



# Introduction to the Book of Acts

## (Acts 1:1-3)

*Commentary: Week One*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

### New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

## I. The Spirit Empowers The Church for Witness

The first two chapters of Acts revolve around the miracle of Pentecost. Everything in chap. [1](#) is related to that event. The risen Jesus instructed the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit ([1:4–5](#)). Immediately prior to his ascension, he commissioned them for a worldwide mission and promised that they would be empowered for this by the Holy Spirit ([1:8](#)). Following the ascension, the apostles returned to Jerusalem to the upper room and engaged in fervent prayer, awaiting the promised Spirit ([1:12–14](#)). But it was necessary that the apostolic circle of witnesses be complete so that all might experience the gift of the Spirit, and Matthias was chosen to replace Judas ([1:15–26](#)). Then the Spirit came with great power ([2:1–5](#)). The Spirit-filled apostles began to witness to a large crowd, which represented “every nation under heaven”; and all in the crowd heard this in their own native languages ([2:6–13](#)). As spokesman for the apostles, Peter seized the opportunity to deliver his first sermon in Acts ([2:14–40](#)), and 3,000 were convicted and baptized ([2:41](#)). The newborn “church” consolidated by developing a close community of learning, worshiping, and sharing; and the Spirit of the Lord continued to bless their witness by adding to their numbers daily ([2:47](#)). The entire narrative of Acts that follows will show the ever-increasing scope of their witness as they were directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

### 1. Literary Prologue [1:1–2](#)

Of all the New Testament writers, only Luke used the form of a literary prologue. Such prologues were a convention with the writers of his day, and the use of them suggests that Luke saw himself as a producer of literature for the learned public. Acts begins with a “secondary prologue,” a device used for introducing new segments to works consisting of more than one book. Luke’s, of course, was a two-volume work; and [Luke 1:1–4](#) is the “primary preface” for his entire work, including Acts. In Hellenistic literature a secondary preface usually consisted of a brief summary of the prior volume followed by a short introduction to the matter to be covered in the new volume. The preface of Acts gives a summary of the Third Gospel: “All that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up.” There is, however, no introduction to the content of the new volume. The book is dedicated to Theophilus, without the formality of the title “most excellent” found in the first volume ([Luke 1:3](#)).

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1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 76-79.

[1:1](#) Since the etymology of Theophilus yields “loved by God” or “lover of God,” many attempts have been made to see the name as symbolic, a suggestion first made by Origen. As “lover of God” some would identify him with “God-fearers” like Cornelius ([Acts 10](#)), but Luke used a different terminology for them than “God-lover.” There is no need to see the name as symbolic since Theophilus is a good Greek name, well-documented from as early as the third century B.C. Neither is there warrant for identifying him with a specific Theophilus otherwise known or to speculate that he may have been Paul’s defense lawyer before Caesar in Rome, with Luke-Acts being written as his legal brief. One would assume that Theophilus was a Christian himself whom Luke was seeking to undergird with the “certainty of the things [he] had been taught” ([Luke 1:4](#)). Though Luke surely intended his work for the whole Christian community, Theophilus may have received the special dedication for being a patron who helped defray some of the costs of Luke’s writing.

Luke referred to his Gospel as his “former book.” The Greek text reads literally “first” book, but the NIV translators were surely correct in translating “former.” In classical Greek the word “first” was used only in series that consisted of more than two, the word “former” being used for series of two. Some have used this observation to argue that Luke must have intended a third volume. Such a supposition might help alleviate the abrupt ending of Acts (the outcome of Paul’s appeal is never related), but it cannot be based on the linguistic argument because the word “first” was the normal Greek word in Luke’s day used in series of two. There is no evidence Luke intended a third volume.

Luke summarized his Gospel with the utmost brevity—“all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” The unusual construction “began to” has been noted by many. It may imply that the work is unfinished. The work and words of Jesus continue throughout Acts in the ministry of the apostles and other faithful Christian witnesses. It still goes on in the work of the church today. The summary ends with a reference to the ascension, which marked the closure to the story of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel ([Luke 24:50f.](#)). In Acts the ascension marks the beginning of the story of the church.

[1:2](#) In a real sense the summary ends and the new story begins in the last half of v. [2](#), where mention is made of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples before his ascension. In his Gospel, Luke already mentioned this period when Jesus instructed his disciples after the resurrection, opening their understanding of the Scriptures, commissioning them for a mission to all the nations, and promising the gift of the Spirit ([Luke 24:44–49](#)). This period of instruction and its closure at the ascension will receive fuller attention in the narrative of Acts that immediately follows ([1:3–11](#)). The period of instruction was a time of transition. In the Gospel it was the time when Jesus completed his earthly ministry. In Acts it was the time when Jesus prepared the apostles for theirs.

One interesting question remains in the last half of v. [2](#). How does the Holy Spirit fit in? The NIV translates “after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit.” The account in [Luke 24:44–49](#), however, has the risen Jesus personally instructing the disciples, as does [Acts 1:3–8](#). The Greek order is somewhat ambiguous in verse [2b](#) and could also be translated “after giving instructions to the apostles whom he had chosen through the Holy Spirit.” Either translation shows a close connection of Jesus with the Holy Spirit, and this is fully in accord with the picture in Luke’s Gospel. During Jesus’ ministry, there is no reference to the Holy Spirit being upon anyone except Jesus. The Spirit descended upon him at his baptism ([Luke 3:22](#)), filled him as he returned from the Jordan ([Luke 4:1](#)), led him both in and out of the wilderness ([Luke 4:1, 14](#)), and rested upon him in his programmatic sermon at Nazareth ([Luke 4:18](#)). The introduction of the Spirit in [Acts 1:2](#) is probably not incidental for Luke. He emphasized that the same Spirit who rested upon Jesus in his ministry would empower the apostles for witness. And the same Jesus who taught them during his earthly life would continue to instruct them through the presence of the Spirit once they experienced the Spirit through the presence of Jesus. Formerly they had experienced the Spirit through the presence of Jesus. After Pentecost they would experience Jesus through the presence of the Spirit.