

ACTS

The Spread of the Gospel

The Acts of the Apostles

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Introduction

As the second book Luke addressed to Theophilus (see Luke 1:3), Acts may originally have had no title. The Greek manuscripts title the book “Acts,” and many add “of the Apostles.” The Greek word translated “Acts” (praxeis) was often used to describe the achievements of great people. Acts does feature the notable figures in the early years of the church, especially Peter (chapters 1–12) and Paul (chapters 13–28). But the book could more properly be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles,” since His sovereign, superintending work was far more significant than that of any human being. The Spirit directed, controlled, and empowered the church and caused it to grow in numbers, spiritual power, and influence.

Author and Date

Since Luke’s gospel was the first book addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:3), it is logical to conclude that Luke is also the author of Acts although he is not named in either book. The writings of the early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome affirm Luke’s authorship, and so does the Muratorian Canon (ca. A.D.170). Because he is a relatively obscure figure, mentioned only three times in the New Testament (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24), it is unlikely that anyone would have forged a work to make it appear to be Luke’s. A forger surely would have attributed the work to a more prominent person.

Luke was Paul’s close friend, traveling companion, and personal physician (Colossians 4:14). He was a careful researcher (Luke 1:1–4) and an accurate historian, displaying an intimate knowledge of Roman laws and customs, as well as the geography of Palestine, Asia Minor, and Italy. In writing Acts, Luke drew on written sources (15:23–29; 23:26–30), and he also, no doubt, interviewed key figures, such as Peter, John, and others in the Jerusalem church. Paul’s two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (24:27) gave Luke ample opportunity to interview Philip and his daughters (who were considered important sources of information on the early days of the church). Finally, Luke’s frequent use of the first-person plural pronouns “we” and “us” (16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) reveals that he was an eyewitness to many of the events recorded in Acts.

Some believe Luke wrote Acts after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70; his death was probably in the mid-eighties). It is more likely, however, that he wrote much earlier, before the end of Paul’s first Roman imprisonment (ca. A.D. 60–62). That date is the most natural explanation for the abrupt ending of Acts—which leaves Paul awaiting trial before Caesar. Surely Luke, who devoted more than half of Acts to Paul’s ministry, would have given the outcome of that trial and described Paul’s subsequent ministry, second imprisonment (2 Timothy 4:11), and death, if those events had happened before he wrote Acts. Luke’s silence about such notable events as the martyrdom of James, head of the Jerusalem church (A.D. 62, according to the Jewish historian Josephus), the persecution under Nero (A.D. 64), and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) also suggests he wrote Acts before those events transpired.

Background and Setting

As Luke makes clear in the prologue to his Gospel, he wrote to give Theophilus (and the others who would read his work) “a narrative of those things” (Luke 1:1) that Jesus had accomplished during His earthly ministry. Accordingly, Luke wrote in his Gospel “an orderly account” (Luke 1:3) of those momentous events. Acts continues that record, noting what Jesus accomplished through the early church. Beginning with Jesus’ ascension, through the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost, to Paul’s preaching at Rome, Acts chronicles the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church (1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5;

19:20). It also records the mounting opposition to the gospel (2:13; 4:1–22; 5:17–42; 6:9–8:4; 12:1–5; 13:6–12, 45–50; 14:2–6, 19–20; 16:19–24; 17:5–9; 19:23–41; 21:27–36; 23:12–21; 28:24).

Theophilus, whose name means “lover of God,” is unknown to history apart from his mention in Luke and Acts. Whether he was a believer whom Luke was instructing or a pagan whom Luke sought to convert is not known. Luke’s address of him as “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3) suggests that he was a Roman official of some importance (24:3; 26:25).

Historical and Theological Themes

As the first work of church history ever penned, Acts records the initial response to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20). It provides information on the first three decades of the church’s existence—material found nowhere else in the New Testament. Though not primarily a doctrinal work, Acts nonetheless emphasizes that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, shows that the gospel is offered to all people (not merely the Jews), and stresses the work of the Holy Spirit (mentioned more than fifty times). Acts also makes frequent use of the Old Testament: for example, 2:17–21 (Joel 2:28–32); 2:25–28 (Psalm 16:8–11); 2:35 (Psalm 110:1); 4:11 (Psalm 118:22); 4:25–26 (Psalm 2:1–2); 7:49–50 (Isaiah 66:1–2); 8:32–33 (Isaiah 53:7–8); 28:26–27 (Isaiah 6:9–10).

Acts abounds with transitions: from the ministry of Jesus to that of the apostles; from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant; from Israel as God’s witness nation to the church (composed of both Jews and Gentiles) as God’s witness people. The Book of Hebrews sets forth the theology of the transition from the Old Covenant to the New; Acts depicts the New Covenant’s practical outworking in the life of the church.

Interpretive Challenges

Because Acts is primarily an historical narrative, not a theological treatise like Romans or Hebrews, it contains relatively few interpretive challenges. Those that exist mainly concern the book’s transitional nature (see Historical and Theological Themes) and involve the role of signs and wonders. Those issues are addressed in the notes to the relevant passages (for example, 2:1–47 and 15:1–29).

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Acts 1:1—2:47

Opening Thought

1) Someone once quipped that God has had to endure three great humiliations: (1) becoming man in Christ, (2) becoming sin on the cross, and (3) the church.

What would you say is the reputation of Christ's church in the world? Why? What are some things we do as believers to bring reproach on the name of Jesus?

Background of the Passage

Luke's book of Acts picks up where his gospel left off, providing details of the birth and early years of the church that Jesus had promised to build (Matthew 16:18). Together the two books, Luke-Acts, form a comprehensive and seamless account of how the followers of Jesus "turned the world upside down" (17:6) by taking the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to "the end of the earth" (1:8).

The opening chapters of Acts portray the apostles and other disciples gathered together in Jerusalem just before the feast of Pentecost. Following Christ's ascension into heaven and a season of prayer, the time comes for the fulfillment of the promise of the indwelling Spirit (Luke 24:49; John 14:16–17, 26; 16:5–15). This marvelous, miraculous outpouring of God results in the birth of the church and provides the supernatural power for believers to take the life-changing message of the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18–20).

Chapter two concludes with a snapshot of church life in the first century.

Bible Passage

Read 1:1—2:47, noting the key words and definitions to the right of the passage.

Acts 1:1—2:47

- ¹ *The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach,*
- ² *until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen,*
- ³ *to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*
- ⁴ *And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me;*

5 *“for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

6 *Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

7 *And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.*

8 *“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

9 *Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.*

10 *And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel,*

11 *who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”*

12 *Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey.*

13 *And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James.*

14 *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*

15 *And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said,*

16 *“Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus;*

17 *“for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.”*

18 *(Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.*

19 *And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.)*

20 *“For it is written in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling place be desolate, And let no one live in it’; and, ‘Let another take his office.’*

21 *“Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,*

22 *“beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”*

23 *And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.*

24 *And they prayed and said, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen*

25 *“to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.”*

26 *And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.*

2:1 *When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.*

2 *And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.*

3 *Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them.*

4 *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

5 *And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.*

6 *And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.*

7 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak
Galileans?
8 "And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?
9 "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and
Asia,
10 "Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews
and proselytes,
11 "Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."
12 So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?"
13 Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine."
14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell
in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words.
15 "For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.
16 "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:
17 "'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your
sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream
dreams.
18 "'And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall
prophesy.
19 I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.
20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and
awesome day of the LORD.
21 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.'
22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders,
and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—
23 "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless
hands, have crucified, and put to death;
24 "whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held
by it.
25 "For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the LORD always before my face, For He is at my right hand,
that I may not be shaken.
26 Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope.
27 For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.
28 You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.'
29 "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and
his tomb is with us to this day.
30 "Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his
body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne,
31 "he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor
did His flesh see corruption.
32 "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.
33 "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the
Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.
34 "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My
right hand,
35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"'
36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified,
both Lord and Christ."
37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men
and brethren, what shall we do?"
38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the
remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

39 “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God
will call.”
40 And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, “Be saved from this perverse
generation.”
41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were
added to them.
42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in
prayers.
43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.
44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common,
45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.
46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their
food with gladness and simplicity of heart,
47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were
being saved.

the former account (v. 1)—the Gospel of Luke

He was taken up (v. 2)—Christ’s ascension to the Father

forty days (v. 2)—the time-period between Christ’s death and His ascension

wait for the Promise of the Father (v. 4)—Jesus repeatedly promised that God would send His followers the Holy Spirit.

restore the kingdom to Israel (v. 6)—The apostles still believed the earthly form of the Messiah’s kingdom was imminent.

receive power (v. 8)—a new dimension or divine enabling for witness

witnesses (v. 8)—The English word “martyr” comes from this Greek word; it designates one who tells the truth about Christ (which often resulted in death).

two men ... in white apparel (v. 10)—angels in the form of men

come in like manner (v. 11) —Christ will one day return with clouds to the earth (the Mount of Olives) to set up His kingdom.

Bartholomew (v. 13)—also known as Nathanael (see John 1:45–49)

Judas, the son of James(v. 13)—also known as Thaddeus (see Mark 3:18)

brothers (v. 14)—actually halfbrothers

the Holy Spirit ... by the mouth of David (v. 16)—a clear description of divine inspiration

must become a witness with us of His resurrection (v. 22) —Judas’s replacement among the apostles had to be one who had participated in Jesus’s earthly ministry and seen the resurrected Christ.

his own place (v. 25)—a way of saying that Judas chose his own fate by rejecting Christ

cast their lots (v. 26)—a common Old Testament method of determining God’s will; no longer necessary after the coming of the Holy Spirit

Pentecost (2:1)—the Feast of Weeks or Harvest, celebrated fifty days after Passover

mighty wind (v. 2)—a frequent Scriptural picture of the Spirit

tongues, as of fire (v. 3)—a symbolic indicator of the divine presence

with other tongues (v. 4)—known languages, not ecstatic utterances

speak in his own language (v. 6)—These pilgrims in Jerusalem were hearing the Galilean disciples speaking about the wonderful works of God (see verse 11) in their native dialects—an astonishing miracle.

wonderful works of God(v. 11)—probably quotations from the Old Testament

new wine (v. 13)—Some accused the disciples of being drunk.

spoken by the prophet Joel(v. 16)—a pre-fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy; the Spirit will be poured out in full during Messiah’s millennial kingdom

last days (v. 16)—the present era of redemptive history from the first coming of Christ all the way to His second coming

visions ... dreams (v. 17)—a common source of revelation in the Old Testament; rare in the New Testament; they will become frequent again during the Tribulation period spoken of by Joel

signs (v. 19)—These mighty works are not an end in themselves, but they point to God and His truth.

attested ... by miracles, wonders, and signs (v. 22) —God validated Jesus as the Messiah by the supernatural works He performed.

not possible (v. 24)—Because of his divine power and God’s promise and purpose, death could not keep Jesus in the grave.

Hades (v. 27)—the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament grave; the general place of the dead

his tomb is with us (v. 29)—a reminder to the Jews that David was never resurrected; thus he could not be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Psalm 16

Therefore (v. 36)—Peter summarizes his sermon with a powerful statement of certainty: the Old Testament prophecies of resurrection and exaltation provide overwhelming evidence that the crucified Jesus is the promised Messiah.

cut to the heart (v. 37) —wounded, stabbed; that is, under intense spiritual conviction

Repent (v. 38)—a change of mind and purpose that turns an individual from sin to God

be baptized ... for the remission of sins (v. 38)—be dipped or immersed in water to identify symbolically with Christ’s death, burial and resurrection; this act does not result in sins being washed away, rather it is an act of obedience to which we submit because our sins have been remitted (an alternate translation)

apostles’ doctrine (v. 42)—the exposition of God’s revealed truth, that is, the Scripture

fellowship (v. 42)—partnership or sharing in the faith

breaking of bread (v. 42)—a reference to the Lord’s Table, or Communion

all things in common (v. 44) —not communism or a redistribution of wealth, but a generous attitude in which they held possessions lightly and moved quickly to meet needs in the body

the Lord added (v. 47)—salvation is a sovereign event

Understanding the Text

2) What words and phrases does Luke use in his opening paragraph to drive home the truth of Christ's resurrection?

3) What instructions and insights did Jesus give His followers concerning the Holy Spirit?

(verses to consider: Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; Titus 3:5–6; Ephesians 3:16, 20)

4) Following the ascension of Christ into heaven what did the believers do? What are we told about the identity of this group?

Cross Reference

Read Ephesians 3, Paul's description of the church, and add the insights there to what you see regarding the birth of the church in Acts 2.

Exploring the Meaning

5) What theological insights does Paul's exposition in Ephesians 3 add to Luke's historical narrative of the birth of the church? What is God's intent in creating the entity we call the church?

6) What was the thrust of Peter’s sermon to the gathered crowd at Pentecost?

7) Books about church-planting, church health, and church growth are in vogue. Seminars about the church have multiplied, with pastors and church boards eager to copy the techniques of successful pastors and fast-growing congregations. How does Luke describe the atmosphere and activities of the first-century church (see 2:42–47)?

Summing Up ...

“In an effort to appeal to people’s interest, the church today emphasizes a great many different programs, methods, and approaches. Small group activities, sharing, and ‘culturally relevant’ worship services, emphasizing music and drama, have become increasingly popular. Secular psychology, management techniques, and advertising strategies have all made significant inroads into the life of the church. Seminars on everything from how to have a good marriage to how to handle money abound.

“Not all of those things may be harmful. Some, in their place, may even be helpful. But what has too often been sacrificed in the flurry of activities and programs is the priority of preaching. While some moderns may bid it good riddance, such has not been the attitude of the church through history, starting with the early church. The first event of church history, following the coming of the Spirit, was Peter’s sermon. It led to three thousand conversions and launched the church. The book of Acts is largely the record of apostolic preaching. Preaching has always remained central to the church’s mission.”—*John MacArthur*

Reflecting on the Text

8) In Acts, there is always a close connection between the activity of God's Spirit and the proclamation of the gospel. Time and again those who experience the baptism or filling of the Spirit begin immediately speaking with others the truth about God and His Son, Jesus Christ. How vocal are you about the things of God? To what do you ascribe this?

(verses to consider: 1:8; 2:4, 17; 4:8, 31; 6:10; 10:44–46; 13:9; 19:6)

9) Reflect on your prayer habits (and your church's). What specifically and practically can you do this week to emulate the early church in this area?

10) Write down a prayer for your church (that it might become all that God wants it to be). Ask God to make you faithful to serve and give and pray.

Recording Your Thoughts

For further study, see the following passages:

Genesis 18:2

Exodus 3:2–6

Exodus 16:29

Leviticus 16:8–10

Psalm 16

Psalm 10:1

Ezekiel 37:9–10

Joel 2:28–32

Matthew 4:23

Matthew 16:18

Matthew 24:30

Matthew 27:3–10

Mark 9:26

Mark 13:32

Luke 1:1–4

Luke 7:20–23

Luke 24:51

John 17:12

Acts 4:32

Romans 6:3–4

1 Corinthians 11:24–29

1 Corinthians 12:13

1 Corinthians 15:5–8

Ephesians 1:7

Ephesians 5:18

Philippians 3:13–14

1 Thessalonians 1:9

2 Timothy 1:9

2 Peter 1:21

1 John 1:3