

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Acts is the action book of the New Testament, and it constitutes therefore one of the most exciting books of the Bible. The full name of it is, "The Acts Of The Apostles," but there are not many apostles mentioned in it. James, John, Peter, and Paul are the only ones who appear in any prominence. Through the centuries Christians have shortened this title and called it simply, "The Acts." I like that better for this is the book of action, revealing how God is at work through Christians.

There is intense conflict throughout the book, but a conflict met by a ringing confidence that is wonderful to see. It is a record of power exercised in the midst of persecution; an account of life and health pouring from a living Christ into a sick society through the channel of obscure men and women, very much like you and me. We could never understand the New Testament if we did not have the book of Acts, for it fills the gap that would exist between the Gospels and the book of Romans, which follows. At the end of the Gospels we find a handful of Jews gathered in Jerusalem talking about a kingdom to come to Israel. In the book of Romans we find an apostle who is not even mentioned in the Gospels, and who was not one of the twelve, writing to a band of Christians in the capital city of Rome, talking about going to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts tells us how this happened, and why this change occurred.

The first fourteen verses of chapter one constitute an introduction to the book of Acts, giving us the key to the book. Here we have revealed the essential strategy by which Jesus Christ proposes to change the world, a strategy which is the secret of the revolutionary character of the church when it is operating as it was intended to operate. I strongly suspect that most Christians suffer from a terrible inferiority complex when we confront the world around us. We have bought the idea of many around that the church is quite irrelevant, a not at all important segment of society. That view is absolutely false. The church is the most important body in the world today -- far and away beyond every other body -- because whatever happens in the world happens as a result of something that is, or is not, happening in the church. We shall see this clearly in this book of Acts. This strategy is given to us in Verses 1-2:

In the first book, O Theophilus I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. {Acts 1:1-2 RSV}

You know, I am sure, that the writer here is Dr. Luke, that beloved physician who accompanied Paul on his journeys. We do not know how he became a Christian though probably through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He was Paul's companion through danger, hardship, trial, and endless difficulty, up and down the length and breadth of the Roman empire. He wrote two books of the New Testament, The Gospel According to Luke, and the book of Acts. The one to whom this book is written is a young man named Theophilus. We do not know anything more about him than that. His name indicates that he was probably a young Greek, perhaps a new convert to Christianity, whom Luke met somewhere and to whom he explains in these two books what Christianity is all about. It is strange that he is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, although someone with the name Theophilus might well tend to remain hidden most of the time.

I had a friend whose middle initial was "T", and once at a party a friend of his announced that he had discovered what that "T" stood for: It stood for "Theophilus," he said, because when the doctor first saw this baby, he said, "That's the awfulest baby I ever saw!" I highly question that is the significance of the name here! The name actually means, "loved of God" and thus probably indicates that this young man was a Christian. We are indebted to this young man for sharing his letters with us for otherwise we would not have the Gospel of Luke or the book of Acts.

Now, in his first statement here, Dr. Luke gives us the great strategy by which the Lord works among mankind. He says, "In the first book, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach..." The Gospel of

Luke is the record of the incarnation of the Son of God. In John's word, he was "the Word made flesh, who came and dwelt among us," {John 1:14 KJV}. Jesus, the man, came to begin something, "to do and to teach," and the record of that beginning is in the Gospels. But, by clear implication, this second book is the continuation of what Jesus began to do. In a very real sense, Acts is not the acts of Christians, but the continuing acts of Jesus. It is an account of what Jesus continues to do and to teach. In the Gospels he did it in his physical body of flesh. In the book of Acts he is doing it through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt by his life. Thus, whether in the Gospels or in Acts, incarnation is the secret strategy by which God changes the world.

Whenever God wants to get a message across to men he does not simply send someone to announce it; his final way of driving it home is to dress the message in flesh and blood. He takes a life and aims it in a certain direction and, by the manifestation of his own life through the blood and flesh of a human being, he makes clear what he has to say. That is the strategy of the book of Acts. It is the record of incarnation; men and women, possessed by Jesus Christ, owned by him, and thus manifesting his life. That is the secret of authentic Christianity. Anytime you find a Christianity that is not doing that, it is false Christianity. No matter how much it may adapt the garb and language of Christianity, if it is not the activity human beings possessed and indwelt by the life of Jesus Christ it is not authentic Christianity.

That is the true power of the church, as we shall see in this book.

The book of Acts therefore is an unfinished book. It has never been ended, but is still being written. The book abruptly closes with an account of Paul in the city of Rome, living in his own hired house. It just ends there as though you might turn over the next page and begin the next adventure. This book is Volume 1, and we are writing Volume 20 now. It may well be the last volume in the series. I hope so.

The key ingredients of this strategy of incarnation are set before us in this introduction. Here we learn the historic basis on which the strategy rests, and the elements that make up the continuous program by which it operates. That is what any good introduction is for, to tell us what the book is all about. The first of these historic elements is the resurrection of Jesus,

To them [i.e., to the apostles] he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, {Acts 1:3-4a RSV}

I am stopping in the middle of a sentence, I know, but I deliberately do so to show you how Dr. Luke stresses for us the great and central fact of Christian faith: **Jesus alive!** That incomparable fact is what thrusts Christianity ten thousand miles ahead of its nearest competitor in the field of religion. There is nothing else like it. Jesus alive, risen from the dead!

Last Sunday night a number of our young people told of a trip they took to the campus of the U of C at Berkeley. They heard there of a man who calls himself the Messiah, announcing that he is the fulfillment of the predictions of the return of the Messiah to earth. He is causing quite a stir among those who are easily influenced by that type of superstition. But, when I hear of someone like that, my first question is this: Has he risen from the dead? I am not interested in any Messiah who has not risen from the dead. Those who have done so are the only ones who can make any impression on me. This man, Jesus Christ, has risen from the dead: "He presented himself alive after his passion by many convincing proofs."

The Greek word for "proof" here is a word that includes the idea of being convincing -- *infallible*, as the King James Version has it. Dr. Luke gives us three categories of these proofs. He does not give us the detail which you will find in other places, but he lists the three categories of proof that Jesus Christ was alive. As you well know, from the very earliest centuries and throughout the twenty centuries of Christendom, we have accounts of the enemies of Christianity who tell us that the appearances of Jesus were really nothing but hallucinations, they occurred only in the imaginations of these disciples, and that he really was not there. But, says Luke, let me show you the three categories of proof that he was risen:

One, he appeared to them during forty days. The word here is one from which we get our word, ophthalmia, i.e., the word for the eye, or literally, the eyeball. If we were to use the modern vernacular, what Dr. Luke says is, these disciples "eyeballed" him for forty days. They saw him again and again, not merely once, but many times during this period. Each time he looked exactly the same. It is hard for an hallucination to accomplish that.

Then, second, he spoke to them: "speaking of the kingdom of God." Why, says Luke, we even remember his subject matter. He talked about the kingdom of God. We saw him and heard him, two objective sensual experiences that confirmed to us that this was no fantasy, no hallucination.

Finally, third, the ultimate proof was, "he ate with us." The word, "staying" has a marginal reference which gives eating as the actual Greek word used. "He ate with us," says Luke, and those who were there saw him eat. They saw the food disappear. It is surely terribly hard to get an hallucination to eat! Luke says, "This is the proof; he ate with us, so we know he is alive."

This marvelous fact of the resurrection of Jesus is the bedrock upon which all Christian faith ultimately rests. Anytime you are troubled with doubts, or are under attack for your faith, come right back to this fundamental fact. The Apostle Paul, remember, holds it up for us and says, in effect, to the enemies of Christianity, "Look, if you want to destroy our faith then disprove this fact. It all rests on this. If Christ be not risen, then our faith is in vain," {cf, 1 Cor 15:17 KJV}. Throughout the centuries many attempts have been made to disprove the resurrection of Jesus, but none has ever been successful. In fact, oftentimes the ones attempting this have themselves become convinced by the evidence and have become Christians. It is fact Number 1 upon which the strategy of incarnation rests.

The second historic fact is called in this passage, "the promise of the Father."

And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. {Acts 1:4-8 RSV}

There is here a four-fold characteristic of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Literally, what Jesus said to these eleven disciples (Judas now having left them) was, "Stick around in Jerusalem." That is the literal Greek expression. "Stick around! Don't go outside the city until the promise of the Father has come upon you." Why? Because you'll make a mess of it if you try witnessing without this. This is an essential. You cannot be an effective Christian if you are not operating in the power of the Holy Spirit. Every attempt made to advance the cause of Christianity which does not arise from that source only destroys the message God wants to convey. "It is absolutely essential," Jesus says to these men, "so don't try anything without it. Just wait, for, in a few days, you will receive the promise of the Father."

What did he mean, "the promise of the Father"? He meant several things.

First, he indicates that the Holy Spirit's coming would not be ritual but reality. John, he said, baptized with water. That is a ritual, a shadow, a picture. But the reality will be the actual Spirit himself, coming to live in you. The promise that was made to Abraham two thousand years ago {i.e., prior to that point in history} will be fulfilled in you. If you want to read that promise you will find it in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. There God said to Abraham, "I will bless you, and make your name great, ... and all nations shall be blessed through you," {cf, Gen 12:2-3}. We are not told exactly what that blessing is when we read this in Genesis. But in Paul's letter to the Galatians he tells us very explicitly what the blessing consisted of. In the third chapter of Galatians, Verse 13, Paul says,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us -- for it is written "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" -- that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. {Gal 3:13-14 RSV}

There we learn what God promised Abraham; he promised to give him the Spirit and, through him, to give the blessing (that same Spirit) to everyone who believes, even to the Gentile world. "Well," you ask, "does that mean that no one ever received the Holy Spirit until the day of Pentecost, even though the promise was given to Abraham two thousand years before?" Well, no Gentile did, unless he had first become a part of Israel. There is no record of any Gentile believer ever receiving the Holy Spirit until the day of Pentecost. It was there that it began to go out to the Gentiles. But in the Old Testament there are several accounts of those who were filled with the Spirit in Israel. Abraham was himself so filled, because God promised, "I will bless you," and that blessing, Paul says, is the promise of the Spirit. But not only Abraham, but Moses, and Joshua, and David, and many of the kings of Judah, and certainly all of the prophets, for Peter tells us that when these prophets predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow they were speaking by means of "the Spirit of Christ which was in them," {1 Pet 1:11 KJV}. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke out of that indwelling.

Yet these Old Testament believers came to a realization and experience of the Spirit-filled life only by means of a long-drawn out process of learning by means of shadows. They were not given this experience first, as we are, and then learned what the effects of it are; but they were first taught by means of pictures, shadows, types, symbols. The Old Testament is full of these:

- Aaron's rod that budded, which was kept in the Ark of the Covenant; the candlestick in the tabernacle; these were pictures of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the mind and heart.
- The cruse of oil from which the widow poured which never became empty, was a picture of the flowing of the oil of the Spirit in a life.
- The two olive trees of Zechariah which dripped oil from their branches into the bowls of the golden lampstand, this is a picture of the Holy Spirit.
- Ezekiel's river that came pouring out from under the throne of God, growing deeper as it went, is a wonderful picture of the flow and power of the Spirit-filled life.

These men of old, reading these and studying them, gradually understood what it meant to be filled with the Spirit and experienced it by faith.

The last of these shadows was the baptism of John the Baptist. Jesus said that he was the end of the prophets. We are told of John the Baptist that he was "filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb," {cf, Luke 1:15}. He experienced this in his own life, but he had to teach it by shadows. As he baptized people in water he thereby taught them that there was coming One who would immediately place them into the body of Christ, making them part of his life. Jesus called John the Baptist "the greatest born of women" {cf, Matt 11:11, Luke 7:28}, because he was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb. But now, he says, there will be no more shadows; now there will be immediate reality. Everyone will begin their Christian life on this level. He had said to these eleven men earlier, "The Holy Spirit is with you, but he shall be in you," {cf, John 14:17}. That was true of these particular men at that time. They had not yet come to this experience. But that does not mean that no one in the Old Testament was filled with the Holy Spirit; it only means that these men were not yet so filled. Their filling of the Spirit was delayed until it would be available to both Jews and Gentiles. Though they were Jews, they were to be part of a body made up of both Jews and Gentiles to be formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Thus our Lord stresses the reality of this. The Holy Spirit is given now, immediately when anyone believes in Jesus. There is no sign, no feeling, no emotional indication of it. It occurs, as Jesus said it would, when any believe on him. It is the means by which the risen life of Jesus becomes available to us, continuously and constantly. All that he is made available through all that I am.

This means that I can have every bit of his attention all the time. All that he is, is available to me, and I do not have to share him with anyone. I can have everything there is of Jesus Christ. He is looking at me, he is talking to me, he is related to me, and everything that he is I can have all the time! But the amazing thing is, so can you! This is why it was important that the Holy Spirit come because it is by means of the Spirit that Jesus' life is made available to us.

Now notice that Jesus points out that not only is this not ritual but reality; it is also not a program, but power. These disciples said to him, "Lord, are you going to at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were thinking in terms of timetables, schedules and programs. "What are you going to do? When is this all going to happen? How is it going to happen? The Lord Jesus said, "That is not for you to know. Times, schedules and programming is not for you to know. That is all in the Father's authority. Your task is to be the manifestation of power, not the knowledge of a program. The Father will take care of that. You content yourself with exercising the power that is given to you, and the Father will put it all together and work it all out just right."

Here has been the mistake of the church. The church has thought it had the task of programming the work of God, that it was up to us to set up timetables and establish the structures and framework by which the work would go on; to carry it all out consistently and systematically across and around the world. But we have never been able to do it. The reason is because that is not in our authority. The times and the seasons are not for us to know. The Father has kept that in his own authority. But, said Jesus, though I am not going to let you know the program, I will give you power. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

Now what kind of power? This is a most wonderful thing! It is resurrection power. It is the power of a risen Lord, resurrection power, a different kind of power. It is not demonstrative or spectacular; it is quiet power. It is the kind of power that never makes any sound, any demonstration. Most kinds of power that we know about make some kind of sound -- they hum, or buzz, or throb, or pulsate, or pound, or explode, or something. But this kind of power does not, it is absolutely quiet. But, though it is quiet, it is irresistible. There is no way to oppose it, no way to overthrow it, no way to stop it. Every obstacle thrown in its path is but turned into an opportunity to advance. You can find many demonstrations of that in the Gospels and church history.

Today some of us are watching a demonstration of this in our local scene where certain attempts are being made to resist the working of the Holy Spirit. Every attempt thus made is but opening the door wider, for this is resurrection power at work.

It is a glorious kind of power. It does not need any props, does not require outside help, and does not borrow anything from the world. It does not even need a cup of coffee to get started in the morning! And it works best in a cemetery. It operates most visibly where everything is dull and lifeless, and nothing is happening. Anyone who is operating on resurrection power can come in and change the whole scene. Resurrection power changes lives from within and not from without. It does not start on the outside, with the environment, or the circumstances, or the external situation; it starts within, and works out, to change the environment ultimately. And it does not separate or divide; it harmonizes, it heals, it draws together and breaks down "middle walls of partition" {Eph 2:14 KJV} that have been standing sometimes for centuries. It batters them down and brings people together, in harmony. It is a totally different kind of power. That is what you receive when you receive the Holy Spirit.

Now, says Jesus, it will not result in propaganda, either, but witnessing. You shall not be propagandists, but "my witnesses," he said. Christians are not like salesmen going out to peddle a product, nor are we recruiters, going around trying to get people to join our religious club. When the church becomes that it has always become a false thing and lost its power. But this has a personal note about it. Jesus says, "You will talk about me, because you will have experienced me. What you will talk about will be what I have done for you." That is always what a witness talks about. "You won't be talking about yourselves," he says, "you will be talking about me."

The mark of the false church is that it loves to talk about itself. These early Christians never witnessed about the church at all; they witnessed about the Lord, what he could do, how we would work, what a fantastic

person he was, how amazing was his power, what he could do in human hearts. The twentieth-century church is too often talking about what the church is, how great it is, what it ought to be doing. It has its eyes focused on itself. But that was not true of the early church. Its eyes were focused on its Lord, and it was a witness to him.

Fourth, this promise of the Father will not be restricted at all, but will be universal. It will begin in Jerusalem and Samaria and go to the uttermost parts of the earth. It will include all places, and all times and ages, all classes, all races, both sexes, slaves or free, it makes no difference.

In Christ there is no East or West,
In him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love,
Throughout the whole wide earth.

That is the second element, the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit. You see that emphasis all through the book of Acts, and through the life of the church since, whenever the church has been what it ought to be. Any deviation from this only results in a weakening of the power of the church.

Now the third element Luke stresses, which will run like a thread throughout the rest of this book, is the hope of Christ's return.

And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." {Acts 1:9-11 RSV}

What an amazing experience this was! As they were standing on the Mount of Olives they saw him suddenly lift and ascend into a cloud. They never saw him again; he does not go beyond the cloud, but just disappears. The cloud received him out of their sight. Now Jesus had told them that this would happen. Furthermore, he said this removal was necessary. "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Comforter will not come to you, but if I go I will send him to you," {John 16:7 RSV}. It is by means of the Spirit that Jesus makes his life available to each of us, so intimately and so personally.

He did not go to some far distant planet of space. I think it is wrong to think of heaven as off yonder somewhere, several billion light years away. No, Jesus simply stepped into a different dimension of existence, the spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on every side, invisibly. He is not far away, and neither is the throne of God, and the greatness of his power. But that invisible life is imparted to us by the Holy Spirit who came as a result of his leaving this earth. Because he went, I can have all of him, and so can you.

Now the angels tell us that though he was to go away, his return is certain. "This same Jesus," they say, "will come back again." When he comes he will come in exactly the same way as they saw him go. Just as he stepped into invisibility then, he will step back again into visibility. Suddenly he will be back. And when he comes, says other Scripture, he will remove the curse from nature.

Men are today looking for a solution to the ecological crisis, the environmental crisis that confronts us today. How shall we solve these problems? Well, we shall not. They are going to get much worse. The crisis will get so bad that human life will actually be unable to exist any longer on the earth. Jesus said so. He said that the tribulation of those days would be so intense, so terrible, that no flesh would be saved if it were not for the intervention of God. But, he says, God is going to intervene. When Jesus comes again, he will remove the curse from nature, and nature will bloom and blossom once again. God will draw back the curtains on the exciting thing he has been creating behind the scenes throughout these twenty centuries -- a new humanity. A new kind of man will suddenly be revealed. That is what Paul calls "the day of the manifestation of the sons of God," {Rom 8:19 KJV}. All the world is looking forward to it.

Now that hope of his return runs like a thread throughout the whole book of Acts. It also runs throughout the

course of church history. It is part and parcel of the mystery of incarnation, the grand strategy that God employs.

The last element is found in Verses 12-14:

When they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away; and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. {Acts 1:12-14 RSV}

What did they do while they were waiting? Why, the only thing left to them -- they prayed. Prayer is the final resort of the people of God. Here were these people, deprived of the physical presence of Jesus. The Spirit was not yet given so they did not have his indwelling life, but they were thereby not cut off from God. They were still linked to him by the marvelous communication of prayer. They gave themselves to prayer, waiting for the full revelation of what God had in mind to give them. Prayer is always an essential part of the life of the people of God. It is part of the strategy by which the incarnate Christ touches and changes the world.

Here in this introduction we have all the elements that make up the book of Acts: a risen Lord whose life is made available through the coming of the Spirit, and who will come again in power and great glory, but with whom we are yet in instant communication by means of the miracle of prayer. That is the book of Acts. That is the life of the church. These are what makes any group of Christians have an impact, and exercise a vital revolutionary force in the age in which they live. May God grant that this will be our experience.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this insight into the strategy of the Holy Spirit, into the way by which you do your work and have been doing it for twenty centuries. Forgive us for the blindness that we have manifested toward this plan so many times, and the failure to take seriously these admonitions and explanations. But thank you, Lord, for the excitement that can be ours as we rediscover this power in terms of our own age. In Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

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