of the miracle

at the temple gate. That was a kingdom act as all the other miracles were. When Peter and John go to the gate, a beggar asks for money. “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Then he preaches in the name of Jesus, by the person of Jesus, Jesus the king, Jesus the resurrected, Jesus the crucified. The kingdom is here. The miracles were performed as a kingdom truth, as definite evidence that Jesus is on the throne and always will be. How do people enter the kingdom in the Jerusalem setting? There has to be preaching and there has to be witnessing.

Notice especially in Acts 4:8-11 and chapter 7, how many people heard Stephen preach. And when the power of Jesus on the throne, became evidenced through the preaching and witnessing of the apostles and the believers, those who would not accept Jesus as Messiah did their utmost to stop the preaching: “We will put you into prison, we will do anything.” The disciples suffered persecution right from the very beginning. They had to stop talking of the resurrected, ascended Lord. They had to stop giving witness to the resurrected. They had to stop giving witness to the fact that God’s kingdom had become a reality and it was a type of kingdom that the Jews didn’t want, particularly the Pharisees. How do you enter? You enter through preaching and witnessing, but only when that preaching and witnessing is listened to. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven whereby men can be saved,” Acts 4:12. That is how you enter into that kingdom, by receiving, acknowledging and submitting to the name of Jesus.

Acts 4:12 is a difficult passage for many people. First, if you are ecumenical you might question, “If there is salvation in no other name than the name of Jesus, then where Jesus is not known, will people really be lost?” They won’t have salvation because salvation only comes through the preaching, believing, accepting, and submitting to Jesus. I had a professor who put tremendous emphasis on that when I was in the seminary in our class of 1933. Half of us became missionaries or spent time overseas. We were truly gripped by this phrase, “There is no salvation....” Christ has to be acknowledged and He has to be submitted to. There is no entrance into the kingdom other than through preaching, believing it. Acts 4:12 gives us clear evidence of this. There is no deception possible.

So in the Jerusalem setting, the kingdom was revealed, the mediator was proclaimed, the covenant was worked out. How about in the broader Judean Samaritan setting? We read of Philip preaching in 8:12, 13. What is said about Philip’s preaching, what was the theme of Philip’s preaching? Chapter 8, “They followed him [Simeon] because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized.” Philip preached the kingdom of God, Jesus the reigning king, the resurrected Lord, the name, the person, the kingdom. At the very heart of his message was that person, the mediator of the covenant. That is who Philip preached and that is when people believed and were baptized and that is when the Holy Spirit became evidently present in a powerful way. Philip preached the kingdom. When the disciples heard what was happening, they came. And they discovered that the preaching that had been in the name of Jesus had not included any reference to the Holy Spirit. So they taught them about the power of the kingdom, the Holy Spirit. And the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit under the ministry of the disciples, those who had been present at Pentecost.

Let’s go to the setting of all nations. That is introduced by the Ethiopian in 8:26-40. He comes from other lands. He’s a man of a different culture reading Isaiah. He is reading about Him who was exalted, chapter 52 of Isaiah, whose blood will sprinkle all nations and who became the suffering Lamb. “Of whom is this said?” Philip preached and taught him who it was, the Christ who had become incarnate, the Christ who had suffered, who had died and was risen. Having heard and believed these things, the Ethiopian asked, “What stops me from being baptized?”

Then Paul comes on the scene and from chapter nine on, the Book of Acts pretty much becomes the story of Paul. Paul is converted and baptized. He starts his ministry in Jerusalem, but God even used the opposition and fear of Christians to get Paul out of Jerusalem. The Christians were afraid of what the Jews would do because Paul the Pharisee had become a convert and with his preaching, he was having such a great effect. So they said, "Paul, you ought to leave." God works in mysterious ways, performing His wonders, accomplishing His missions. Paul had to become disoriented from Jerusalem. I had to become disoriented from the Christian Reformed Church and from my home. We often are unwilling to leave our homeland, where we are comfortable, and so the Lord must teach us that our mission is to the entire world. Paul had to learn that. The kingdom was to become a kingdom in which all nations were represented. Paul had to be sent off.

There is also the interesting lesson that Peter had to learn in chapters 10 and 11. "Peter, there is no distinction between clean and unclean, between Israelite and Gentile. Don't you know, Peter, what the covenant promise was back in Genesis 12? This is for all nations. This is for all people, do you not know that Isaiah had said, in chapter 19, that God's people are going to be made up of people from Egypt and from Assyria as well as from Israel?" Let me read that passage for a moment: "The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship together. And in that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth." Israel will not be at the top. Assyria, Egypt and Israel will be equal. All three together will be making up the great fellowship of the kingdom. Isaiah 19:23-25 gives you tremendous international perspective. "Peter, do you not know what the Old Testament teaches?" He was too concerned about what could happen to the kingdom of Israel. "Rise and eat." Finally Peter did obey. And Peter became a missionary. Where did Peter go as a missionary? It is said that he became a great leader in Egypt with Mark. It is said that "Doubting" Thomas went all the way to India to plant the church of Maratoma. That church suffered greatly for its faith. Thaddeus went to Assyria. Those apostles spread out because they knew what was expected of them. And the senate of Jerusalem, in Acts 15, learned what God was doing.

In the last part of Acts, chapters 13 to 28, we have an account of the missionary journeys. What is really happening? In Acts 14:22 there is a summary: "They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said." It is not easy. But after they had gone through their first missionary journey, they went back to all the churches they had planted and said, "It is not easy to be a member of the kingdom, there will be struggles, there will be temptations. There will be trials. There will be persecution." They summed up what they had been doing and they summed up the life they were asked to live, the kingdom life, under King Jesus, the resurrected, saving Lord.

Paul preached and did tremendous work. Paul did not only preach salvation. He preached creation. In Acts 17:26, "From one man he made every nation of men," Paul preached the unity of the human race. He preached the great providence of God. He preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He preached concerning the kingdom of God. Acts 19:6-8 is a summary passage of Paul's preaching: "When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about 12 men in all. Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God." He was preaching in the midst of Gentile proselytes and Jews. They needed to understand the kingdom of God and all that was involved. This was at Ephesus. Acts 20:25 says, "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again." This is Paul at Ephesus when he is saying good-bye. He sums up his missionary message with the kingdom, the all-inclusive term.

Acts 28:23 says, “They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning until evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” They would never understand the kingdom unless they saw Jesus as the king. They had to get the broader perspective of the kingdom and Christ as the king; that is what these people needed. They needed to understand the heart of the Mosaic covenant: “You will be to Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. You are precious to Me.” When Luke sums up the work of Paul in 28:30, he says, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” This phrase sums up Paul’s missionary message. All the theology in his epistles can be summed up this way as well. The all-inclusive concept, the kingdom, and the Lord Jesus, the mediator of the covenant who came as the seed of Adam, who came as the Son of God—that was Paul’s missionary message.

Now we have reached the setting for the epistles because as Paul did his missionary work, he had to write these epistles to remind these people what he had been preaching and the details concerning the kingdom. The epistles can be difficult to comprehend, with many details concerning the mediator and the covenant. The epistles had to follow up on the preaching, and in the epistles specific points that he had preached are developed. We will look at that next time.

Remember the golden cable, that which was first woven when God created and set the great cosmic kingdom setting, when He covenanted with Adam, when Adam fell and the promise of the seed was given. That is where the first weaving of the golden cable comes. At the very heart of that cable is Jesus. He is the strength of the cable, but a cable is never made up of one strand. To be a cable, there has to be at least three parts and that is why I speak of the golden cable: the kingdom, the covenant, and the mediator. It was initiated in creation, and then more fully worked out with Abraham. Stephen appeals to what God said to Abraham, which was worked out more fully with Moses.

In the New Covenant the heart of the Mosaic covenant was not done away with. Some of the external elements of the old covenant were disappearing, but not the heart—“You are My precious possession, My people.” The will of God is for a redeemed precious people. That carries on through and we saw in the nativity that Jesus Christ was born of the house of David in Bethlehem. He became the king, the humble one. It is right through the Scriptures. The disciples asked, “How are you going to give us an earthly kingdom?” And Jesus went to His throne and He gave them power to become active, powerful, kingdom servants. Jesus did this in fulfillment of the covenant promises. He administered the covenant. The covenant is a living relationship, but it is also a means by which and through which God carries out His purposes. That is what the New Testament tells us. God included in the covenant with Abraham the amazing promise, “And in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” A great universal perspective was given there and this is pointed out in the Book of Acts. Jerusalem is not forgotten. Judea is not forgotten. Samaria is not forgotten, nor are the nations. For in Christ, the seed of Abraham, all nations - every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (as the saints in heaven sing) - will be members of the kingdom, beneficiaries of the blessings of the covenant. All this is because of the great work that the mediator of the covenant has done, He who is truly the seed promised in Genesis 15, and whom God never forgot to keep before the people.

You cannot be a missionary if you do not know the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the first part of Acts that tells of Jesus going to the throne. I want to conclude by saying, when I had a call to go as a missionary to Australia, I was having a very effective ministry in Michigan. We had started a Christian school. We had helped the church solve a problem about money. We started a couple youth programs in the church, but after two-and-a-half years I received this call to go to Australia. Do I go or not? Then my

youngest child was born and when she was three days old we had to rush her to the hospital and put her in an oxygen tent because she was so full of mucus. The doctor said, "I was in Australia when I was in the armed forces and they have a climate there that will take care of mucus in any child's throat. So I decided to go. God uses unique ways. There were tears when we parted with the family as the ship pulled out of the harbor in San Francisco, but if there was any one thing that gave me comfort and strength it was this: Jesus is not only going to reign in eternity, but He is on the throne now. And I was going out as a kingdom servant, a minister of the Gospel, a living one because of Jesus, the resurrected one. You can go out in that same power and in that same assurance—Jesus is king. Go out and preach that kingdom and all of its fullness. God bless you.