

## What Is Christianity All About?

Acts 1:1-3

### Stubborn Facts

As John Quincy Adams famously quipped: “Facts are stubborn things.” He went on to explain that “whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

Among the “stubborn facts” of life, we must include the astonishing fact that Christianity exists today. We often forget how improbable this is. Nearly 2,000 years ago, against all odds, thousands of people in Jerusalem began worshiping Jesus of Nazareth, a wandering Jewish teacher who had been condemned by his own religious leaders and crucified by the Romans (Acts 2:41; 4:23-30). The earliest Christian documents say that hundreds claimed that they saw him alive (1 Corinthians 15:6). And within a few decades, this Jesus movement had gained a firm foothold in “the Eternal City”—Rome itself (Acts 28:17-31).

This astonishing fact cannot be denied, but it begs to be explained. How did this happen? The answer to that question is found in the book of Acts. Simply stated, Acts teaches us that the work of Jesus did not end when he died on the cross, nor when he rose from the tomb, nor even when he ascended to heaven. Rather, *Jesus Christ continues to work across all kinds of boundaries, as people who believe the good news about him receive the Holy Spirit.*

### We Are All Theophilus

Luke, who wrote both the gospel bearing his name and the book of Acts, addressed both volumes to a man named Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Besides the hint that Theophilus was a wealthy Roman official, we don’t know much about him. One thing we do know is that Theophilus had learned some facts about Christianity, but he lacked “certainty” (Luke 1:4). *In this respect, we are all Theophilus:* whether we have learned about Christianity on the level of a child or an advanced theologian, we need a grasp that is deeper, clearer, and more satisfying.

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With this in mind, Luke begins the book of Acts by presenting the basic facts of Christianity. He summarizes what Jesus did and taught during the forty days between his resurrection (that is, when Jesus rose from the dead) and his ascension (that is, when he was hidden from human view and enthroned in heaven, Acts 1:9; 2:33; 3:21; 17:31). Thus, we may see this passage as answering the question, “What is Christianity all about?”

- 1. Christianity is about a kingdom.** “Speaking to them about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3, see also Luke 4:43).

*Importance of the kingdom.* The phrase “kingdom of God” occurs only eight times in the book of Acts (1:3, 6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), but its importance cannot be denied when we note where it is mentioned. Near the beginning of Luke, Jesus had said that he was sent for the purpose of preaching the good news about the kingdom of God (4:43). And at the beginning of Acts, Jesus is still teaching about the kingdom of God (1:3). Finally, at the end of Acts, we find the Apostle Paul teaching about the kingdom of God (28:31).

*The meaning of a kingdom.* A “kingdom” is the realm, rules, and ruler under which humans live—and, ideally, in which they flourish. Everyone has ideas about the best kind of “kingdom” (whether in the home, work, school, business, etc.), but these ideas often clash. You are thinking in “kingdom” terms when you tell yourself, “If I were in charge, I would change \_\_\_\_.” To say that God’s kingdom has arrived (Mark 1:15; Matthew 3:2) is to say that the way in which God intends to bring humans to flourish under his authority has finally broken into history.

*Confusion about the kingdom.* In a world dominated by ruthless and incompetent leaders, the announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived brought tremendous excitement (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). But, just like us, the followers of Jesus had their own ideas about the kingdom of

God. Perhaps it would be a time when they would finally bask in celebrity status (Luke 9:46-48), enjoy political power (Matthew 20:20-23) or national victory (Acts 1:6)! Perhaps it would come with a massive military uprising against the Roman government! But all these ideas were dashed to pieces when Jesus was crucified. What kind of kingdom could possibly exist whose king had been executed?

## 2. Christianity is about the King.

The despair of his disciples ended when Jesus rose from the dead. But because of their lingering confusion, Jesus still had to re-teach his disciples about the true nature of the kingdom and about his work as the King. Luke mentions three parts of Jesus' work: his death ("his suffering," 1:3), his resurrection, "he presented himself alive," 1:3), and his ascension ("taken up," 1:2, "lifted up," 9-11).

*Jesus' death* means that the penalty of sin could be paid for by a sinless sacrifice (Acts 2:24).

*Jesus' resurrection* proved that his death was not a defeat, but the greatest triumph ever. World rulers may do their best to manage the fruits of sin, but King Jesus conquered the root of sin itself.

*Jesus' ascension* was his ascent to the throne as King. He passed from the view of his disciples, not to leave them, but to guarantee that his authoritative presence would be with them everywhere, for all time (Matthew 28:19-20). Moreover, because Jesus ascended, the benefits of his death and resurrection are now available to anyone who believes in him, since he pours out the life-giving Spirit on all who repent and believe (Acts 2:33, 38).

The fact that Christianity is about the King means that the Christian faith is not about us and what we must do for God; rather, it is about King Jesus and what he has done to bring us to God (see Acts 2:39; 2 Corinthians 5:20). This is why the response to the message of the kingdom is not "Reform!" Instead, it is "Repent and believe!" (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38; 3:26; 16:31).

Simply stated, Christianity is about the kingdom of God and its King, Jesus Christ. At this point in history, this kingdom of God coexists with the kingdoms of this world. It grows, person by person, when men and women, boys and girls put their trust in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. But one day, when Jesus returns, "the kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

## Questions for Discussion and Application

1. **Need for Certainty.** Luke suggests that Theophilus needed "certainty" about the things he had been taught (Luke 1:4). The phrase rendered "have certainty" carries the idea of a *more thorough knowledge*. What problems arise when we have a shaky grasp of the Christian faith?
2. **Clash of kingdoms.** What evidence do you see in our world (whether at home, work, school, in politics, etc.) that there are clashes of kingdoms? What different visions for human flourishing are behind these conflicts?
3. **If you could change anything.** Discuss what one thing in the world you would change if you had unlimited power. Jesus, who *did* have unlimited power, came for just one purpose: to make people right with God. If we truly valued that redemptive purpose for coming to earth, how might that change our outlook on the problems in our lives this week?
4. **Kingdom of God.** The psalmists agree with the emphasis on the kingdom of God, often proclaiming "the Lord reigns" (for example, Psalm 97:1). If we *really* believed that God was king over everything, discuss specific ways that would change our perspective on current events, our level of anxiety, or the way we treat our family members, or coworkers.
5. **Hard to believe?** The study guide states that "the Christian faith is not about us and what we must do for God; rather it is about King Jesus and what he has done to bring us to God." Why do you think so many people have a hard time believing this? What features of our hearts make it difficult to accept this?