

THE CHURCHES AS THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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The Acts of the Apostles, the second installment of Luke's narrative addressed to the God-loved Theophilus, opens with the actions and teachings of the resurrected Jesus concerning the kingdom of God (1:1, 3).¹ During the forty days between His resurrection and public ascension, Jesus "presented Himself alive..., appearing to them" (v. 3). Prior to His crucifixion Jesus promised His disciples that He would be in them as the Spirit (John 14:17, 20; cf. 7:38-39), and after His resurrection Jesus came to the disciples and breathed Himself into them as the Spirit (20:19, 22). Having been with the incarnated Lord in the flesh for three and a half years, the disciples were accustomed to His visible presence. But after His resurrection they needed a forty-day training period to learn to know Him, live with Him, and follow Him according to His invisible presence. Hence, in these forty days Jesus repeatedly appeared and disappeared until the disciples were assured that He was with them "all the days" (Matt. 28:20; cf. 1:23; 18:20). The Lord's word to Paul in Acts 18:10, "I Myself am with you," further indicates that the Lord's invisible presence is the portion of all of the Lord's followers, including the disciples who came to know Him after His resurrection and ascension.²

When the Lord appeared to them, He spoke of things concerning the kingdom of God. The Lord not only demonstrated to His disciples that He is the resurrected and indwelling One living in and through them; He also specifically instructed them concerning the kingdom of God. The theme of the kingdom is echoed in the final verse of Acts, which concludes with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered" (28:31). Acts 1:3 and 28:31, as the introduction and conclusion—the bookends of Acts—confirm that the Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom are the main theme of this book.³ In *Life-study of Acts* Witness Lee more fully identifies the subject of Acts as being "the propagation of the resurrected Christ in His ascension, by the Spirit, through the disciples, for the producing of the churches—the kingdom of God" (9). This statement associates the kingdom of God with not only the church universally but also the churches locally. It appositively relates *churches to the kingdom of God*, highlighting the equivalence of the churches to the kingdom of God as an integral theme of Acts.

The Kingdom of God in the New Testament

The kingdom of God is a ubiquitous term in the New Testament. It appears in the Gospels and throughout the other books of the New Testament and often in connection with the church. Significantly, when the church is first mentioned in the New Testament, the Lord, who introduced the term (Matt. 16:18), associated it with the term *the kingdom of the heavens* (v. 19). The next reference of the Lord to the church is in 18:17. Here *the church* refers to its local expression and practice because the context is that