

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

**Saint Luke, the author of the Third Gospel account, likewise wrote the Acts of the Apostles. He intended the two works to be read in conjunction with one another. Luke, as the first Christian historian, presents the Founder and the Foundation of the Christian Church in his two-fold work. He demonstrates how the Church flows from the life and work of Jesus Christ, and he reveals how the Church is the continuation of God's plan for the salvation of mankind.**

**By the time of St. Irenaeus (180 A.D.) tradition identified the author of Acts as Luke, a Syrian from Antioch, a gentile convert, a doctor by profession and companion of Paul. He remained unmarried and died at the age of eighty-four at Boeotia in Greece. Irenaeus, in his work "Against Heresies" attributes the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to the authorship of Luke. The Anti-Marcionite prologue to the Third Gospel, written around 160 A.D., and the Muratorian Canon, composed between 170-190 A.D., both attribute the Gospel and Acts to Luke.**

**The archaeological findings of the present century confirm that the author of the Acts possessed reliable information about life in the First Century. The evidence argues that the author possessed knowledge acquired through personal experience. The author was familiar with the area in which Paul traveled. Beginning in chapter sixteen of Acts, he implies he is a participator and co-worker with Paul. Here he begins to write "we." He implies, at this point, he became an eyewitness of the things recorded.**

**Since scholars generally agree that Acts was written shortly after the composition of the Third Gospel, the date for the writing of Acts has been determined largely by what date would be acceptable for the composition of the Third Gospel. Some modern scholars still favor the early sixties for its composition. They even see it as a brief, drawn up by Luke, to defend the imprisoned Paul and Christianity itself before Rome. Critical consensus places the date for the composition of Acts between 70-85 A.D.**

**In a general sense Acts divides itself around the activities of the two most prominent members of the early Church - Peter and Paul. From the very beginning of his account Luke demonstrates Peter is the head of the Church - the acknowledged leader and chief spokesman for it. Indeed, he presents Paul as the hero but not at the expense of Peter who clearly stands out, in Luke's writings, as the Rock on whom the whole Church was founded. The first half of Acts paints a picture prior to Paul's electric and dramatic impact upon it. The Third Gospel closes with a picture of the disciples spending all their time in the Temple at Jerusalem "constantly, speaking the praises of God" (Lk. 24:53). Acts ends in Rome. Paul was the bridge builder spanning the Church across ethnic, cultural and provincial differences. He brings the salvation that came from the Jews to the Gentiles. After suffering many trials and hardships the cross is planted at the heart of the Roman Empire. The Gospel is on the move and nothing can stop it!**

**Luke does not intend Acts to be read independently of his Gospel account. These two works impart the teachings he desired to convey to his readers. Luke writes at a transitional time in the Church. From where Luke stands he can still see those distant beginnings of the Christian Church - a time unique and gone. Luke seeks to bridge this historic primitive Christian Community with the Church of his present day, and by so doing he builds a bridge between that primitive Church and the Christian Churches of the future. In some distant tomorrow the Church can return and contemplate, in the Gospel and Acts, its roots, its foundation, its true character and thereby gauge the genuineness and faithfulness of its own Christian spirit.**

## **PAROUSIA AND THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH**

**The Church of the apostolic times expected the end of the world to be imminent. Jesus would soon return in glory as the Judge of this world. The Church felt an urgent need to spread the "good news" as rapidly and as far as possible. It preached an oral gospel for as yet, nothing had been written. Christian Communities lived in a state of expectancy for the Second Coming of Jesus which would herald the end of the world. Needless to say, this spiritual awareness and psychological condition of an imminent Second Coming colored and controlled the apostolic activities and life of the primitive Christian Community. They stimulated a unique community that the Church, as a whole, would not see again. Luke does not present the early Church as an example and ideal for the later Church. He merely records the unique characteristics of this community**

that already differed decidedly from the Church of his day. Luke paints a picture in Acts of a progressively changing Church.

By the time Luke writes, the Church realized the Second Coming would be indefinitely, postponed. The Church, faced with the possibility of a long life on this earth, would be forced to re-think its position towards the world, its methods of preaching and teaching, and its organizational set-up. Indeed, many things only developed in the Church with the realization that long life on earth was a distinct possibility. Christians' attention would switch from the Second Coming of Jesus to the fact of a personal, future Judgment, and a final resurrection of the Just - with no fixed date for either. Luke was to aid this with his written works.

### THE DIVINE PLAN OF SALVATION

Luke recognized a divine plan of salvation being unfolded in the world. This Divine Plan served as the background and blueprint for the composition of both his works. It has been suggested Luke viewed salvation history to be in three distinct but successful stages.

The first stage was the foundation of Israel as God's People. It was the initial and preparatory stage for salvation with the Prophets and the Law occupying the central role. This first period ended with the ministry and death of John the Baptist. The preaching of John echoed the religious theme of the first stage in salvation history: return to God through repentance - the necessary condition for salvation. This theme will run through all three stages creating a moral continuity between them.

The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was the second stage and central period of salvation. It was the time of salvation - a timeless salvation accomplished in a historical moment of time. The effects of this salvation flowed back through the ages reaching to Adam. Likewise, it would cover men and women in all ages to come. The third stage, and last period in the history of salvation, would be the time of the church. The Church would serve as the means by which salvation, achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, would be carried and applied to all peoples.

Even though each of the three stages are unique, there is a continuity between them. Each served as the foundation of the other. The three together form the Divine Plan of salvation. Luke demonstrates Jesus' continuity with the

previous period by having Jesus baptized by John, and initially, continuing the ministry of John. The time of Jesus was unique and distinct from the time of the Church. But the Church must know and understand the time of Jesus in order to know its own nature and purpose, and find its direction. Each new age of the Church must return to its roots - its Founder - to adequately and accurately interpret its mission to its own age. Christ is for all ages and so can His Church be for all ages.

The historical life of Jesus achieves the salvation of the world. Salvation becomes a historical fact. The historical life of Jesus has also a future significance. From it flows the establishment of the Church, and His historical life serves as the pattern and way of Christian discipleship. The grace-filled words and deeds of Jesus, remaining with the Church, continue to influence the present. They have a sacramental quality to produce grace in the lives of people and they serve forever as a light directing the light of the Church.

Although the earthly life of Jesus comes to an end, Jesus does not abandon His disciples. Luke apparently seeks to tie together the return of Satan and Jesus' institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper.

In a special way the Eucharist appears to be instituted for the period of conflict now beginning for the disciples and the Church. The Sacrament of the Eucharist replaces the Presence of the historical Jesus. In this sacrament a disciple finds the strength and protection of the Risen Savior. It is forever the sacrament of Faith and instituted to insure perseverance in the Faith.

## TIME OF THE CHURCH

An interval of time occurs between the Ascension of Jesus and the Coming of the Holy Spirit. This time interval separates the central period of the Divine Plan from the final stage - the age of the Church. The Coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurates this final epoch in salvation history. Luke directs the attention of the Church away from Parousia to the Presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been given in lieu of an immediate return of the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit's coming fulfills the promises of the Old Testament prophets and establishes the continuity of this third stage, the Church, with the first stage, Israel.

**The city of Jerusalem is the geological focal point of the Divine Plan. The city symbolizes the continuity of three stages: here is the Temple of Yahweh the earthly point of God's encounter with men; here Jesus dies on the Cross and achieves salvation; here the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the disciples of Jesus and the Church is born.**

**The third stage is a missionary one. The Christian Community is a mission Church. It is sent into the world to bring the saving news of Jesus Christ - to announce the Good News in order that all men can be saved. The Church will be able to do this through the abiding Presence of the Holy Spirit. All the Church truly accomplishes in the Name of God and His Christ will be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.**

**The nature and mission of the Church gradually unfolds. The initial phase of the Church is unique. It possessed the authentic witnesses of Christian revelation - the Twelve Apostles. From their presence flowed a unity and peace that would noticeably be absent after their deaths. It does not begin with the awareness that it must break away from the Law and Temple worship and the city of Jerusalem itself. A conscious awareness of the Church's universal commission for the salvation of the world comes gradually. Time and changing circumstances and the interpretation of these events in the light of the Holy Spirit would bring to the Church the awareness of its true nature and mission. This is the story told in Acts.**

## **BETWEEN RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION**

**Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles by immediately stressing the continuity between his Gospel account and his present work. By so doing he establishes the relationship between Jesus and the Church. "In my first account, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up to heaven, having first instructed the apostles he has chosen through the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:1-2). Luke implies the words and deeds of Jesus, retold in the Gospel, begin the story now to unfold. To the Holy Spirit, who will dominate this work, Luke attributes the selection of the first members of the Church. This Holy Spirit, who operated in the life of Jesus, from the moment of His baptism in a most unique way, will soon operate within the Church in a comparable fashion.**

**Luke stresses the importance of the previous formation given to those who will receive the Holy Spirit. The Gospel relates to us the effort Jesus took in the formation of His disciples. Luke now relates that the Risen Jesus**

continued this formation and education between the Resurrection and the Ascension. Obviously, it is not enough to merely believe in Jesus Christ. A Christian must be grounded in Christian truths. In other words, a disciple of Jesus must be carefully taught these Christian truths so that they may accurately understand them and clearly instruct others about them. Luke emphasizes the care and time Jesus spent accomplishing this task. The period between the Resurrection and the Ascension is a time when the disciples, under the divine guidance of the Risen Lord, received clarification of many things that still troubled them. The disciples needed to be instructed in a fuller way of concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Fullness of understanding did not come immediately. Luke relates, "While they were with him they asked, 'Lord, are you going to restore the rule to Israel now?' His answer was: 'The exact time it is not yours to know. The Father has reserved that to Himself'" (Acts 1:6-7). Mark states the same truth even more forcibly: "As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father." (Lk.13:32.) This teaches us that the time of the end of the world, or the Second Coming that heralds it, is not part of the revelation given to the Church nor will it be! Jesus implies this when He teaches it has not been given to the Son to know this. In other words, it is not part of the Word's revelation to the world. In the light of this, what are we to think of these prophets and prophecies proclaiming the end of the world? Any teaching that truly contradicts the Scriptures cannot be of the Holy Spirit. It is not the mission of the Christian Community to proclaim the time of the Second Coming but to proclaim the Gospel and work for the salvation of all men.

## THE ASCENSION

With the instruction of the disciples complete, Luke writes: "No sooner had he said this than he was lifted up before their eyes in a cloud which took him from their sight." The earthly life of Jesus ends with Ascension and the Church begins with the Ascension. The ending of the earthly life of Jesus is the Church. Luke's account of the Ascension teaches that the historical, earthly life of Jesus has been completed and now He goes "to sit at the right hand of God." This proclaims that Jesus Christ, elevated in His humanity, is over all the angels and saints and now takes up a place of honor. He now participates in the honor, in the glory, in the ruling and

**judging power of God. There He shall remain until the work of the Church has been completed, and then, He shall return to the earth in glory. The Ascension means the final elevation of Christ's nature into the condition of divine glory. This was symbolized by Jesus being assumed into the "cloud" - a biblical reference to the Shekinah - the glory of God's presence.**

**Christ's Ascension is the example and pledge of the disciples' own Ascension into Heaven. As Saint Paul writes: "Both with and in Christ Jesus he raised us up and gave us a place in the heavens, that in the ages to come he might display the great wealth of his favor, manifested by his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph.2:6-7).**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)**

**"HE IS ALWAYS ABLE TO SAVE THOSE WHO APPROACH GOD THROUGH HIM, SINCE HE FOREVER LIVES TO MAKE INTERCESSION FOR THEM." (Heb. 7:25.)**

**FIRST DAY: Read the Introduction to the Summary.**

- 1. What does Luke seek to present to us in the writings of the Third Gospel and the Acts?**
- 2. How does Acts present Peter and Paul to us?**
- 3. How does Luke's work aid the Church of today?**
- 4. What was the great work Paul was to do in the Church?**

**SECOND DAY: Read from the summary through the Divine Plan Salvation.**

- 1. What effect do you think a belief in an imminent return of Christ would have on the Christian Community?**
- 2. What are the three stages of the Divine Plan?**
- 3. What do you discover to be a continuity between the three stages?**
- 4. What is the importance of the second stage in the Divine Plan?**

**THIRD DAY: Read the remainder of the Summary.**

- 1. What would you say is the importance of the historical Jesus to the Church of today?**
- 2. How is the third stage of salvation brought into existence?**
- 3. Why would this be called the missionary stage?**
- 4. What do you see to be the work of the Church?**



**FOURTH DAY: Read Acts 1:1-5 and Luke 24:13-49.**

- 1. Before the Ascension how does Jesus spend His time?**
- 2. What does this teach you concerning preparation for reception of the Holy Spirit?**
- 3. Why is merely believing not enough?**
- 4. What is the difference between John's baptism and of the Spirit?**

**FIFTH DAY: Read Acts 1:6-8, Mark 13:32-37 and I Thes. 5:1-11.**

- 1. What do you believe about the Second Coming of Jesus?**
- 2. What do the Scriptures tell us about the time of the Second Coming?**
- 3. What are we to think about today's prophecies of the end of the world?**
- 4. How do the Scriptures teach us to prepare for the Second Coming?**

**SIXTH DAY: Read Acts 1:9-11, Lk. 24:50-53, Ephesians 4:7-16.**

- 1. What does the Ascension teach us about Jesus?**
- 2. What is the symbolism of "a cloud" in Acts 1:9?**
- 3. What do you think Paul teaches us in Ephesians 4:8?**
- 4. How can a Christian prepare for his or her own ascension?**