

THE BOOK OF ACTS
Introduction

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To study the book of Acts is to participate in an adventure of faith which began in Jerusalem and ended some thirty years later in Rome, which was the capital of a huge empire that stretched from Britian to Arabia.

The characters in this drama include regional governors, Roman centurions and soldiers, kings, common folk, and aristocrats/upper class. There is Stephen, the first Christian to die for his faith; an Ethiopian finance officer; James, the Lord's brother and head of the Jerusalem church; Cornelius; Aquila and Pricilla; Silas and Barnabas. But Peter is the main feature in the first part of the story, and Paul is center stage during the last part. But throughout the entire story the central figure is always Jesus, the risen Lord.

While not written as history, the book of Acts gives us our only record of the beginnings of Christianity—from Jesus' instructions to His disciples between the resurrection and His ascension, to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the founding of God's new order, the Church. From Jerusalem, empowered believers took the Good News of salvation throughout Judea, Samaria, and Galilee—all of Palestine.

Traditionally, Luke has been accepted as the author of Acts, the second volume to the third Gospel. This gives Luke, the only gentile writer in the New Testament, the distinction of writing more than one fourth of the New Testament. We are not sure of Luke's beginning, but tradition suggests that he may have come from either Syrian Antioch or Philippi. We do know that he was a physician, a companion of Paul in many of his travels, and an able writer and historian.

We know, also, that Luke was with Paul on his last trip to Jerusalem, throughout his imprisonment at Caesarea, and on his final journey to Rome. This means that much of Acts is an eyewitness account, and what isn't came to Luke from reliable eyewitnesses.

The time and place where Acts was written cannot be determined for certain. But tradition seems to favor a date between A.D. 60 and 70. Tradition also holds that it was written in Rome.

As we move into this “bridge” book between the Gospels and the Epistles, which follow, we find God at work through His Holy Spirit in the hearts of Jew and gentile alike. We see a energized young Church on the move. The mood is one of holy restlessness as first-generation Christian’s witness to the life-changing power of the gospel of Jesus. His new fellowship is beginning to take shape—nothing could stop it then; nothing can stop it now. We are the church, and no evil force can prevail against us.

The book of Acts is God’s “rest of the story.” Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke continues the story he began in his Gospel, with the second volume as he shows us what happened to the Christian faith after Jesus’ ascension.

The time period covered by the book of Acts is approximately A.D. 29-67. It was a time of peace and stability in the Roman Empire. Travel was relatively easy and safe. The common language of Greek made communication possible throughout the empire. Basically, the time was ripe for the expansion of the Christian community. And that is precisely what the book of Acts describes. It begins with a small band of believers in Jerusalem and ends with Christianity existing all over the known world. In between is a storyline that reads like a modern-day adventure story.

But we should not let the fast-moving quality of the book blind us to the careful piece of history that it is. Luke demonstrates the same care for order and detail in this book that he did in his earlier Gospel account. Many scholars agree that the clue for organization can be found in Acts 1:8. Here we see both the centrality of the Holy Spirit and the planned expansion that can be traced throughout the rest of the book: *“... ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”*

Theme wise, Acts focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit through the lives of the early disciples. Matter of fact, some scholars have said that the book could have been titled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.” As we study this book, we will often focus on the idea of effective witnessing, drawing comparisons between the first century and ours. In addition, we will encounter the basic content of early Christianity through several important sermons. And from start to finish we will see how God worked to create Christian community and to establish Christianity as a universal religion.

A knowledge of the message of Acts is essential if we are to understand how Christianity moved from Jesus to Paul—from Palestine to the world. Without it we would

not only have a historical “blank,” we would also fail to discover many ways in which the Holy Spirit can use us in the continued expansion of the Church.

The Book of Acts begins with a group of people whom God intended to use to change the world. But they were not ready yet. They didn’t fully realize it, but they needed to be prepared. I believe that’s what the fifty-days between the resurrection of Jesus and Pentecost were all about. It is easy for us to overlook this needed time of preparation because we are told so little about what happened during those days.

We are told, though, during the forty-days between His resurrection and His ascension, Jesus taught the disciples about ***“things pertaining to the kingdom of God”***

(1:3). This must have been the most intensive time of instruction the disciples had ever known. In his Gospel, Luke says that Jesus: ***“. . . opened their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” (24:45)***. That in itself is amazing, and it speaks of the depth of teaching and learning that took place.

01/03/2024