

The Acts of the Apostles

Introduction – Many scholars believe that the book of ACTS is the most important book in the New Testament. Its placement between the Gospels and letters makes it most certainly the most pivotal of New Testament books. It records the origin and growth of the Christian movement, telling us how the first believers lived out Christianity. Acts can also be described as “the master plan of discipleship.”³⁴

“Live in that book (Acts), I exhort you: it is tonic, the greatest tonic I know in the realm of the Spirit.” – Martin Lloyd Jones

THE AUTHOR

There are few arguments, none that carry any theological weight, that Luke is not the author of ACTS. Most theologians agree on the author of Acts as being the same Luke as the Gospel. The introduction of the book confirms this assumption.

“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” Acts 1:1-2

As well we see that the book contains ninety-seven verses during Paul’s journeys where the third person is replaced by the first person plural – the so-called “we passages,” which claim to be the observation of an eyewitness. We know from Paul’s letters that Luke was his companion in Rome.

“If Luke did not write the Third Gospel and Acts, it is difficult to explain how the tradition connecting his name with these documents ever arose, since he is otherwise an insignificant figure in the early Church.” – Ward Gasque

Originally, as you might expect, these two volumes circulated together as one complete and independent History, but not for long. Early in the second century the four “canonical” Gospels were gathered together into one collection and began to circulate as the fourfold Gospel. This meant that the earlier volume of our twofold History was detached from its sequel and attached to three works by other writers which covered more or less the same ground, relating the story of Jesus and ending with

³⁴ Ajith Fernando, The NIV Application Commentary. Zondervan Publishing, 1998 p21

the witness to his resurrection. The second volume (Acts) was thus left to pursue a career of its own, but an important and influential career, as it proved.³⁵

While I think it is important to keep the historical emphasis of Acts is must not come in lieu of its theological implications. Scripture was not intended to be characteristic of the history books of the school systems. There includes enough history to validate the writing but never an exhaustive recount of history as the intent is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correct, and training IN RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

The book of Acts seems to have a variety of audiences throughout the writing however it begins as an address to Theophilus, or God-lover, in the same was as Luke's first book. As stated in the introduction of Luke this could, and will be evident in the book, mean any number of people falling into the category of God-lover.

Luke addresses some particular audiences throughout the book through preaching events by certain people. Those are broken down in the following chart.

2:1-47	3:1-26	8:26-39	10:1-48	13:14-52	14:6-20	17:16-34
Palestinians and Jews	Jerusalem Jews	God – fearers/General	God- fearers/General	Jews and God- fearers	Gentiles	Intellectual Gentiles

As you can see there are gaps within the scriptural references. These occasions often reflect a time of teaching before the synagogue, high priest, trials, imprisonment, etc and therefore would be categorized as events that occur as a result of the preaching and teaching to particular audiences.

THE OCCASION FOR ACTS

Again, Acts is written in conjunction with the Gospel of Luke. Its timeframe as stated earlier in the study during the section on Luke's Gospel is sometime before 70AD, most likely mid 60's. It most defiantly occurred prior to the destruction of the temple in 70AD as there is no mention of the event in the book.

Luke takes the occasion to write Acts to “finish” the story and show the completion of Jesus work on the cross. To end at the ascension does not show the fullness of the completed work of Jesus as he continually promised throughout his life that the comforter, the Holy Spirit, would come after him to guide and direct. That is precisely the story of Acts. The Holy Spirit comes and the church expands to the ends of the earth. It is indeed a book of motivation and inspiration of just what the power of God can and will do through his people. His Church is being established and the Kingdom is coming to earth as it is in heaven.

³⁵ F. F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts, Revised Edition. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988 p3

OUTLINE OF ACTS

- A. Prologue (1:1-2)
- B. Preparation for Pentecost (1:3-26)
- C. Witness in Jerusalem (2:1 – 7:60)
- D. Witness in Judea and Samaria and the Beginnings of Gentile Evangelism (8:1 – 11:18)
- E. Witness to the Ends of the Earth (11:19 – 28:31)

ACTS 1:1 – ACTS 7:60

- A. Prologue (1:1-2)
- B. Preparation for Pentecost (1:3-26)
 - 1. Instructions Before the Ascension (1:3-8)
 - 2. The Ascension (1:9-11)
 - 3. After the Ascension (1:12-26)
- C. Witness in Jerusalem (2:1 – 7:60)
 - 1. The Day of Pentecost (2:1-47)
 - 2. Healing at the Temple and Its Consequences (3:1 – 4:31)
 - 3. Radical Community (4:32 – 5:11)
 - 4. The Apostles Before the Sanhedrin (5:12-42)
 - 5. The Appointing of the Seven (6:1-7)
 - 6. The Ministry and Martyrdom of Stephen (6:8-7:60)

Acts 1:1-2 – Prologue

The prologue is the linchpin that ties the Gospel of Luke to the Book of Acts. This portion sets the stage for the introduction and recap of the end of the Gospel as to not lose sight of what has taken place and the reason it has taken place.

Preparation for Pentecost

Act 1:3-8 – Instruction before the Ascension

- Jesus gave proof of his resurrection by his appearing to the apostles.
- Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God.
 - This referred to the reign and rule of God and was the key to his teachings through the Gospels.
 - The references themselves do not appear as often in Acts as they do the Gospels. It seems this is the case because the Kingdom is actually expanding physically. Jesus emphasis was for them to understand the

Acts 1:8 ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Kingdom and its potential growth. Acts is showing that understanding come to fruition.

- The promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (verses 4-5).

WHEN DOES THIS TAKE PLACE IN THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN?

WHAT TYPE OF EXPERIENCE IS IT?

- Restoration NOT like Israel. Jesus heart was likely saddened by this.
 - A kingdom not of this world.
 - Greater than any ever seen.

The verb, the noun and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. The verb *restore* shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun *Israel* that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause *at this time* that they were expecting its immediate establishment.³⁶

- The alternative aspiration of evangelism and the heavenly kingdom. (verse 8)
 - Reach the entire region
 - Reach the entire world

Acts 1:9-11 – The Ascension

Luke's mention of this period is what has caused the Christian church to place the Ascension Day forty days after the Easter. In the apostolic witness Jesus' resurrection and ascension seem to form one continuous movement, and both together constitute his exaltation.

There were multiple occurrences of the disappearing Jesus from the presence of the disciples.

- The Breaking of Bread
- Emmaus Road
- Upper Room
- Breakfast on the Beach

³⁶ John Stott, Acts; p41

**WHAT HAPPENED ON THE FORTIETH DAY WAS THAT THIS SERIES OF VISITATIONS
CAME TO AN END WITH A SCENE WHICH IMPRESSED ON THE DISCIPLES THEIR
MASTER'S HEAVENLY GLORY.**

Act 1:12-26 – After the Ascension

Disciples were given specific instructions to wait for the Holy Spirit. This time of waiting was twofold:

1. Prayerful Anticipation
2. Prayerful Expectation

In their waiting a replacement for Judas is chosen. This choosing of one who would represent Jesus' authority with eleven remaining disciples was not one to take lightly, and the disciples did not take it as such.

Both men chosen were qualified for the position and therefore they voted like any good democratic system and appointed Matthias to be the twelfth man.

Practical Implications of this Section

- 1. Kingdom Minded Followers**
- 2. Prayer Filled Decisions**
- 3. Great Expectancy of Things Promised**

Witness in Jerusalem (2:1 – 7:60)

The Day of Pentecost (2:1-47)

The second chapter of Acts introduces three of the most important keys to the entire book: the fullness of the Spirit, the evangelistic ministry of the church, and the community life of the believers.

Fullness of the Holy Spirit (1-13)

- Occurred 50 days after Easter
- Was a major feast day that required a pilgrimage to the Holy City
- Was perfectly timed by the Lord to have a harvest that was plentiful

EFFECTS OF PENTECOST:
i. FILLED WITH POWER
ii. SPOKE IN DIFFERENT TONGUES

RESULTS OF A HOLY SPIRIT FILLED LIFE:
POWER
WITNESS

Peter's memorable words to the beggar indicate that they were in touch with the power of Jesus. –
F.F. Bruce

Healing at the Temple and Its Consequences (3:1 – 4:31)

Lame Man Healed - The story begins during one of the daily visits that Christians made to the temple; this particular one is at 3:00PM.

- Peter acted in accordance with the way Jesus would have if he were present.
- Astonishing piece of the miracle is that the disciples now possessed the power to heal just as Jesus had promised.

Peter's Speech (3:11-26) - This speech is complimentary to the Pentecost speech (2:22-40). It is not exactly a repetition of the previous sermon given by Peter. Different aspects are emphasized and new perspectives are introduced, broadening the picture of Jesus' significance for the people of Jerusalem.

Acts 2:17 ¹⁷ "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

Deflects Glory from Himself - Acts 3:12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

Significant Christological Statements – The speech begins and ends with the expression of Jesus as God's "servant."

Peter Cites Blessing to the Audience – The promise of blessings made to Abraham (v.25)

The Consequence – Arrest and Trial

Peter and John are placed before the Sanhedrin. Many of those who participated in Jesus trial are present including Annas and Caiaphas. They are disturbed by the news of a resurrection and the preaching this "Gospel" concerning Kingdom.

Disciples are technically on Defense, yet they switch to an attacking position in their response.

Acts 4:10-11 It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'

- Their boldness they are dismissed as uneducated given a warning and are discharged (4:13-22)
- A Prayer of Praise is had by their people, the disciples. This most likely the 120 or so disciples that are in Jerusalem about to be dispersed throughout the continent to proclaim the Good News. (4:23-28)
- Request Granted (4:29-31)
 - God shows his power
 - They go out and proclaim boldly

Radical Community (4:32 – 5:11)

The Second time Luke describes the quality of the radical sharing that the first Christian community practiced (2:44-45 was the first occurrence).

*It is NOT surprising that,
with such spectacular
ministry by the apostles,
the Jewish leaders
“were filled with
jealousy” (v17)*

Their possessions were a shared entity. This was not a government mandated and enforced practice. “All the believers were one in heart and mind.”

Acts 5:1-11 - Deception of Ananias and Sapphira

- Practice was not wrong
- Hearts were selfish
- Lying was punished

*Their loves, their
hopes, their passions
joined. – John Wesley*

The Apostles Before the Sanhedrin (5:12-42)

- Power continued through the Holy Spirit

The Apostles are Arrested, Tried, and Beaten.

- This would be the beginning of the sufferings they would face for the sake of Gospel.
- It would not slow their efforts to spread the Good News.

REJOICE AFTER A BEATING

“Incredibly, the Apostles rejoice over their flogging, because ‘they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.’ This is an oxymoron: the disgrace was an indicator of their worth, so they felt honored by the dishonor!”³⁷

The Appointing of the Seven (6:1-7)

The Need – Widows and Poor

The Apostles were being bombarded with hurting people. Notice they want to help but cannot devote time to helping full time and preaching full time.

Choose Seven men to focus on these issues so that ministry appropriately happens and preaching of the gospel is not diminished.

Choose people to do what they have been given the gift to do and let them thrive using their gift.

³⁷ Ajith Fernando, The NIV Application Commentary

The Ministry and Martyrdom of Stephen (6:8-7:60)

Stephen receives a significant amount of space in Acts. It is not just because he is the first martyr. He presented the church some radical implications of the gospel, especially about the temple.

Stephen a man of Character (6:5, 8-10)

Stephen Charged (6:11-15)

- Excellent debater...silenced the Jews
- Jews turn to law (similar to the trial of Jesus making false accusations)

Stephen's Speech

“NOT JUST HIS DEFENSE BUT RATHER A PRESENTATION OF PURE CHRISTIANITY AS GOD’S APPOINTED WAY OF WORSHIP.” – F.F. BRUCE

1. The activity of God is not confined to the geographical land of Israel
 - a. Mesopotamia - 7:2-3
 - b. Haran - 7:4
 - c. Egypt - 7:9-16
 - d. Desert of Sinai - 7:30-34
 - e. Red Sea and Desert – 7:36
2. Worship acceptable to God is not confined to the Jerusalem temple
3. The Jews have constantly rejected God’s representatives
 - a. Joseph
 - b. Moses
 - c. Jesus
 - d. Stephen
 - i. A history of rejection (7:51-53)

Paved the way for “radical” faith and “bold” proclamation.