

R.C. SPROUL

YOU WILL BE MY

WITNESSES

TO THE END OF

THE EARTH

ACTS

ACTS: AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY



“R.C. Sproul, someone said to me in the 1970s, ‘is the finest communicator in the Reformed world.’ Now, four decades later, his skills honed by long practice, his understanding deepened by years of prayer, meditation, and testing (as Martin Luther counseled), R.C. shares the fruit of what became perhaps his greatest love: feeding and nourishing his own congregation at St. Andrew’s from the Word of God and building them up in faith and fellowship and in Christian living and serving. Dr. Sproul’s expositional commentaries have all R.C.’s hallmarks: clarity and liveliness, humor and pathos, always expressed in application to the mind, will, and affections. R.C.’s ability to focus on ‘the big picture,’ his genius of never saying too much, leaving his hearers satisfied yet wanting more, never making the Word dull, are all present in these expositions. They are his gift to the wider church. May they nourish God’s people well and serve as models of the kind of ministry for which we continue to hunger.”

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Teaching Fellow  
Ligonier Ministries

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—Dr. W. Robert Godfrey  
President emeritus and professor of church history emeritus  
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California

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—Dr. Derek W.H. Thomas  
Senior minister  
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

“Dr. R.C. Sproul was the premier theologian of our day, an extraordinary instrument in the hand of the Lord. Possessed with penetrating insight into the text of Scripture, Dr. Sproul was a gifted expositor and world-class teacher, endowed with a strategic grasp and command of the inspired Word. When he stepped into the pulpit of St. Andrew’s and committed himself to the weekly discipline of biblical exposition, this noted preacher demonstrated a rare ability to explicate and apply God’s Word. I wholeheartedly recommend Dr. Sproul’s expositional commentaries to all who long to know the truth better and experience it more deeply in a life-changing fashion. Here is an indispensable tool for digging deeper into God’s Word. This is a must-read for every Christian.”

—Dr. Steven J. Lawson  
Founder and president  
OnePassion Ministries, Dallas

“How exciting! Thousands of us have long been indebted to Dr. R.C. Sproul the teacher, and now, through Dr. Sproul’s expositional commentaries, we are indebted to Sproul the preacher, whose sermons are thoroughly biblical, soundly doctrinal, warmly practical, and wonderfully readable. Sproul masterfully presents us with the ‘big picture’ of each pericope in a dignified yet conversational style that accentuates the glory of God and meets the real needs of sinful people like us. This series of volumes is an absolute must for every Reformed preacher and church member who yearns to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus. I predict that Sproul’s pulpit ministry in written form will do for Christians in the twenty-first century what Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ sermonic commentaries did for us last century. *Tolle lege*, and buy these volumes for your friends.”

—Dr. Joel R. Beeke  
President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics,  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan



# ACTS

AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY



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R.C. SPROUL

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*To Steve and Kathy Levee  
lovers of God's truth*





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## SERIES PREFACE

When God called me into full-time Christian ministry, He called me to the academy. I was trained and ordained to a ministry of teaching, and the majority of my adult life has been devoted to preparing young men for the Christian ministry and to trying to bridge the gap between seminary and Sunday school through various means under the aegis of Ligonier Ministries.

Then, in 1997, God did something I never anticipated: He placed me in the position of preaching weekly as a leader of a congregation of His people—St. Andrew’s in Sanford, Florida. Over the past twelve years, as I have opened the Word of God on a weekly basis for these dear saints, I have come to love the task of the local minister. Though my role as a teacher continues, I am eternally grateful to God that He saw fit to place me in this new ministry, the ministry of a preacher.

Very early in my tenure with St. Andrew’s, I determined that I should adopt the ancient Christian practice of *lectio continua*, “continuous expositions,” in my preaching. This method of preaching verse-by-verse through books of the Bible (rather than choosing a new topic each week) has been attested throughout church history as the one approach that ensures believers hear the full counsel of God. Therefore, I began preaching lengthy series of messages at St. Andrew’s, eventually working my way through several biblical books in a practice that continues to the present day.

Previously, I had taught through books of the Bible in various settings, including Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and audio and video teaching series for Ligonier Ministries. But now I found myself appealing not so much to the minds of my hearers but to both their minds and their hearts. I knew that I was responsible as a preacher to clearly explain God’s Word *and* to show how we ought to live in light of it. I sought to fulfill both tasks as I ascended the St. Andrew’s pulpit each week.

What you hold in your hand, then, is a written record of my preaching

labors amidst my beloved Sanford congregation. The dear saints who sit under my preaching encouraged me to give my sermons a broader hearing. To that end, the chapters that follow were adapted from a sermon series I preached at St. Andrew's.

Please be aware that this book is part of a broader series of books containing adaptations of my St. Andrew's sermons. This book, like all the others in the series, will *not* give you the fullest possible insight into each and every verse in this biblical book. Though I sought to at least touch on each verse, I focused on the key themes and ideas that comprised the "big picture" of each passage I covered. Therefore, I urge you to use this book as an overview and introduction.

I pray that you will be as blessed in reading this material as I was in preaching it.

—R.C. Sproul  
Lake Mary, Florida  
April 2009

## PREFACE

It has been said that “the Holy Spirit leaves no footprints in the sand.” Jesus likened the work of the Spirit to the wind, with a word play of the Greek word *pneuma* (breath, wind, spirit), saying, “The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it wishes . . . you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes” (John 3:8).

In the book of Acts we see the footprints of the Holy Spirit in and through the footprints of the Apostles. The sound of a mighty rushing wind introduces their work. As a sailing ship is carried about by the wind, so the apostolic mission in the early church was carried about by the Holy Spirit.

Acts does not present a perfect church, pristine and pure. No, it is an infant church, a nascent community. It is inspired, but not fully developed; alive with power and devotion, but not yet sanctified. All the problems addressed by Paul, Peter, John, James, et al. arise in the heat of the passion and struggles of the first decades of apostolic Christianity.

For Luke, Acts is his volume two. It flows naturally and irresistibly out of the gospel. It follows the accomplishment of redemption with the concrete application of redemption. Ultimately God is its author as well as its chief character. Here the invisible hand of Divine Providence becomes visible as the feet of the apostolic band, under the weight of the Holy Spirit, presses His imprint in the sand.

This book is not a technical commentary, though the technical analysis lies behind it and undergirds it. This is an expository commentary, drawn from real preaching to a real church in a real world of pain, sorrow, joy, and faith. May it be fodder for further preaching and nutrition for spiritual growth.

—R.C. Sproul  
Orlando, Florida  
2010





# 1

## A SECOND ACCOUNT

*Acts 1:1–3*



The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.—Acts 1:13

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.—Luke 1:1–4

**D**uring the apostolic age books were not typeset with machinery such as we are accustomed to in this day. Books were written by hand, usually on parchments made out of papyrus. In antiquity, the standard length of a book written in this manner was about 35 feet long. The scrolls were then rolled up and carefully preserved as they were read and passed from church to church.

## Acts Overview

Initially Luke penned two volumes on separate scrolls: one, the gospel account of Christ, and the second, which was carried along with the first, the book of Acts. Very early on, it became the practice of the church to collect the four biographical sketches of Jesus that we call the four Gospels and keep them together in the church to be read and studied. As a result, the Gospel of Luke was separated from his volume two, the book of Acts. Sometimes these two books together are called Luke-Acts.

It was in the early church that this second portion of Luke's writings was given the title "Acts of the Apostles." Some saw the book as such an elaborate defense of the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul that they thought it ought to be titled "Acts of the Apostle Paul." However, Paul isn't even introduced until Acts 7, as we will see. There is also much attention given to the church in Jerusalem and to the ministries of Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, and others. Therefore, it would be a misnomer to call the book "The Acts of the Apostle Paul," although he emerges as the central figure.

Luke does not identify himself as the author, but if we look carefully at the "we" passages of Paul's missionary journey, we know that Luke was in that band of men with Paul. When he speaks in terms of "we," he is referring to himself as the writer of the book, so it is easy to deduce, as the church has, that Luke indeed was the author of both the Gospel attributed to him and this book of Acts.

An alternate title that could be given to the book, one that I favor, is "The History of the Acts of the Holy Spirit." Since it was inspired by the Holy Spirit and is a record of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostolic church and on the ministry of that church, one could even go so far as to call it "The Autobiography of the Holy Spirit." In any case, as we go through the narrative, let's not miss the power and presence of the third person of the Trinity, whom Jesus had promised so deeply and fervently in the Upper Room Discourse found in John's Gospel.

Certain similarities exist between the beginning of Luke's Gospel and the beginning of Acts. Both volumes are dedicated to a person named Theophilus. The name Theophilus, if we break it down linguistically, means "friend or lover of God." *Phileo* is a Greek word meaning "to love," and *theos* is the Greek word for "God." Theophilus can also mean "one who is loved by God." So, the name can mean either "one who loves God" or "one who is loved by God."

Because the name carries with it the concept of being either a lover of God or one loved by God, many have believed that the book is not addressed to one specific person but to all who are beloved of God or lovers of God. The case against that, however, is the addition in Luke's prologue of the title "most excellent."

That is significant because, in the ancient world, often major publications were dedicated to members of the nobility, and members of the nobility were often addressed with gracious titles such as “most excellent.” Since Luke’s Gospel is addressed not to just any Theophilus but to the most excellent Theophilus, many come to the conclusion that the book is ascribed to perhaps a Christian in high places in antiquity who was as devout as his name suggests. However, in the latter part of the first century and in the second century it was common for Christian apologists to address their defenses of the Christian faith to the emperor of Rome.

There is something else to note, briefly here, about the book of Acts. The book is a work of apologetics, a defense of the truth claims of the Christian faith. Along with that, conceivably, is a very important defense of the authenticity of the apostolic authority and office of Paul, because Paul was not one of the original twelve Apostles. Three times in this book there is an account of Paul’s call and his conversion on the road to Damascus, which grants more and more credibility to this one to whom the Lord gave an apostolic mission to the Gentiles. We will look into that more as we encounter it from time to time in the text itself.

### Luke the Historian

Luke knows that others had undertaken the task of writing down a history of the things that had gone on in the life of Jesus:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. (Luke 1:1–4)

Luke, the beloved physician, was an educated man. His Greek is one of the highest in terms of literary quality to be found in the New Testament. He provides evidence of his academic credentials. He is writing not just as a believer but as a historian, basically saying, “I take great care to trace the story from the beginning, from those who were there, to include in my account things that either I saw or other people saw, whom I have interviewed.” We get more information in the Gospel of Luke about the birth of Jesus than from any other source. According to tradition, Luke personally interviewed Mary, the mother of Jesus, to get her perspective on all the events surrounding the annunciation and the Nativity.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we are dependent for our

knowledge of antiquity on the historians who wrote the history of that time. We look to Tacitus, to Heroditus, to Suetonius, and to the Jewish historian Josephus. All these great historians of the ancient world have been subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny of critical scholarship. That is no less true of the Gospel writers. Because Luke wrote both a Gospel and a history of the apostolic outreach of the early church going into Gentile lands, there is a sense in which his work has been subjected to closer scrutiny from a secular perspective than any other biblical biographer.

I believe the Scriptures are the unvarnished Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, infallible, inerrant in everything it says. I do not need the verification of a secular archaeologist to convince me that this is the Word of God, but (just as an aside, from a secular perspective) Luke has been esteemed as the most accurate historian of the ancient world. He enjoys a higher reputation than Suetonius, Heroditus, Tacitus, Pliny, Josephus, or any of the rest. His work has been checked more carefully than anybody else's.

How can we check out Luke's accuracy from the vantage point of the twenty-first century? When he talks about the appearance of an angel by the name of Gabriel to Zacharius or to Mary, it is hard to verify that story through the normal structures of scientific inquiry. Unless we were to find a petrified set of angel wings, we are not going to be able to do that. But there are many things included in this work that do have testability; that is, they can be verified or falsified by archaeological examination.

Early in the twentieth century a British scholar by the name of William Mitchell Ramsay, a skeptic about Christianity, traced the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul as recorded in the book of Acts. He looked for evidence in the landscape and ruins and in the titles of the local rulers or magistrates in foreign cities that were not common knowledge to people who lived in Jerusalem. Ramsay started out a skeptic and ended up a believer because he was overwhelmed by the evidence he was able to uncover. The stones were crying out that every title of every magistrate Luke recorded in the book of Acts was verified by the turning over of the shovel. Likewise, the description and accounts of the towns were just as Luke had described them.

Twenty-five years ago or so I wrote a novel, and in that novel I included an episode in Tokyo. I had never been to Tokyo, and I knew very little about it, but all I had to do was go to the library to get manifold witnesses to street names, important buildings of commerce, and places of entertainment. I was able to reconstruct Tokyo in a fictional way without feeling that I would get caught with inaccuracies in describing the local scene. Today, with the Internet, writing that novel would be even easier. In the novel I also wrote in a detective scene. For

background information I called someone from the FBI, and he explained how the organization works. Luke did not have that advantage. He had no library or Internet to find out how things were in Philippi, or Colosse, or Corinth, or Ephesus, yet the portrait he gives of those locations has been verified time and again. I mention this because Luke labors the point in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke and in the beginning of Acts that he was not writing a religious tract; he was writing history, one that has been corroborated by eyewitness testimony and by what he calls in his prologue to Acts “many infallible proofs.”

### Luke’s Agenda

**The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen** (vv. 1–2). At Paul’s conversion, after he had been knocked to the ground and blinded by the light and had heard a voice calling to him, Paul responded to Christ, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” (Acts 9:6). Years later, when Paul stood on trial before King Agrippa in chains and gave a defense of his ministry, he recounted that story of his conversion. On one occasion Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). Paul responded, “I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains” (v. 29). As Paul made his defense, Festus interrupted and said, “Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!” (v. 24), and Paul replied, “I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason” (v. 25). On that occasion, in the midst of the discussion he said to the king, “Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19).

At the end of my life, I would love to stand before Christ and say, “Lord, I was not disobedient. I did everything you told me to do. I went everywhere you told me to go.” The Lord and I both know that will not be true, so it would be foolish to claim it; but it was true of Paul. Paul’s life and ministry are the paradigm of obedience in the apostolic church. He did do what Christ told him to do.

Luke’s agenda was not only to verify that Paul was obedient to the heavenly vision but to remind his readers of the commandments that Jesus gave just before he ascended. What follows in the rest of Acts is a drama of the highest magnitude—the drama of the obedience of the early church to the mission that Christ had given to it. We have a record of the pristine apostolic community. We might be tempted to try to read Acts as the story of Christianity in its perfection, but if we read the New Testament epistles, we know that the early church was anything but perfect. Most of the apostolic letters were written to correct errors,



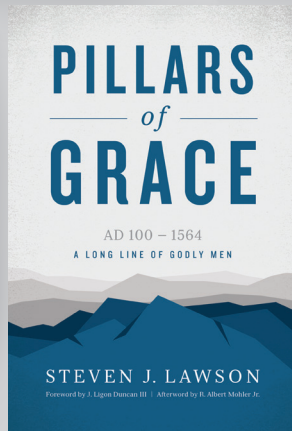
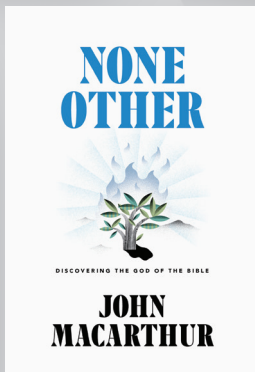
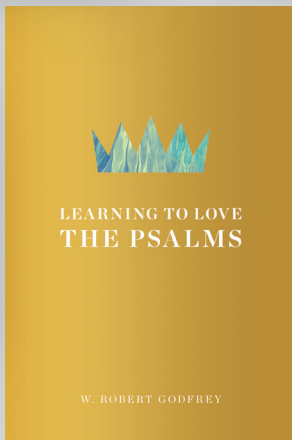
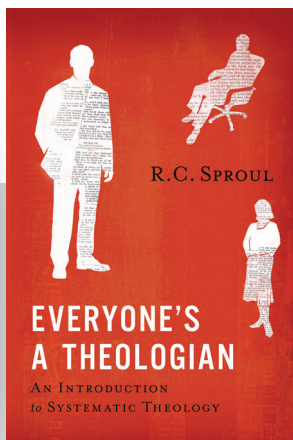
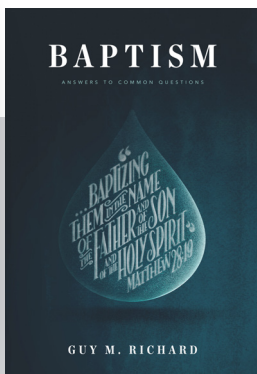
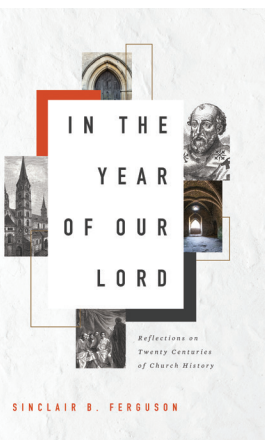
heresies, abuses, and disobedient behavior among the people of the early church. That church was by no means perfect, but it is of vital importance to study because of its proximity to the foundation of the Christian church.

Years ago I was embroiled in a controversy on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, a controversy that never dies. During a meeting of theologians, someone was defending the Reformation doctrine of justification when another said to him, “Well, Luther may have been right in the sixteenth century, but it doesn’t matter anymore.” And the other theologian said, “It’s not the sixteenth-century gospel I’m interested in defending; what concerns me is the first-century gospel.” We must go back to the foundation of the Christian church, to the purity of the gospel as it was set forth by the Apostles, so that we can study the apostolic doctrine in that location. That is what Luke was doing, giving us an account of the obedience to the commandments of the Apostles whom Christ had chosen.

**To whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God** (v. 3). The prologue acts as a preface, and the preface is setting before us the purview of the author, the things he is going to select from the narrative of the early church. Through the rest of the book he talks about the apostolic witness to the kingdom of God. The theme of Acts is this: the church’s obedience to Christ’s commission and commandment to be His witnesses as the ascended King, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. If you wonder why the first-century church turned the world upside down and why we do not, it is because they preached the kingdom of God, and we do not. They believed that the kingdom burst in power at the appearance of the King, who came on the scene after John the Baptist, the forerunner who said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 3:2). Jesus came, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15), and, “If I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20).

A whole new chapter of world history began with the ministry of Christ and with His ascension to the right hand of the Father, where He is enthroned as the King. One of the worst distortions of theology that plagues the evangelical world is the idea that the kingdom of God is something completely future. That view completely destroys the biblical testimony of the breakthrough of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus, especially in His ascension. Yes, the consummation of the kingdom is still in the future, but the reality of the kingdom is now. The mission of the early church was to bear witness to the reality of that kingdom in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.

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# They Took the Gospel to the Nations

Acts is a book of action. But whose actions does it follow? The most obvious answer is the Apostles'. The book's full name is the Acts of the Apostles, for it recounts their efforts to take the gospel to the nations. Yet we can also think of it as the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Poured out "like a mighty rushing wind" (Acts 2:2), the Spirit empowered the Apostles' witness and opened hearts to believe. In this volume, Dr. R.C. Sproul offers an in-depth study on the Spirit's work through these Christians and in the growth and spread of the early church.

Dr. Sproul's expositional commentaries help you understand key theological themes and apply them to all areas of your life. Drawn from decades of careful study and delivered from a pastor's heart, these sermons are readable, practical, and thoroughly Bible-centered. Here is your opportunity to learn from a trusted teacher and theologian as he leads you through God's Word and shares his perspective on living faithfully for God's glory. This is a series to serve pastors, small groups, and growing Christians who want to know the Bible better.

*R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including The Holiness of God.*



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