

# Introduction

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome here for this Sunday, April 7th, 2024. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. So as Leah reminded us in some of the songs we sang this morning, we've just come through Holy Week, right?

We've just come through the Easter season. And I'm going to be risky here. I'm going to challenge you with something. He is risen. Jesus is still risen today, not just last weekend.

Okay? It's important for us to remember that we live in the power of a risen Savior. So while we can recognize the immense personal and eternity-altering events that were made possible during that time, we should be able to recognize some other significant things.

The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ altered lives and inspired followers. People's lives and plans were changed in ways they could not have ever begun to imagine.

But as we know, Jesus Christ was also revealed to be far more than just an inspired teacher who gathered followers. He was revealed to be the Messiah, the Son of God.

[ 1 : 18 ] The ministry, the message, the example of Jesus lit a fuse. It started a movement that spread around the world and continues to spread and thrive to this day.

Why are we here this morning? Because of Jesus Christ. But how did it all get started? What were the early gatherings of Christ followers like?

What were their triumphs and challenges? Most importantly, what can we learn from them today?

We're starting a new sermon series this morning called Acts to All the World.

And as you may have guessed or learned from the newsletter this week, the book of Acts in the New Testament is where we can learn all about the early days of the first century church.

Its gatherings, its leaders, its triumphs and tribulations. So this is going to be a sermon series. You'll notice that I specifically didn't say how long.

[ 2 : 21 ] I'm not sure yet. Now I've looked at, well, you can preach the book of Acts in 12 sermons. It feels a little thin. You can preach the book of Acts in 70 plus sermons.

Feels a little long, perhaps. So we're going to go along and see how it goes. So I'm not promising anything. I'm not saying that we'll be done in three weeks.

Not a chance. I'm also not saying that we'll pause at Advent and Christmas and then continue into the new year in the book of Acts. I'm not saying no to that either.

So I'm open to God. So if you want to pray that God inspires me to not go that long, feel free and see how that goes. So the book of Acts is where we'll be, where we're going to rest for a while.

So the New Testament, as we hopefully know, is a collection of 27 books. It includes gospels, historical accounts, epistles or letters to specific audiences, prophetic writings, and even what is known as apocalyptic literature.

[ 3 : 34 ] Sounds scary. Revelation is apocalyptic literature. So some of what is recorded in the New Testament was written to large groups of people. Other things were written to individual Christians or even gatherings of Christians in specific churches in specific places.

So this may surprise you. But did you know that more than a quarter of what is written in the New Testament was written to one person? Did you know that?

Paul already cheated. He said the name. Shh, Paul, shh. So that written to one person. 27% of the New Testament was written from one person to one recipient.

So considered together, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts contain more than 27% of the total words in the New Testament. And both were written to a man named Theophilus.

So there's the stage. So we've set the stage with Luke and two letters that he wrote to one specific person. So I'm going to dig into that more. But the other thing, too, is that we're going to see how that individual correspondence grew to become something very different, something much bigger.

[ 4 : 59 ] If you want to turn with me to Luke 1, verses 1 to 4, I'll read it to you as well. Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, And then in Acts, Acts 1, verses 1 to 3, In the first book, Luke says,

So if you are, lots of you know that I'm a movie person, so I like sequels. So as much as the first film might have been great, sometimes the second one fleshes out the story, continues the story, introduces new characters.

So Luke and Acts 1 to 3, verses 1 to 3, So you heard Luke say there in Acts 1 to 3, he says, Wait a minute. So if you're just reading Acts, you come into it and say, oh, I missed the last episode. Right? So is the book of Acts, and I just spoiled it a little, is it part two somehow? Well, actually, it is. Well, actually, it is. And we'll get there. So with such a significant chunk of the New Testament written to just one man, It's not a bad idea for us to take a moment to consider the relationship between the author of these two writings, which originated as letters, by the way, and the recipient, And then as well as the connection between the two letters themselves.

So we're going to do that. So who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts? Well, given the openings of both books and the common recipient, scholars generally agree that the same person wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

[ 7 : 49 ] And since very early on, even though the author is not really named in either book, like Paul will say, it is I, Paul, and identifies himself. There are no identifiers in Luke or Acts.

But church tradition has supported the idea that Jesus' disciple Luke was the author of both. So what other things do we know about Luke?

Well, Colossians 4, verse 14 states that Luke was a physician. Scholars also agree Luke was thought to have been a Gentile, so not a Jew, but a Gentile.

There are many statements throughout Acts that include the word we. If you read through the book of Acts, you will see the word we continually. So that suggests a third person or narrator, someone who was present at the events and relating them by themselves.

So this narrator would have been a companion to Paul. He would have been featured in much of Paul's writing as well. So as Luke is mentioned, here's where we deduce some things.

[ 8 : 59 ] As Luke is mentioned throughout Paul's writing as being a companion of his, a companion of Paul, this also connects with some of the other conclusions that have been drawn.

So as Luke seemed to have traveled with Paul a great deal, he would have had many opportunities to collect the information, to observe, to participate in, to give firsthand witness to, things that are shared in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Does that make sense? So let's consider now the recipient of these two letters for a moment. Now I can go into a lot of different scholarly theories about who this person was.

Was it actually a person or is it just a generic reference? So you'll see why I say that. But I'm going to stick with the person theory, an actual person.

And you'll see, I'll explain why people think maybe not a person. So the Gospel of Luke was written to, as we read in Luke 1 verse 3, the most excellent Theophilus.

[ 10 : 06 ] Now, if I had another son, I might consider the name Theophilus. It sounds very regal. Call him Theo for short. See, right? It works. But it's interesting to note that this Greek name Theophilus means loved of or friend of God.

So this is where lots of scholars say, okay, this is a generic term. So I could say to someone, oh, most excellent Theophilus, because you are a friend of God, right?

So that you can see that, where someone would draw that conclusion. Now, it's a little thin. So this is why I say I'm landing on the person theory, because this is the one that makes the most sense to me and seems to have the most support.

So the honorary use of most excellent there, it suggests that Theophilus may have actually been a government official of some kind.

So that's an honorary term, and it's used in other ways in the New Testament. So government officials are referred to in this way, actually even by the Apostle Paul.

[ 11 : 14 ] Most excellent. And if you know the movie Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, I wouldn't necessarily recommend it, but they say most excellent a lot. This is most excellent. A most excellent time.

So the most excellent Theophilus. Dude. So the book of Acts is addressed to O Theophilus in chapter 1, verse 1, but without the honorary most excellent this time.

So not much more is known about the identity of this man, Theophilus. So now we do know that there's different possibilities related to the purpose of Luke's letter to him.

So why did Luke write his letter to Theophilus? Especially the one that we now refer to as the Gospel of Luke. Well, in Luke 1, chapter 1, verse 1, we learn Luke is writing partly so that Theophilus may, as Luke phrases it, have certainty concerning the things that he's been taught. So in other words, Luke wants to confirm some things for him, perhaps also correct or clarify some things he may have previously heard incorrectly, or maybe as rumors, right?

[12:31] There are things that he may have heard about Jesus, about the disciples, about the ministry, that may not be correct. So as a physician, it makes sense, right? He's a factual person.

So he's looking to set the record straight. So Theophilus may very well have heard things about Jesus and his followers, and Luke wanted to clarify. So as an eyewitness, as we already said, to the events that would have happened, Luke would have been an excellent source, a reliable source for that information and that context.

So some scholars have also suggested Luke may have written at least partially with the goal of proving that neither Jesus nor his followers posed any political threat to the Roman government. So that sets the stage for Luke a little bit. So why was the book of Acts written? What was Luke's point there? Why did he write it? Well, first, the book of Acts continues the story, as I said, part two, right?

Continues the story that he began in the Gospel of Luke. After recounting Jesus' ministry and his teaching, the book of Acts then picks up right after the resurrection of Jesus.

[13:48] And we'll touch on that starting next week. So it continues immediately. It's a next day kind of story. So second, some scholars have actually concluded that Theophilus may have been the magistrate, may have been the judge who heard Paul's case in Rome.

So the book of Acts may have actually served as a legal brief of sorts that established Paul's defense. And we can see that at times in the book of Acts.

So the book of Acts also seems to, I don't know if you've ever thought of this, it seems to end a bit abruptly. And if you listen to Acts, Acts 28, verses 30 and 31, Luke is speaking of Paul in Rome. And he says, The end.

Roll credits. Feels a little light somehow? Maybe? Like, the book of Acts is so, I mean, as we preach through it over the next two years, you'll hear, you caught that, you'll hear, like there's so much richness and so much depth and so much story.

[15:13] And we know all these pieces of what happens throughout the book of Acts. We know the conversion of Paul, and we know, you know, we know all of these different events, these critical events in the first century church.

But we don't really think of them as one book. These are all contained in the book of Acts. So that's it, right? The book feels a bit like it wraps up quickly before Paul's trial.

So Luke's purpose in writing these two letters to Theophilus was to inform him of the details of the life and ministry of Jesus, and then inform him about the growth and some of the key events of the early church.

So how can we conclude that these letters might have been received by Theophilus? Well, we don't really know. But what effect might these letters have had, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, what effect might they have had?

Well, as we noted already, Luke drops the honorary title, most excellent in Acts, right? He uses it in Luke and drops it when he addresses Theophilus in Acts.

[16:21] So the notable change in tone there between those two letters has suggested a related change in relationship between these two men, or at least in their familiarity between the writer and the recipient.

Some scholars have even suggested that Luke's recounting of the mission and the message and the example of Jesus in the first letter in Luke may have actually resulted in Theophilus' conversion, his conversion to Christianity, or at least in the development of a closer connection or friendship between the two men, a softening of that relationship, and a closeness developing.

So let's look at Matthew 23, verses 8 to 12. And this will feel like a weird, jarring, right turn I'm taking, but don't panic. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. So the point of sharing that is that even if these two men came from different social or economic classes, Christians in the early church didn't use titles like this to address each other.

[ 17 : 56 ] Recognizing that there is a leveling of a playing field here that comes as followers of Christ. So this also suggests that a brotherhood connection may have developed, may have formed between Luke and Theophilus.

And as I said, it's possible that Luke, or that Theophilus, pardon me, may have even become a convert to Christianity. So, and the other thing is, you'll note in Acts at the beginning, Paul moves from most excellent Theophilus to O Theophilus.

So there's, again, a sense of familiarity there. Scholars also suggest that Luke's letters may have had a positive effect on Paul's various appearances before the Roman governor, Felix, and then his successor, Festus.

Those are great names, Felix and Festus. So in his disputes with the Sanhedrin, this would have been, obviously, you know, the Supreme Council and Tribunal of the Jews, Paul's letters may have actually had a positive impact on how that trial would have gone.

So as we know, Paul's temporary freedom gave him the opportunity to travel, to visit many places, most of which we hear about in Acts, and also during which he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus.

[ 19 : 20 ] So Paul's writing was done during the time period that Acts occurs. But even if the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts began as letters originally intended for one man, as we've said, and as they served maybe as a legal brief of sorts to make a case for Paul, scholars still agree that these two works, these two writings by Luke were no less inspired by the Spirit of God.

So just because they were letters, just because they served other purposes, doesn't mean they don't somehow belong in Scripture. So what's the value of these letters?

They're now books of the Bible, right? They're part of the canon of Scripture. So what's the value of them beyond what their original purposes may have been? And we've touched on some of those.

Well, the Gospel of Luke continued the record of the life and ministry of Jesus. Unlike other Gospel accounts, have you ever thought about how Luke is different? Where do we most quote the birth of Jesus at Christmastime?

It's from Luke. So unlike the other Gospel accounts, likely because its author was a physician, this is the perspective of Luke, Luke's Gospel wrote about the human sides of Jesus, the Son of God.

[ 20 : 47 ] So Luke focused more on, if you look at the Gospel of Luke, he focused more on Mary, Jesus' mother. He focused on Jesus' birth, focused on his human growth, not at the expense of his divinity, not even close.

But Luke was very clear in presenting Jesus, the man, also the Son of God. So Luke emphasized Jesus' wisdom through many of his parables.

There's lots of parables in Luke. As well as recounting his death, birth, and resurrection. Very powerful account in the Gospel of Luke. So then the book of Acts picks up from there in a direct sequel of sorts.

Most of us have been moved by the account of Jesus as he is presented in Luke's Gospel. And our faith has likely been moved by his accounts of so much of what Jesus said and did.

I know I find Luke very powerful in the way Jesus speaks and is portrayed there. Luke's Gospel is also the most extensive of the four Gospels. Maybe you didn't know that.

[ 21 : 54 ] It's written in chronological order. And again, I think this is a physician's influence. He states for Theophilus that he has written an orderly account.

So he's basically saying, Luke is saying, I've captured it all. I've laid it out for you in a logical, easy-to-follow format. The book of Acts is anchored in historical context.

And it conveys important details of the time as well. Such as who the rulers were, that's touched on throughout Acts, and what key events were happening as well.

So we have historical and relatable contemporary context to the events that are happening in the book of Acts. And Luke also records many examples of conversion to Christianity throughout the book of Acts.

Particularly as Peter instructs a larger group, Philip does some drive-through personal evangelism on the road. Luke's account also gives us an idea of evangelistic messages and methods that the early church used, that the apostles and gospel preachers used in the early church.

[ 23 : 08 ] The book of Acts also gives us many examples of personal conversion experiences that can help us to better understand our own journey with Christ, help us to lead others into a relationship with Christ as well.

So we can see how the gospel was presented by others to others. And that can help us to better understand our own experience. Were we told the same gospel?

How did we respond? Did we respond in the same way? A different way? And as I reflect on it now, in the moment, what gospel are we hearing in churches in the West?

Is it the gospel of Jesus Christ as conveyed by the early church? I have to wonder sometimes. The book of Acts contains the only record of the first 30 years of the church.

Did you know that? Begins shortly after Jesus' resurrection and ascension and continues as the good news of salvation spread to all the world as Jesus commanded.

[ 24 : 23 ] Acts describes much of the nitty-gritty, like the details, the how, the whens, the whys, the establishment, the growth, the organization, the worship even of the early church, where their priorities were anchored and their focus was riveted.

Comparing Luke's record in Acts and the religious world of today, we can see, I think, how far people have drifted from following Jesus as the way.

It wasn't complicated. I had a conversation with someone the other day about denominations and got Protestantism and Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Church and how are they all similar? How are they all different? And I tried to unpack as best I could and I said, at the end of the day, I think Jesus is pinching the bridge of his nose a lot and saying, brothers and sisters, I did not make this this complicated.

You made it far more complicated than I ever intended it to be. And one day, we will all come back together and worship him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

[ 25 : 35 ] Side sermon. Two letters written to one man sometime in the early 60s AD. Who would have thought that a simple correspondence between two men would have come to have had the impact that it did, that it continues to have?

The power of these works is due to their interpretation and presentation by the Spirit of God. Have you read these two letters? Do so and you will have already checked a box of a quarter of the New Testament.

You'll have the opportunity to learn so much about Jesus. So much about the salvation that is available to humanity through him and the early history of his church.

So we're going to take this journey together in the coming weeks and months and years. Maybe. As we continue in our series, Acts to all the world.

Amen. Amen.