

ACTS 1–5

Acts 1:1–3. Precedent 1: Commissioning the Apostles—Their Role, Authority, and Evidence

The first few verses of Acts deal with priesthood authority and duties of the Apostles and Church officers. The Apostles were commissioned as witnesses and received instructions on how to prepare for Jesus’s return. They were called to witness to the world the divinity of Jesus and the truth of His gospel.

Several elements that may be called legal or administrative can be found here. For example, the Greek word *apostolos* was introduced into Christian writing from the Hellenistic world of shipping and commerce. Linguistically, its meanings developed to correspond approximately with the modern English words *agent*, *ambassador*, and even *group envoy*, referring to people who have literally been sent forth with the legal power and authority to act on behalf of another individual. In the case of the early Christian Church, Jesus can be seen as the principal, with the Apostles as Jesus’s representatives or agents. While the concept of agency was strongly present in the Jewish and Greek legal systems, the general concept of agency was almost absent in Roman law.

Following His Resurrection, Jesus not only instructed the Apostles for forty days but also gave them commandments. The Hebrew and Greek words for “command” also have legal connotations, not only in religious settings—such as with the Ten Commandments—but also in the context of issuing one’s last will and testament, and even more specifically when investing someone with legal powers and authority to act on behalf of the principal. Using such words of validation and authorization signified that the Apostles had become the authorized agents and heirs to the rights and powers recently bestowed upon them by Jesus Christ before and just after His Resurrection.

According to Acts 1:3, the Apostles had been given “many infallible proofs” (*en pollois tekmēriois*) that Jesus had been divinely appointed by God, was resurrected, and now had ascended. Having mentioned

such evidences in the concluding chapters of his Gospel, Luke does not take time here to restate the many things that people had openly seen and heard in this regard. Luke considers that case conclusive enough. Interestingly, the strong word *tekmēriois*, deservedly translated as “infallible proofs,” was used in the spheres of medicine, law, and logic. Speaking as a physician, Luke invites people to see the physical resurrection of Jesus in terms of a medical case whose symptoms were so strong that they acted as infallible proofs, warranting the conclusive diagnosis of sickness or health. Legally speaking, this word was used to describe such proofs as were demonstrative and compelling evidence that allowed the ruling in favor of any legal position. Logically speaking, Aristotle used this term when referring to evidence solid enough to constitute a complete irrefutable proof as opposed to a rebuttable sign or mere analogy.

Acts 1:4–11. Precedent 2: Commissioning the Apostles—Formal Assembly, Directive to Witness, and Angelic Witnesses

The Apostles assembled with Jesus in a special gathering (*synalizomenos*) that appears to be more than a casual meeting. The nature of their assembly on this occasion was ceremonially and legally more complex than is immediately obvious. This Greek word is translated in the King James Version as “being assembled together,” but literally *synalizomenos* describes a group that is “eating salt together.” The Old Testament connection between salt and the covenant may be symbolically relevant to this word on this occasion. Much like the phrase “breaking bread” can mean eating together, it can also refer to a covenant-making or covenant-renewing ordinance. Therefore, this event was not just a casual lunch or social dinner.

Among other things, at this meeting the Apostles were called to be witnesses, and not just in a reporting mode but in a legal sense, specifically to be “my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and throughout the land” (1:8). Calling the Apostles to be witnesses in Samaria and other nations necessarily implied contact with Samaritans and Gentiles, which required reevaluation and possibly repudiation of traditions that discouraged, and in some cases forbade, contact between Jews and Samaritans and Jews and Gentiles. Changes in that previous restriction were thereby authorized, though they were not specifically acted upon until a little later, when the time was right. The serious teaching and commissioning that occurred at this gathering not only bestowed on the Apostles the authority to do their work but also yielded a record giving them formal credibility and authority before all the followers of Jesus and also in the eyes of various rulers or judges.

Jesus commissioned and instructed His Apostles, answered their questions, and then ascended. As the Apostles watched Jesus ascend into heaven, they became aware of the presence of two men dressed in white who stood as the legally necessary two witnesses required under Jewish law to establish the truth of an event or covenantal promise (see Deuteronomy 19:15). As well as assuring the Apostles that what they had seen was real, these two angels testified that Jesus would return, witnessing to the truthfulness of Je-

sus's statements and the covenantal relationship He had established with the Apostles (Acts 1:10). Thus, one of the main purposes of this episode is to report the legal binding and commissioning the Apostles as witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 1:12–26. Precedent 3: Replacing Judas Iscariot

In Acts 1:14, the Apostles and other witnesses to the Resurrection “continued” (King James Version), or “persisted” or “waited,” with one accord to perform with unanimity the duties left to them by Jesus, among which was the selection of Judas Iscariot’s successor. Having established the legality of appointing a replacement, they sought legal justification and scriptural clarification for how to replace Judas. They developed a two-stage process involving both (1) the qualifications and (2) the divine authorization to determine whom the Lord would have them appoint and ordain.

While Judas once had the legal place or clerical right (*klēros*) to remain in this service, Peter explained that Judas had forfeited that position through sin, specifically by breaking the Hebrew law that prohibited taking bribes. Judas had personally used the thirty pieces of silver that he had received unjustly from the judges and chief priests to purchase the field known as “the field of blood” (Matthew 27:8; Acts 1:19). There he died in a way that suggested a divine hand had played a role in his punishment.

Peter then consulted the scriptures to address a legal issue regarding the replacement of Judas in his former role among the Apostles. To justify Judas’s replacement as a member of that group, Peter quoted especially Psalm 109:7–8: “His bishoprick let another take.” After justifying the action, qualified candidates were identified by the criteria that required them to be followers of Christ and witnesses of His Resurrection. Two candidates were “put forth,” or “presented”—namely, Matthias and Barsabbas.

In line with biblical patterns, Peter petitioned God to make known His will for this selection: “And they prayed, and said, ‘Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, that he may take part of this ministry and apostleship’” (Acts 1:24–25). He sought an answer to the prayer and a sign from God by traditional legal means that took the form of casting lots, or pebbling (dropping your rock in one box or the other to cast your vote). The Apostles followed these legal steps and selected Matthias to serve with the other eleven as a witness of the Resurrection and as an agent of the Savior (1:26). Matthias was appointed to fill the office, or lot, left vacant by Judas and was numbered with the eleven. Interestingly, the word for “lot” here, *klēros*, is the same as the word used initially to refer to Judas’s rightful place in the council.

This episode sets a strong expectation that the number of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles be replenished, when needed, to always be twelve.

Acts 2:1–36. Precedent 4: The Feast of Pentecost

All the Apostles were soon gathered again “with one accord.” As promised by Jesus in Acts 1:4–5, the Spirit descended upon them, accompanied by tongues of fire, whereupon they taught the new law such that each of the Pentecostal visitors in Jerusalem could understand in their own language. Significant legal themes and factors are particularly abundant in this account. Indeed, Pentecost was celebrated each year as a kind of “law day” fifty days after Passover. It commemorated the day when the Lord appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the law. During that event, Moses had been surrounded by flames and thunder in the holy mountain. Now, on this occasion near the holy temple mount, tongues of fire flared through the crowd as a marvelous manifestation of God’s presence and approval. And just as Moses had taken seventy elders into the mountain, symbolically representing the applicability of the law of Moses to all nations, seventy languages were now understood as Peter spoke to a large gathering from all over the region on this first new day of Pentecost. That experience in the mountain was the precedent behind the annual celebration at the temple for the holy day of Pentecost (literally meaning “fifty”), which fell fifty days after Passover. The house where this large crowd had gathered must have been an unusually large structure and thus could well have been part of the temple complex itself (Acts 2:2).

Peter formally addressed the audience as “Ye men of Judea and all ye that dwell in Jerusalem,” implying an official welcome by the Church of Jesus Christ to all leaders and occupants of Jerusalem as well as other devout Jewish visitors. He quoted Joel 2:28–29, legally justifying and recognizing that God’s spirit was now open to and had come upon all people: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.” Having assured the crowd that the outpouring of the Spirit was of God, Peter testified in accordance with his commission that Jesus of Nazareth was a man singled out by God and made known to the people through “miracles, portents, and signs, which God worked among you through him” (Acts 2:22). Because some had thought that Jesus worked His miracles by evil forces, Peter’s attestation that His miracles were of divine authority countered any lingering doubts in that regard.

In this formal speech, Peter further certified that Jesus’s execution had occurred with God’s full foreknowledge and within divine purposes that had been established in the eternal, premortal council (*boulē*), according to the eternal plan (as *boulē* may also be translated). Nevertheless, Peter testified that Jesus’s death had occurred unlawfully, by “an anomalous (illegal) hand” (Acts 2:23). As evidence that Jesus’s Crucifixion had been foreknown by God and also foreseen by David, Peter then quoted Psalm 16:8–11.

Among other results, the events on this day of the new Pentecost demonstrated the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the presence of the power of the Holy Ghost, and the official acceptance of their Apostleship by the heavens, and—last but not least—it set a clear precedent that Christians should continue to celebrate Pentecost as had been required under the law of Moses. But for Christians, this feast would now take on many new but related meanings, the gospel being both old and new.

Acts 2:37–43. Precedent 5: Peter’s Instructions to Take the Gospel Abroad

At the end of his Pentecost speech, Peter exhorted his audience to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). He then extended the legally significant promise of the covenant of Abraham to them, their children, and their distant posterity (2:39).

The extension of this promise to further generations is suggested by the phrase “all who were afar off” (2:39). This phrase is taken from Isaiah 57:19, which may refer not only to posterity but also to converted Gentiles. Peter’s audience was predominantly Jewish, yet the promise was extended to all who would repent and be baptized. The Abrahamic covenant was now to apply to Gentiles, a significant development since they are not necessarily physically descended from Abraham. For example, since the Abrahamic covenant involved circumcision, extending the covenant to members of the Christian Church meant the Apostles would later need to determine whether circumcision would be necessary for gentile converts. That issue will arise in Acts 10.

This phrase may also refer to those who were “afar off” because they had sinned.¹ Applying the ecclesiastical order of the Church, those who were baptized in this way and followed Peter’s rules of worship and conduct continually would “save themselves from this untoward generation” (Acts 2:40). These new converts then were allowed to continue in full “fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayers,” demonstrating that converts from a diverse background were being assimilated into the group and that all functioned as a cohesive organization (2:42). That this pattern of living became fundamental to the new Church organization is demonstrated by Paul’s giving similar advice in his epistle to the Philippians. Reflecting Peter’s authoritative words, Paul’s advice refers to the converts as being “in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:14–15).

Acts 2:44–47. Precedent 6: Unity and Miracles by Having All in Common and Honoring God

A large number of new converts of diverse origin were assimilated with full fellowship into the new Christian community (using here the term *koinonia*; Acts 2:42). That community grew and became a body of healthy, unified believers of Jesus, as “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

In this formation of the early Church, one finds clear influences of Jewish, Greek, and Roman models of associations. For example, the Greek word *koinonia* was a legal term for the partnership or association in the common management of money or property for defined purposes. In this case, these people had all their property in common (*koina* [2:44–46; 4:32]), and the Church redistributed that property based on the needs and abilities of the people. This arrangement is reminiscent of the United Order in the early days of the Restoration and of the current law of consecration. Jesus, during His earth life, told the rich young man in Matthew 19:16–29 what would be required of people to obtain treasures in heaven. Jesus said, “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure

in heaven: and come and follow me.” Peter and the other Apostles put this principle into practice in the fledgling Church, and its faithful members were clearly trying to follow it.

Because the people were exercising the virtue of reverence as God-fearing (or pious) people, the Apostles were able to perform many signs and wonders (Acts 2:43) in the name of Jesus. As set forth in Deuteronomy 13, all such miracles were to lead people to love and follow only the Lord Jehovah and no other. Logically, it thus becomes clear that Christians recognized that Jesus was truly the Jehovah of the Old Testament, who was “crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). Otherwise, miracles performed in His name could not pass the rigorous prohibition against wonders performed in any name other than that of Jehovah.

Acts 3:1–10. Precedent 7: Healing and Caring for the Poor

In this episode, a lame man begging for alms at the eastern gate (the Golden Gate) of the temple was healed by Peter and John (Acts 3:1–10). This gate, on the east side of the temple and city wall, led out directly onto the side of the Mount of Olives, near the Garden of Gethsemane. The beggar had asked Peter for money, to which Peter responded that he had no silver or gold, which was true because Peter had given all his property to the Church community. But instead, Peter gave him health and hope. In doing so, Peter established the precedent that miracles of healing, as Jesus had performed, would continue to be performed by His new priesthood holders acting in the name of Jesus Christ (3:6). Moreover, Peter made clear that it is better to give health and healing than alms. In this way, the old law, which required that “you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be,” now became new (Deuteronomy 15:8–9). The new order required the lame man first to “look on” Peter and John, echoing the way that Moses had told the Israelites to look up at a brass serpent (Acts 3:4). Peter then took the beggar “by the right hand” and miraculously his feet and ankles received strength (3:7), giving him “that which they had”—namely, the blessings of Jesus. Rather than just providing temporary relief, the Apostles of Jesus Christ gave something more lasting: the manifestation of the power of the priesthood and of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The people who saw this “ran together” as a large group to tell all the people in Solomon’s Porch in the temple about this miracle that had just been performed (3:11).

Acts 3:11–26. Precedent 8: An Opportunity to Teach and Bear Witness

Having attracted a large crowd, already “greatly wondering,” at Solomon’s Porch (Acts 3:11), Peter addressed the crowd, again calling them “Ye men of Israel.” He testified that it was not by their own powers that the lame man had been healed. He took the opportunity to bear witness that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had glorified Jesus, God’s Son. The lame man, said Peter, had been healed through his faith in the name—that is, by the revealed law and personal authority of Jesus.

While testifying concerning the trial and death of Jesus, Peter again laid legal blame for Jesus's death on some of the Jews, just as he had also done on the day of Pentecost and as he would soon do again before the Sanhedrin (2:36; 4:8–11). He stated explicitly that the Jewish leaders had delivered (*paredōkate*) Jesus up for trial. This is a little different from the material in the Synoptic Gospels, especially in Mark 15:15, in which more of the blame seems to be placed on the Romans. A similar word, *prodidōmi*, means “to betray.” By using the former word rather than the latter, it appears that Peter is not accusing the Jews of betrayal; rather, he is accusing them of simply handing Jesus over, especially in ignorance of His divinity and the manifestation of God's will (Acts 3:17). Peter thus made a specific legal point that Jesus's death occurred because of ignorance, invoking to their benefit the mitigating provisions in the homicide laws of Moses regarding those who act or sin ignorantly or unwillingly (Exodus 21:13–14; Numbers 15:27–29). In that light, Peter was able to reassure the Jews that because of God's obligations under His covenant made with Abraham, the Lord had come to them first so that they might turn away from their iniquities (Acts 3:26).

Acts 4:1–14. Precedent 9: Peter and John Withstand Accusation before the Sanhedrin

As a result of the healing at the Golden Gate of the temple, Peter and John were arrested by the chief priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees and were taken by those officials to stand trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1–14). Legal details, naturally, are plentiful in this episode.

Because it was evening and because trials did not normally go into the night, the two Apostles were held in prison overnight (4:3). The documented description of the next day's events indicate that an official trial then took place. First, an impressive array of judges, including Annas the high priest, commenced to examine the accused. The Apostles were placed in the conventional location for defendants—that is, in the middle of the semicircular gathering of the Sanhedrin. Peter referred to the proceedings as “being examined” (4:9).

These and other terms in this account indicate that Peter and John were indeed being tried before the Sanhedrin acting as an official court. The legal question involved here was, “By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?” (4:7). Performing miracles in the name of the Lord God was permissible, but performing such wonders in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth would have been questionable. First, miracles could be performed only in the name of the God of Israel, and any person who used miracles to lead Israel to worship other gods must be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 13:1–5). Obviously, this Jewish council had not accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the God of Israel.

Second, communing with familiar spirits, or spirits of the dead, was strictly prohibited.² Peter and John claimed that they had spoken to and received power from Jesus after His death.

Third, performing miracles in the name of Jesus Christ was evidence of the worship of Jesus Christ, thereby raising questions of idolatry (Exodus 34:14).

Once this examination was over, the judges were astonished at the unique nature of Peter's responses. Since they regarded the two Apostles as unlearned and untrained, they were surprised at the effectiveness of the Apostle's defense. Here was a great example of the Savior's promise: He had advised, "And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say" (Luke 12:11–12). This set the precedent for the Christians to rely on this promise. Peter admitted and testified that the miraculous healing of the lame man was performed in Jesus's name and by Jesus's power. However, he also argued that the result of this miracle was unquestionably good, which thus demonstrated its divine authorization and approval. Presumably this argument worked, at least to some extent, because that council, the full Sanhedrin, took time to deliberate before they responded.

Acts 4:15–30. Precedent 10: Peter and John Refuse to Be Silenced

The Apostles, and possibly the healed man who was present, were then commanded to leave the council while the members conferred to determine what other actions they might take. The notable miracle was undeniable and was known throughout Jerusalem (Acts 4:16). However, the council did not want the effectiveness and notoriety of the Apostles' miracle to expand further. Peter's defense was that the miracle was performed by divine authorization and approval. Perhaps for this very reason the penalty imposed by the court was not death (as would have been required under Deuteronomy 13:1–6) but rather only the issuance of a prohibition against further speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. A similar punishment, called *damnatio memoriae*, was used to forbid any speaking of the name of a vile criminal who had been executed. It was a form of condemnation in which all traces and memories of the person were to be obliterated. The court took that option and strictly ordered Peter and John to refrain from using Jesus's name in public (Acts 4:17).

However, Peter and John set an important legal precedent for all Christians to follow. By refusing to be bound by this unprecedented order, the Apostles demonstrated that it was more righteous to obey God than to obey this weak effort by the court to silence them (4:19). The court could do nothing at that point except reissue the warning and discharge Peter and John. For one thing, the two Apostles had not yet ignored the prohibition, and thus they could not be punished even though they stated up front their bold intention to disobey this order. Also, the people were wildly in favor of what the two Apostles had done because the man had been publicly known as a cripple for forty years (4:21).

When Peter and John then returned to their people, they praised God and swore to stand up against kings and rulers (4:26–27). This proclamation set the precedent for bold civil resistance by Christians since they planned to continue to heal and perform signs and wonders by invoking the name of Jesus. This episode established three legal precedents: (1) for miracles to be performed by Christians in the

name of Jesus, notwithstanding the commandments to have and to worship no other god, as the Jews supposed; (2) at the same time, not allowing Christians to call upon ghosts or other spirits; and (3) for priesthood authorities to put only “my name,” the name of Jehovah, upon the children of Israel.³

Acts 4:31–5:11. Precedent 11: Entrusting Property to the Apostles

As the Apostles bore witness of the Resurrection, many members of the Christian Church sold their land, took the proceeds, and laid them at the Apostles’ feet. Subsequent distribution of this money ensured that everyone had all things in common and sufficient for their needs. The following case then arose out of the process of depositing property at the feet of the Apostles (Acts 4:35). For Christians, this was tantamount to pledging property or paying a vow to the temple, as had previously been done under Numbers 30. It also illustrated how the believers should follow two of the commandments of Jesus: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, . . . [but] in heaven” and “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matthew 6:19–20; 19:21).

Barnabas, as a positive example, sold his land for cash and gave all the proceeds to the Apostles (Acts 4:36–37). Interestingly, the text identifies Barnabas as a Levite born in Cyprus. Under the division of land after the conquest of Canaan, the Levites received no land among the tribes of Israel. From a legal perspective, Barnabas’s land would thus not have been subject to any rights of redemption under Leviticus 25, and so this transaction would not have posed any problems concerning rights of first refusal on the part of any next of kin, and thus Barnabas’s land could be sold and donated free and clear of any inchoate claims. Thus, if this precedent is strictly limited to the special facts of this case involving a Levite, then Jewish converts to Christianity coming from other tribes in Israel would not have been expected to sell the lands of their inheritance in the land of Israel but rather only their personal property or their estates in other lands.

As a direct contrast to the acceptable offering of Barnabas, a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, knowingly kept back part of the sale of a possession that was their personal property. That the couple may have been affluent can be supported by the use of the Greek word *tis* (in the designation *anēr tis Ananias*)—meaning “a certain, or notable” man—a word commonly used by Luke to distinguish a prominent person.⁴ Both Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, died suddenly. They were buried by the young men, a point that became a Christian tradition. Though medical explanations may have existed for their sudden death, to the early Christians this was no doubt viewed as divine punishment. The seemingly God-inflicted punishment exacted upon Ananias and Sapphira for their dishonesty in purporting to consecrate all their resources demonstrated that within Christianity, such a failure was a serious matter in the eyes of God. This precedent thereby established the rule that lying to God will result in divine, not human, punishment.⁵ In such a case of robbing God, the offenders were not punished by the Apostles or other Church authorities but were left to God’s judgment.

Acts 5:12–42. Precedent 12: Healing in the Name of Jesus

This case begins with multitudes being healed and many signs being given (Acts 5:12–16). This event brought about the second arrest of the Apostles—this time perhaps all or many of the Apostles—by the high priest (5:18). Legal elements are obviously present in this case. Having been placed in the common prison, the Apostles were freed by the angel of the Lord. Their liberation served as definitive proof of divine approval for their escape because they left with the prison still being locked (5:19–24). Nevertheless, they were peacefully arrested again. In addition to being indicted for continuing to perform miracles in Jerusalem, they were accused of speaking in the name of Jesus and of filling Jerusalem with their doctrine (5:28).

At their trial, Peter and the other Apostles unequivocally reaffirmed that they would “obey God rather than men” (5:29), and they took the opportunity to stand as witnesses in court, testifying again that the Jews were responsible for Jesus’s death (5:30). These statements cut the judges to the heart (5:33). Gamaliel, an expert in Jewish law, advised the Sanhedrin to let the matter go (5:34, 39) since all who followed earlier brigands or self-acclaimed prophets (such as Theudas and Judas) had been killed or scattered by the Romans, and thus nothing problematic had come of such cases.

As a result, the Apostles were reprimanded, beaten, and again prohibited from speaking in the name of Jesus (5:40). As they left, they counted it an honor to be worthy to suffer legal indignities for the sake of Jesus’s name (5:42). This episode certainly expanded the circle of those who might expect to be likewise arraigned before and beaten by the local courts to include now not only Peter and John but also all the Apostles. Gamaliel’s opinion that that the court should consider the Christians to be like bandits or robbers whom the Romans should either execute or disband stood as a stern warning to Christians since being a robber—like being a pirate or bandit—was clearly a capital offense usually punishable by crucifixion.

Notes

- 1 Talmud, Sanhedrin 99a, online at <https://sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.99a?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.
- 2 Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10–12.
- 3 See Exodus 20:3; 34:14; Leviticus 21:26–27; Numbers 6:27; Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; Isaiah 42:8; 45:5–6.
- 4 See, for example, Acts 9:36–43; 10:1; 14:8–10; 19:13–17, 34.
- 5 Acts 5:4; compare Malachi 3:8: “Will a man rob God?”

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