



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ♦ DEO ♦ GLORIA

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

An Introduction to Acts

January 14, 2007

- I. Introduction**
 - a. Author
 - b. Date
 - c. Audience
 - d. Purpose
- II. Uniqueness**
 - a. Relationship to the Old Testament
 - b. Relationship to the Gospels
 - c. The Speeches
 - d. Paul's Three Missionary Journeys [plus the final to Rome]
 - e. The Holy Spirit
- III. Major Themes of Acts**
 - a. Jesus is the Risen Messiah
 - b. The Effectual Spread of the Gospel
 - c. The Sovereignty of God
 - d. The Working of the Holy Spirit
 - e. The Establishment of the Church
 - f. The Inclusiveness of the Gospel
 - g. Engaging the World
 - h. The Guaranteed Success of the Gospel

I. Introduction

- ❑ The Book of Acts is the second book addressed to Theophilus [the first was the Gospel of Luke].
- ❑ It is the only historical book in the New Testament, chronicling the beginning of the Church following the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

a. Author

- ❑ It seems quite clear that the Book of Acts and Luke were written by the same author.
- ❑ First of all, both Luke and the Book of Acts are addressed to Theophilus.
- ❑ Secondly, beginning in Acts 16:10-17, where Paul is traveling from Troas to Philippi, the author of the Book of Acts begins using the **first-person plural ['we']**, revealing that he was traveling with Paul in during these journeys [other 'we' narratives include 20:5-21:18 during Paul's' travels from Philippi to Jerusalem; and 21:1-28:16, from Caesarea to Rome].
- ❑ Also, throughout the Pauline Epistles [those letters written by the Apostle Paul], Luke was closely associated with Paul. Luke was with Paul when Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy were written.
- ❑ In Colossians 4:14 Paul sent greetings from Demas and 'our dear friend Luke, the doctor.'
- ❑ In 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul notes that everyone had abandoned him, or left to serve in other area and that 'only Luke is with me.'

- ❑ It seems possible, even probable, that Luke was a Gentile, as his use of the Greek language was quite good.
- ❑ Some have even proposed that he was a freed slave, as doctors were often taken from the slave class.
- ❑ Further, the name Luke (*Loukanos/Luicus*) was a common slave name.

b. Date

- ❑ Most conservative scholars [and I would definitely agree] date the writing of Luke some time before A.D. 64.
- ❑ Possibly the strongest evidence for this date is that at the end of the Book of Acts, the author states, 'And he [Paul] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him...' (28:30)

- ❑ Because of this rather sudden ending of the book, many believe that it was at this point when Luke wrote the Book of Acts: two years after Paul arrived in Rome, and prior to his trial.
 - NOTE: Eusebius of Caesarea, living in the fourth century, wrote that the Apostle Paul was beheaded under the reign of Emperor Nero. This would have likely taken place in 64 A.D., during the great fire in Rome, or 67 A.D..
- ❑ Finally, the books of Colossians and Philemon state that Luke was with Paul during this two year imprisonment period.
- ❑ Other evidence for an early dating of the Book of Acts [around 64 A.D.] is, as John B. Polhill writes, ‘the primitive Jewish-Christian Christology of Peter’s sermons, the simple organization of the churches, the concern with Christianity’s relationship with Judaism...likely the freshness of Luke’s account is due to his own involvement in and proximity to the matters he related in his account of the early Christian witness.’

c. Audience

- ❑ It should first be noted that Theophilus is a Greek name, and as such, it must be assumed that the Book of Acts, then, was not written to an exclusively Jewish audience.
- ❑ However, throughout much of the book, especially in Peter’s speeches, there is a strong emphasis on Jesus’ messiahship – a sort of apologetic defense directed at the Jews.
- ❑ It is most likely, though, that the intended audience of the Book of Acts was likely Jews and Gentiles. This is further substantiated in that much of the Book focuses on the work of Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, and then on Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles.
- ❑ Finally, as is clear in Paul’s letters, many of the early congregations were a mix of Jews and Gentiles.

d. Purpose

- ❑ The purpose of the Book of Acts cannot be understood apart from the Gospel of Luke.
- ❑ The preface of the Gospel of Luke states, ‘that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught’ (Luke 1:4)

It is as though in his Gospel account, Luke describes the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ, to include His Ascension; and the Book of Acts describes the **results** of Christ’s Birth, Life, Death, Burial, Resurrection and Ascension [beginning with a detailed account of the Ascension].

II. Uniqueness

a. Relationship to the Old Testament

- ❑ One cannot gain a sound understanding of the Book of Acts [or any of the New Testament for that matter], without a solid grounding in the Old Testament.
- ❑ The Old Testament is not an account of the failure of God's plan to use the nation of Israel. Further, the New Testament is not an account of God's next plan which finally 'works.' Rather, the whole of Scripture is the revelation of the one redemption plan of the one true and living Sovereign God.
- ❑ The New Covenant community in the Book of Acts is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of inclusion of the nations into God's covenant people.

The New Testament 'assimilates the historical experience of Israel as a nation to the life of Jesus – the ultimate in typological fulfillment. Like Israel, Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tested, and his twelve disciples represent the twelve tribes [Israelites] who are sent out to conquer the land.'

Gerald Bray

- ❑ It seems that too often today, most Christians ignore the Old Testament, thinking it irrelevant to us today. Tragically, then, much of the Church today ignores 2/3 of the Scriptures, and remains largely ignorant of the historical and theological foundation of the New Testament.
 - ❑ 'The overall perspective of the book is not that of the Hellenistic histories with their concepts of the fate and destiny but the biblical view that all of history is ultimately under the direction of a sovereign God.'
- John B. Polhill
- ❑ To demonstrate these truths, Luke, and the various speakers throughout the Book of Acts, quote extensively from the Old Testament text.

The speakers in the Book of Acts, when speaking to the Jews, powerfully use the Old Testament Scriptures to convince their audience that Jesus is, in fact, the promised Messiah.

- ❑ Finally, it is worth noting that much of Luke's writings are rooted in the language of the Old Testament. It has been noted that 90% of his vocabulary is found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament [the Septuagint], translated in c. 250 B.C.

b. Relationship to the Gospels

- ❑ The end of the Gospel of Luke is basically an introduction to the Book of Acts.

- ❑ Once again, the Gospel detail the Life and Work of Christ, and the Book of Acts details the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Early Church, which is, of course, on the basis of the finished Work of Christ.
- ❑ Polhill writes, ‘Jesus’ final words to his disciples are a virtual summary of the main themes of the first chapters of Acts – the waiting in Jerusalem until clothed with the power of the Spirit, the preaching to all the nations beginning with Jerusalem, and the fulfillment of the Scriptures in the death and resurrection of the Messiah, which is the central topic of Peter’s sermons in Jerusalem (Luke 24:44-49).’
- ❑ Finally, only in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, do we specifically read of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father.

c. The Speeches

- ❑ The Book of Acts is also a Book of speeches.
- ❑ Nearly 1/3 of the entire book is speeches – almost 300 of its 1000 or so verses come are records of speeches.
- ❑ In total, there are twenty-four (24) total speeches in the Book of Acts: Eight (8) from Peter, nine (9) from Paul, and seven (7) from others, including Stephen.
 - There are ten (10) ‘major’ speeches; three (3) ‘missionary’ sermons of Peter; three (3) speeches from Paul corresponding to his missionary journeys; three (3) ‘defense speeches’ of Paul, and Stephen’s speech (1) before the Sanhedrin.
 - The three missionary speeches of Paul can be broken down as follows:
 - The First Missionary Journey speech: Paul addresses the Jews in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch.
 - The Second Missionary Journey speech: Paul addresses the pagans in Athens in his Areopagus Address, or Mars Hill speech.
 - The Third Missionary Journey speech: Paul addressed the Christian leaders of Ephesus at Miletus.
- ❑ Although the Book of Acts is a historical book, it also contains a great deal of theology. Primarily, it is in the speeches in the Book of Acts that the theology is proclaimed in its clearest form.
 - In the Book of Acts, there are three missionary speeches to the Jews. In these, the speakers quote extensively from the Old Testament, demonstrating that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

- In Peter's speeches, or rather, sermons, he defends Jesus as 'servant,' the 'Righteous One,' a 'prophet like Moses,' the 'Messiah.'

d. Paul's Three Missionary Journeys [plus the final journey to Rome]

- Only in the Book of Acts, does Scripture given an account of Paul's Missionary Journeys.
- What is significant is that it is during these Missionary Journeys that the Gospel will spread to the 'remotest part of the Earth.'
- The Book of Acts ends during Paul's in-house arrest in Rome, the center of the Roman Empire, while he is awaiting trial

e. The Holy Spirit

- It has often been suggested that the Book of Acts should be called the 'Book of the Acts of the Apostles' or, even more appropriately, the 'Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.'
- Polhill writes, 'Just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22) and continued to abide with him throughout his ministry (Luke 4:18), so the Spirit was the constant companion in the life of the young church. The Holy Spirit is a gift to every believer (Acts 2:38) and comes as a special endowment of power in times of crisis to enable a bold witness (4:8). The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures that the Christian community saw being fulfilled in its own time (4:25).'
- One of the strongest pieces of biblical evidence for the Personhood and Deity of the Holy Spirit comes from the Book of Acts in the account of Ananias and Sapphira.
- From the beginning of the Book of Acts (1:8) ('...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...') it is quite clear that all of the work of the Apostles is done so only because of the power and enablement of the Holy Spirit.
- The work of the Apostles is quite simply a continuation of the work of Jesus – the Apostles heal the sick, exorcise demons, and even raise the dead. It is in the 'name of Jesus' and the 'power of the Holy Spirit' that the Apostles are able to perform such works.

It is the miraculous work of the Apostles (in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the glory of the God the Father) **that the Gospel message is authenticated as it spreads from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit through the early Apostles prepare the way for the greatest miracle of all – salvation for both Jews and Gentiles by grace alone through faith alone in the Person and Work of Christ alone to the Glory of God alone!**

III. Major Themes of Acts

a. Jesus is the Risen Messiah

- ❑ One of the central themes of the Book of Acts is that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.
- ❑ As is clear, as well, in the Book of Acts it is **the resurrection in of Jesus Christ that demonstrates His true identity as the Messiah.**
- ❑ Finally, as Jesus is the Messiah, Acts presents a simple Gospel message that salvation is wholly a gift of God, by grace through faith, and that there is salvation in no other name than Jesus (2:38; 4:12; 16:31).

b. Effectual Spread of the Gospel

Isaiah 55:10-12 states:

For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there,
But water the earth,
And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower
And bread to the eater,
**So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.**
“For you shall go out with joy,
And be led out with peace;
The mountains and the hills
Shall break forth into singing before you,
And all the trees of the field shall clap *their* hands.”

- ❑ As the prophet Isaiah states, the Word of God **will accomplish** that which **God intends** for it to accomplish.
- ❑ This is one of the primary themes of Acts.
- ❑ Acts 1:8 states, ‘...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you **shall be** My witnesses...’
- ❑ Christ declares NOT that the disciples **may be**, but that they **shall be**, or **will be** His witnesses.
- ❑ Then, he says, ‘...you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.’ Acts 1:8

The whole of the Book of Acts, therefore, is the fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

- ❑ The Gospel message begins in Jerusalem (Chapters 1-5); it moves out to Judea and Samaria (Chapters 6-8); then, it goes to the ‘ends of the earth’ (Chapters 13-28).

c. The Sovereignty of God

- ❑ It is God’s plan and God’s will that the Gospel spread in the manner it does.
- ❑ One of the primary reasons the Gospel spreads to the ends of the earth, as we will see in our study of the Book of Acts, is that the Jewish people reject the Gospel. It is because of the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews that it spreads to the Gentiles.
- ❑ Yet, this did not catch God off guard; rather, He spoke of this truth through the prophets, in the Old Testament.
- ❑ It was always a part of His sovereign, redemption plan!
- ❑ One of the most powerful demonstrations of God’s sovereignty in the Book of Acts is the author’s use of the Old Testament.
- ❑ The author often begins the quote with ‘the Scripture had to be fulfilled’ (1:16).
- ❑ Some of the Old Testament ‘fulfillments’ include:
 - The need to replace Judas (1:16-21)
 - The Miracle at Pentecost (2:16-21)
 - The Necessity of the death (2:25-28) and resurrection of Jesus Christ (2:34-35)
 - The Gentile witness with respect to the Gospel (13:47)
 - The Gentile inclusion in the people of God (15:16-18)

d. The Working of the Holy Spirit

- ❑ As stated previously, the Apostles do not act on their own accord or power; rather, they fulfill the promise of Acts 1:8 **in the power of the Holy Spirit**.
- ❑ May we never forget that the Holy Spirit always acts perfectly in accordance with the Work of the Son and the Will of the Father. However, this perfect subordination must always be viewed in light of the ontological equality of the Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit [One God, Three Persons = the Trinity].

e. The Establishment of the Church [Restored Israel]

- ❑ The Book of Acts begins with the disciples asking the question, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ (1:6)
- ❑ Then, the whole of the Book chronicles this process, as Israel is restored in through the genesis of the Church.
- ❑ Although the Gospel message spreads, in large part, by the rejection of it by the Jews, the Gospel message is clearly and powerfully presented as the ‘power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.’ (Romans 1:16)
- ❑ This pattern is no clearer in this book than during the times when Paul first preaches the Gospel in each city in its respective synagogue.
- ❑ A great number of Jewish Christians do emerge, however: 3,000 at Pentecost, 5,000 in the Jerusalem church a little later, priests convert as well, and ‘many thousands’ of believers in Jerusalem at the time of Paul’s final visit.
- ❑ At the beginning of the Book, the Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world, was the primary location; by the end of the Book it is Rome, the center of the Roman/Gentile world that emerges as the most significant city.
- ❑ In conclusion, the Book of Acts presents the Church, the New Covenant people of God, as the restored Israel.

f. The Inclusiveness of the Gospel

- ❑ In the Book of Acts, as the Gospel spreads, Luke mentions men of influence and authority, such as Herod Agrippa I, Agrippa II, Gallio, the procurator of Achaia, even the emperor Claudius.
- ❑ At the end of the Book, Paul is waiting to get a hearing before the Emperor himself.
- ❑ Thus, by the end of the Book, the gospel was preached to governors, kings, and later, possibly the Emperor himself.
- ❑ Such details in this book demonstrate the inclusive nature of the Gospel: not that all without exception will be saved, but that the Gospel message makes not discrimination or distinction between people of different races, social classes, etc.
- ❑ As the Apostle Paul, later, states, ‘...I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.’
1 Timothy 2:1-3

In the Book of Acts, the Gospel message is not restricted to a select group: it is intended for all, **without distinction**.

g. Engaging the World

- ❑ As the Apostle Paul passionately sought to proclaim the Gospel ‘to the ends of the earth’; he knew and understood his rights as a Roman citizen.
- ❑ He even used these rights to possibly even get before the Emperor himself.
- ❑ Paul did not move away to an isolated area; rather, he engaged the world with the transforming power of the Gospel message.

h. The Guaranteed Success of the Gospel

- ❑ This is likely the most significant theme in the Book of Acts: the Gospel message through the proclamation of the Word of God **will be successful**.
- ❑ In other words, despite hardship, calamity and ‘insurmountable’ obstacles, the Gospel message **will** accomplish what God intends for it to!

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF ACTS:

- I. The Gospel in the Jerusalem Church (Chapters 1-12)
 - a. The Early Church in Jerusalem (1-5)
 - b. The Outreach Beyond Jerusalem (6-12)
- II. The Mission of the Apostle Paul (Chapters 13-28)
 - a. The Three Major Missionary Journeys of Paul (13:1-21:16)
 - b. Paul’s Defense of his Ministry (21:27-28:31)