

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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—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



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Acts: An Expository Commentary

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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

During 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

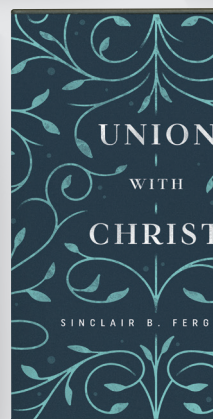
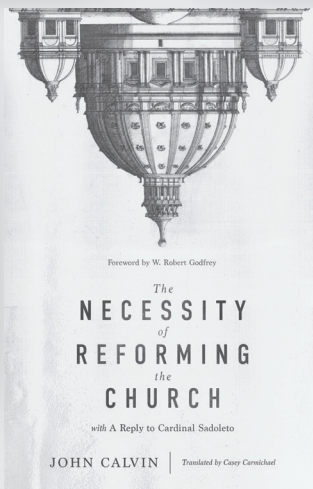
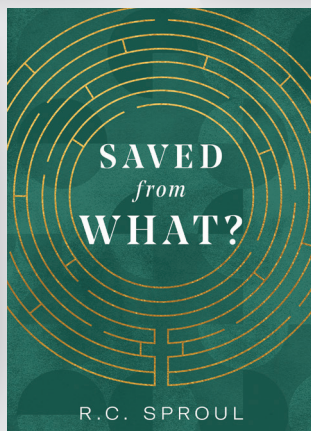
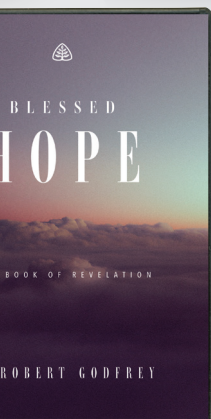
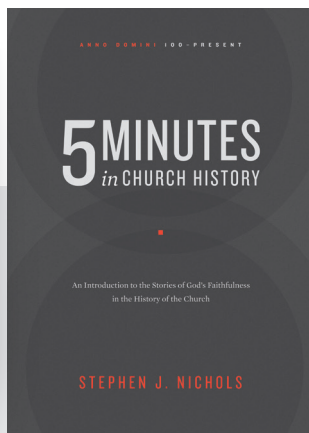
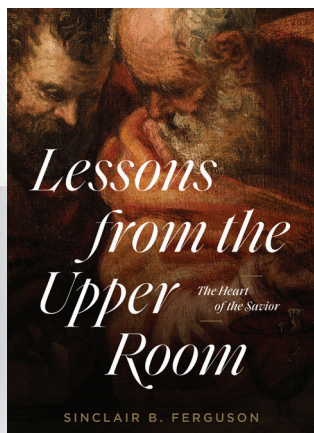
Luke knows that others had undertaken the task of writing down a history of the things that had gone on in the life of Jesus:

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

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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