

Introduction to the Book of Acts

The book we know as the Acts of the Apostles has also been, probably more accurately called 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles'. It shows how the Holy Spirit worked through the Apostles of Jesus in the life of the early church.

It has also been shown to be a book that is accurate historically. Researchers have combed the book for details and have found that the author, Luke, can be seen to be a historian of the highest integrity and accuracy. However, Luke is not just a historian, he is primarily a disciple of Jesus, and his express desire in this book is not to give a mere historical account of the days of the early church, but to show the works of the apostles, or the Holy Spirit through the apostles to 'Most Excellent Theophilus' and to us, as he does in his gospel earlier.

Firstly, we know that the Book of Acts has been attributed to Luke, as the author opens with the greeting to the 'Most Excellent Theophilus', as he does in Luke's gospel. He then mentions the things that he wrote to Theophilus about in the previous book.

I find the Book of Acts one of the most interesting books in the Bible, mainly because it brings to life the life of the early church, in all its messy detail. So much happens in the life of the early church, and this book gives us the perfect model for how the church should operate in the world. A little later I will go into some of the detail of how the early church was such an example to us and how that Acts details how we need to act as a body of Christ.

As far as looking at an introduction to Acts, I have found that the NIV Study Bible, if any of you have a copy, has excellent notes on the introduction to Acts. It generally has a pretty good introduction to most books in the Bible, but the notes on Acts give an excellent breakdown of the importance of the book to us in the 21st century. It goes through the history, the theme, and the purpose of the book.

One of the things that that the NIV introduction states is that Acts provides a bridge for the writings of the New Testament. It comes in between the gospel accounts and the letters of Paul and others. And so it gives an introduction to Paul's life, as I outlined last time I was here. The book also "joins what Jesus 'began to do and to teach' as told in the gospels with what he continued to do and teach through the apostles' preaching and the establishment of the church. Historically, it recounts the first 30 years of the church, as I said before, sparing no messy details. It shows the good the bad and the ugly. It shows how the Holy Spirit worked amazingly through the church, it details conflict between the disciples, and how it caused them to go their separate ways. The discord between Paul and Barnabas is one such example.

Acts is both an inspired and inspirational book – inspired in that it is the Word of God, and inspirational in that it gives us classic examples of steadfastness in faith amidst severe trials.

Let's look at just some of the events that are detailed in Acts:

- Jesus' ascension into heaven
- Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
- Stoning of Stephen
- Conversion of Saul/Paul
- Missionary journeys of Paul
- Communal living (Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-37)

And perhaps one of the most overlooked yet striking examples of sharing faith in a different culture is in Acts 17 when Paul is in Athens. This was first pointed to me by something that Smithy wrote about evangelism and how to relate the gospel in a way that is relevant to the culture around us.

READ ACTS 17: 16 – 31.

Acts 17 is one great example of how the Book of Acts can be used to show the church today how to spread the good news of Jesus. It is the story of when Paul was in Athens and how, as it says, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Notice how he went about his message. What was the first thing he did?

- He complimented them on the fact that they were religious.
- He pointed out the inscription on one of their altars saying 'to an unknown god'
- So Paul used the things that he found in their culture to proclaim the gospel. He found things that they had in common. He didn't see the people of Athens as the enemy. He complimented them. Then he began to proclaim that the God who made the world and everything in it is a God who can be known, who is personal. He said that we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, things made out of human hands.

Paul's audience was also one that was very receptive to the message he was giving. The passage says earlier on that the people of Athens spent all their time discussing and debating the latest ideas.

Personally I would have loved to be around at that time. What an opportunity to proclaim the gospel! These people hung on every word that was said. And while that is often not the case in our culture here in Australia, this example of Paul provides a perfect model for us to engage with our culture, to engage with the people around us and see them not as the enemy, but to find the things we have in common, to see them as God's creation just as much as we are, to see them on a journey, just as we are.

It is interesting to note that in the introduction to Acts, Luke mentions Jesus' suffering. The suffering that Jesus went through seems to have been very significant to the first Christians. Both Luke and Acts specifically show that Jesus' suffering was no accident of history but part of God's plan. Look at Acts 8: 26-35 where we have Philip and the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah 53, where it talks about the fact that it was God's plan that the messiah would suffer, when Philip bumps into him and starts telling him the good news of Jesus.

This is just one example in Acts where there is a strong link to the Old Testament. The speeches in Acts proclaim this loud and clear. They proclaim that the work of God culminates in Christ and his work. Luke's emphasis on the links to the OT are clear here. He wants to show that this Jesus, and the Way as it is called, is not just some obscure new religion but it is in fact the continuation of God's plan of salvation. It is said by others that the prominence of the Hebrew Scriptures and the insistently

Jewish practices of Jesus and the first Christians in Luke-Acts reinforce this notion. Luke's attempts to outline the continuity between Christians and Israel and between the events of Jesus and the OT prophecies was an important aspect of his writing.

Similarly, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is spoken of in terms of in the light of the prophet Joel in 2:28-32a.

Then again, a little later, we have the story of Stephen giving his speech, after which he is stoned. Stephen's speech before his stoning links Moses and the OT to Jesus as well.

Of course one of the major aspects, perhaps the major aspect of this book, is that we are to be 'His Witnesses' to the ends of the earth. But, as we remember on today, this day of Pentecost, he doesn't leave us alone, despite what we sometimes may think, and despite what the first disciples may have thought as they saw Jesus ascending into the sky on that great day. The coming of the Spirit is the most significant event in the life of the early church. It is at Pentecost that the church is born.

The Xenos church in America has some great Bible studies, including a very good one on Acts. One of the things they comment on is how the disciples may have felt as Jesus was leaving them. Listen to what they say:

This is a daunting task! (*carrying on Jesus' message to the world*) Imagine how these people (11 flawed disciples; 120 total; hostile city) must have felt as Jesus said "Your task is to take this message to the whole world—I'm out of here."

No wonder they kept looking into the sky (“But, but, but . . .”)!! But before he left, Jesus promised them the resource to accomplish their mandate.

READ ACTS 1:8a. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, Jesus would continue to be present with them and provide them with all they needed to accomplish this task. What Jesus began to do and teach in one body, he now continues to do and teach through his new Body (the church) by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Then it goes on to mention, as I stated before, that the title “The Acts of the Apostles” is inaccurate—it should be “The Continuing Acts of Jesus through His Followers by the Power of the Holy Spirit.”

Throughout the rest of Acts, Luke traces the fulfillment of this promise. He shows how, at every juncture, the Holy Spirit provided them with everything they needed to fulfill his mandate. Without the book of Acts, we would not know about the life of the early church. We would not know about the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the birth of the church, and we would not have the magnificent examples of faith under fire, of how to share the gospel in our culture, and how the Spirit worked in those amazing days after Jesus left this world, and left us the Spirit.

Finishing with a quote from this book, as a result of the coming of the Spirit, as told in Acts....READ ‘Introducing the New Testament’ (Drane),BOTTOM PARAGRAPH OF P. 222. Therein lies the awesome privilege we have today, as left us 2000 years ago by Dr Luke in the book of Acts.

by Nils von Kalm
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