Acts Of The Apostles – Expositional Preaching

Acts Overview

I do confess to you that I am a firm believer that if you understand the overall significance of a book, you can navigate it.  I don’t know how you are if you ever use a Google map, but when pop up a Google map on your iPad or whatever it is and you want directions, if you’re like me, you want to see the whole picture first.  I want to know A to Z, and then I can get down into the details and kind of track along with that if I have some kind of sense of where I’m going.

I think that works really well in studying the Bible, especially when you approach a new book, to get some kind of an overview of the whole thing, to pull back and get the full picture.  Now in reading Verse 1, you’re going to get enough for us to get started.  The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach.  Luke is referring – Luke is the writer, the historian.  He’s referring to his gospel, the Gospel of Luke.

So who was writing this and why. We want to know why the Holy Spirit intended the book for us and to seek to determine the way in which it is relevant today. Luke was a doctor by profession and was from Antioch in Syria, he was the only Gentile writer in the Bible, he was a companion of Paul, he travelled with him and had a keen interest in researching the events surrounding the life of Jesus and the growth of the church. The book was written in Rome, whilst the book of Luke was written in Caesarea.

That was the first account that he composed and sent to this gentleman named Theophilus, which means “Lover of God.”  “The most excellent” which is a title suggesting a lawyer or a judge, this phrase is also used elsewhere in the book of Acts of Felix and Festus, both of whom were governors and both met with Paul. Luke knew that the book would be widely circulated in Rome as people asked questions about the faith for which Paul stood trial.

So Luke’s first volume of history was about all that Jesus began to do and teach.  That’s a very important verb.  Luke wrote Volume 1, the Gospel of Luke, about all that Jesus began to do and teach.  The Book of Acts is Volume 2 about the continued doing, if you will, and teaching of Jesus.

The gospels, you might say in one sense, tell the story of the finished work of Christ.  You do remember that he said in his high priestly prayer in anticipation of the cross in [John 17:4](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/John%2017.4), “I have finished the work you gave me to do.”  And then on the cross, according to [John 19:30](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/John%2019.30), just before he gave up his life, he said, “It is finished.”  So it is true that the first volume, the Gospel of Luke, and for that matter, all the other gospel writers, tell us of the finished work of Christ.  The long awaited sacrifice for sin that satisfied God fully, he offered.

By the sacrifice and offering of himself, he saved forever those who believed, and of course, he secured their redemption by his resurrection from the dead.  Now nothing can be added to the finished work of Christ.  Nothing.  It was satisfactory to God, and so God raised him from the dead to validate his satisfaction, and then God gave him a name above every name, exalted him to his right hand, gave him the name Lord, restored him to complete exalted heavenly glory, and even added a new dimension now as the savior because he had offered personally the sacrifice.

And so he would then purchase with that work a vast array of redeemed people throughout all of human history who would forever praise and honour and glorify him.  This is the work that Jesus finished, but there also was the work that Jesus only began.  The work of redemption he finished.  The work of doing and teaching he just began.  The work of proclaiming the gospel, teaching the kingdom, and living the kingdom he only began.

You might say he began in his ministry to collect the elect.  He began to collect them, small group they were.  He began to collect the elect, but he only began that.  By the time he ascended into heaven, there are just a few.  They’re all in one tiny little country in the midst of this globe.  A hundred and twenty gather in the upper room in Jerusalem, and several hundred more in Galilee, and that’s the beginning.  That’s what Jesus began.

So Acts, as Luke continues to write, is the story of what Jesus continues to do and teach.  This is Volume 2, although it’s the first book of church history, it’s Volume 2 of the New Testament history of redemption.  And if you will, it could be said that it’s actually Volume 3 because the first volume of redemptive history is the Old Testament itself.  Acts continues the story, the story and the long process completing God’s redemptive work through Christ.

So Luke says the first account I composed, the Gospel of Luke.  The Gospel, which like the other three Gospels, tells the story of, listen, of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.  The Old Testament gives the prophecies of the coming of Messiah, and the Gospels give the record of the realization of those prophecy.  The plan of God promised in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament.

God brings the chosen redeemer to save Israel and the nations that was promised throughout the Old Testament.  So Luke’s Volume 1 is very, very important.  Let’s go back to Luke 1 for a moment, and let me read the first four verses so you understand something about Luke’s writing.  By the way, if you ever have the opportunity to listen to the messages that were preached from this section when we went through Luke, you’ll find them very instructive.

So Luke writes, “In as much as many have undertaken to compile account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses of servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well having investigated everything carefully from the beginning to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”

Now I just want to grab one phrase, the exact truth.  Luke is a fastidious historian to start with from the human view.  He’s a meticulous historian.  And you add to that, of course, that he’s inspired by the Holy Spirit, and he sets off to write, and in Luke’s mind, he doesn’t know this will be called Luke, and he doesn’t know Volume 2 will be called Acts.  He writes one great, long history, and the goal was exact truth.  To provide absolute certainty of the facts of redemptive history, to provide full assurance to believers, like Theophilus and others, that God’s promise of salvation was being fulfilled.

The prophecies in the Old Testament that came through the prophets to whom he refers as eyewitnesses and servants of the word, those prophecies were precise and exact and identified places like where he’d be born in Bethlehem and details about his life and details about his death.  So Luke wants to write a history to show that all the precision of the Old Testament that pointed toward Christ was fulfilled with the same kind of precision.

So Acts then continues the story of the exact truth of God fulfilling Old Testament prophecy with the coming of Messiah, and then after Messiah’s resurrection and ascension, God continues to fulfill the story, and Luke writes with the same precision.  Why?  To provide certainty.  To provide certainty so that you may know the exact truth about the things you’ve been taught so that you may know.

You’ll remember that at the end of this book of Luke, as Luke signs off, Jesus opened their minds to understand the scripture, and he said to them, “Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem.  You’re witnesses of these things, and behold, I’m sending forth the promise of my father upon you, namely the Holy Spirit.  Stay in the city until you’re clothed with power from on high.”

And that is how Volume 1 ends, and Volume 2 essentially begins with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.  The Holy Spirit is promised in the book of Luke and comes in the book of Acts the way the Messiah was promised in the Old Testament and came in the book of Luke.  This is an exact and precise history.  The early readers were being taught then essentially that the apostles and the prophets spoke the truth.

Luke writes to give them assurance.  The Holy Spirit would come and the work would continue.  Luke writes with certainty about Christ from his birth to his ascension in Volume 1, and he writes with certainty from the ascension to the coming of the Holy Spirit to the gospel being proclaimed to the world for the establishment of the church.

It was never Luke’s intention to write this book to tell Paul’s life story or even the history of the church, but it was to give enough information for Theophilus to understand how the Christian faith developed and why Paul was unjustly now accused.

Luke structured Acts around the 2 main Apostles Peter, who was the Apostle to the Jews and who dominates chapters 1-12; and Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles who dominates the rest of the book.

It was also written to counter the threat of two separate churches developing, Jewish and Gentile churches, with each claiming their Apostle as the one to follow. Luke ensured that one was not seen as more important than the other.

Peter and Paul

* They both performed miracles
* They both saw visions
* They both suffered for their faith
* They both made long speeches
* They were both filled with the Spirit
* They both preached with boldness
* They both preached to Gentiles and Jews, though Pater did more to Jews and Paul more to Gentiles.
* Both were imprisoned and miraculously set free
* Both healed the sick
* Both healed a congenital cripple
* Both exorcised demons
* Both had extraordinary means of healing; Peter (shadow) and Paul (Hankies)
* Both raised the dead
* Both declared judgement on false teachers
* Both refused to be worshipped
* Both died in Rome

Luke strongly suggests both men were equally honoured and valued as Apostles in the Church.

Acts 1:8 they were witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Jesus told His disciples that they would do this.

So there is a possible development of this theme – the witness commences in Jerusalem in Chapters 1-7, Judea and Samaria Chapters 8-10 and Europe outwards the rest of the book.

Luke is demonstrating how Jesus’ words at the beginning of the book had been fulfilled by the end.

So what is the message for us today?

The book of Acts is a link between the Gospels and the Epistles. Without it many New Testament things would be difficult for us to understand. Some key people and places cannot be understood without this book. We therefore can get a true sense of some of the reasons why Pauls Epistles were written as opposed to untruths that have been twisted by the Catholic Church and other false teachers.

Paul wasn’t mentioned in the Gospels so without Acts we would know very little about him or his ministry or how he came to be writing to churches and individuals and why these letters are important.

Baptism in water – only in Acts is baptism described as being in water

Baptism in the Spirit, this phrase occurs in all 4 Gospels, but none of them tells us what it means or what happens when someone is baptised in this manner.

The Law of Moses: - Acts helps us to consider our approach to the Law of Moses today. How do we know that Christians aren’t bound by it? The Law had 613 different requirements, so we need to be clear as to whether we are free of these requirements. How do we know if they are still binding? The answer comes in the argument concerning circumcision in Acts 15 when it was settled once for all that Christians are free from the Law of Moses, though still bound by the Law of Christ.

The Church

If it were not for Luke’s record in Acts the word ‘church’ could be misunderstood. Only Matthew mentions the church in the Gospels and his 2 references aren’t descriptive of what a church should be like. The epistles are generally addressed to churches and give us hints as to what they were, but only in Acts do we learn what a church actually was, including how it was planted, how elders were appointed and what the relationship was between the Apostles and the churches they founded.

Conversion

We learn so much about the proper way in which people were born again. The Gospels record events before the coming of the Holy Spirit and the Epistles are written to people who are already established in their faith.

In Acts we see how the Apostles brought people into the Kingdom, through conviction, repentance, faith, baptism in water and in Spirit.

A Model For Today

Acts is an important source of information and explanation, but it is much more than that too, a model for church life everywhere and I pray for the day when modern churches will exhibit the same qualities Luke describes.

Abnormal As Well As Normal

When it comes to understanding events in Acts there is a distinction to be made between the abnormal and the normal. There were certain things that happened in Acts which were abnormal and should not be expected to happen continually. Now I am not saying here that these things were confined to this time and will not happen today. I will give a fuller meaning now.

Paul’s conversion: He hears the voice of Jesus and is blinded by a light. This was a one off experience and is not the norm for every believer, as most of us will testify. Paul himself claimed it was a unique commissioning for him to be an Apostle.

Annias and Sapphiras: Have believers not done worse things today, but yet not been slain by God? Is the replacement of Judas by casting lots a model for the church today? No!

We cannot take one event or experience of the early church and make that the norm for the whole church in any period.

How do we distinguish between what is abnormal and normal? Has the church not often assumed that some phenomena are abnormal and not for today only to be proved wrong?

Is the event only mentioned once? If son and is never repeated it is likely though not certain to be abnormal.

The Day of Pentecost

Things happened on this day, which were unique. We don’t expect to hear wind and see flames every time someone receives the Spirit. On another occasion the building shook when the believers met for prayer. This would be an inaccurate guide for us today as to whether genuine prayer had taken place. Some of the early church events were necessarily one-offs.

Is The Event Repeated?

In the descriptions of baptism in the Spirit in Acts we see similarities. Pentecost; wind and flames were unique but other phenomena are repeated. When at the house of Cornelius (10:46) the disciples of John receive the Spirit and they speak in tongues – suggesting that this may be a repeatable phenomenon, even if the wind and flames aren’t. On every occurrence in Acts when a believer is filled with the Spirit there is always something happens to make it clear to recipients and onlookers alike that the Spirit has come.

Is there independent confirmation recorded elsewhere in Scripture?

If the Gospels or the Epistles give independent attestation that the happening in question was a normal part of Christian life at that time, it is pretty certain that we can accept it today. It is not just Acts 2:33 that speaks of the Spirit being ‘poured out’. Joel 2:28 and Titus 3:6 confirm this as a term of general validity.

The appointment of Elders in Acts is another example. Was this a one off event? No it was just a temporary office in Acts. Titus 1, Timothy and Hebrews all include references to the universal necessity for this type of leadership.

What they did

Acts tells of the churches warm fellowship together, the centrality of the Apostles teaching. The importance of prayers and their spontaneous evangelism as the Spirit empowered them and sent them out to tell others about Christ. It also tells of their fearless declaration of the Gospel when they faced opposition from Jews and Gentiles alike. It is a book full of vibrant action of God, the obedience of the Apostles to His will, and the growth of the Kingdom.

What They Were

They were people filled with the joy of knowing God, even praising Him when they were in prison. They were people who feared God. And they were people of hope and courage. Peter and John were willing to disobey the Jewish leaders and refused to stop preaching. Stephen was also prepared to confront them even though it meant losing his life.

Acts is the missionary manual.

Accepting that Acts is a model for us today, how are we to read it? Acts is not just a model for Church behaviour, but a missionary manual for church expansion. Acts tells us how to fulfil the great commission and spread the Gospel. From this book we can identify a 7 fold strategy which we can follow today.

1. Send Apostles

The word ‘Apostle’ literally means ‘sent one’. It was the understanding of the early church that certain individuals were commissioned by God to spread the Gospel. There are five kinds of Apostle in the NT.

1. Jesus the chief apostle – there is no one else like Him
2. The 12 Apostles, witnesses of the resurrection, there is no one like them today (Matthias replaced Judas)
3. Paul, Apostle number 13, the ‘last of all born out of due time’ no one is like him today, writing inspired scripture
4. A pioneer church planter who builds new churches with new converts – the Apotle Paul would be among this kind too, as would Barnabas and others, who were always sent out in a team.
5. Any Christian sent from A to B to do anything is an Apostle. E.g, Epaphroditus, who was sent to be Pauls housekeeper in Rome – in this sense anyone could be an Apostle.

It is the fourth and fifth dimensions which apply to us today. The church of Jesus Christ needs church planters and those willing to be sent out to accomplish particular tasks in God’s name.

It should be the local church that sends out and it is clear in Acts that it was the Holy Spirit who set apart the people for the work. The sending out did not come from a decision made by the people, but by the direction of the Spirit. So it was the Spirit who said that Paul and Barnabas should be set aside for the work he had for them. The church was prepared to send out its best people in order that Christ would be made known.

There are no lone ranger missionaries in Acts.

1. Reach Cities

It was common for Apostles to commence work in highly populated centres, so that growing churches could have a ripple effect throughout the surrounding area. Paul went to Ephesus and taught daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, we read that all Jew and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord. It is likely that a man named Epaphras came to faith through these lectures and planted the church at Colosse. Paul wrote to the church although he never visited it himself or had been involved in its growth. This is like making bridgeheads in war zones.

1. Preach the Gospel

Paul would typically focus first on the synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures. When Paul was with the Jews he would use the Old Testament. But he would change his approach when he preached to the Gentiles, he would find some common ground before introducing biblical concepts, in Acts 17 he was talking to a Pagan audience.

He referred to incidents which took place in their past and to poets who they knew. He knew that there had been an earthquake in Athens which had devastated the city and destroyed their buildings. Being polytheistic, the Athenians had assumed they had upset one of their Gods and were anxious to know which one. So they decided to let some sheep loose in the main street. Whichever idol the sheep lay down nearest to would indicate which god the Athenians had upset. However the sheep refused to follow the plan and ended up lying down in the middle of a field. SO the council met and concluded that if they still did not know which god they had upset, there might be a god they had forgotten, who was upset at the absence of an altar for him. So they erected an extra altar, inscribing on it the words ‘To the unknown God’.

Paul having seen this altar on his visit to the city, uses it as a base from which to tell them of the God they did not know. Immediately he has an audience. From that common ground he can go on and tell them about a God they should and could know and about Jesus, who this God raised from the dead and appointed a judge of the human race.

1. Make Disciples

The Apostles were concerned that people should become disciples. They weren’t interested in our modern methods of responding: raising a hand, coming to the front of a public meeting or signing a car. They realised that disciple making took time and so Paul would stay in a place for a considerable time to make sure the believers were established. In Ephesus he taught the kingdom of God every afternoon from 12 till 4 o clock (siesta time) for two years in order that young converts might learn and new people would come to faith. It was perseverance on the journey that mattered, not a one-off decision that had little effect on daily life.

1. Plant Churches

Acts records how the preaching of the Gospel established groups of believers and how the apostles revisited these groups later on, so that each missionary journey bore fruit in the establishment of ongoing communities of believers.

1. Appoint Elders

We read how Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch and appointed elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

The newness of the church meant that the elders could only have been 12 months old in the faith, but this was no problem. As long as the candidates were ahead of the others and maturing, they could be trusted to lead. This is seen throughout Acts.

1. Apostles Leave

The seventh and final stage in the missionary model is also crucial. Once the church was established, the apostle moved on. Further contact would have been through a letter or a visit by an apostle delegate. Once the fellowship had local leaders the apostle could leaver them to continue the work. They became self-propagating, self governing and self supporting.

* There were no church buildings, they met in homes, hired buildings and beside rivers
* Investment in property was not considered necessary
* No clergy laity distinctions
* All offices in the church were based on gift and function and every believer was considered to have a ministry.
* No hierarchy
* No HQ
* No infant baptism
* No denominations
* No orders of worship

So much of what we regard as a normal part of Church or Christian Activity today was not normal for the early church.

So how are we to view the book of Acts?

The book was originally called ‘Acts’. It comes from the Greek word ‘praxis’ from which we get the word practice. Acts therefore describes the practice of Christianity.

But who is it the practice of? Whose acts are they?

The Apostles – most of the apostles don’t appear in it. James is beheaded in the early chapters. John is mentioned alongside Peter, but only Peter receives much space and more than half the book focusses on Paul, who was not one of the original twelve. So it is not strictly about the “Acts of the Apostles”.

Jesus: The book begins by saying all about Jesus began to do and teach, so we could call it the Acts of Jesus continued…

The Holy Spirit: The most prominent person in Acts is the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned 40 times in the first 13 chapters and 70 times in all. So maybe we should call it the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

God: The Holy Spirit is mentioned 70 times but God is mentioned 100 times. So the best comprehensive title for the book to me would be the ‘Acts of God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit in the Apostles.

Acts is the remarkable account of the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke sifts the evidence and selects the events which chart this expansion, providing a model for church life and a missionary manual to enable the expansion to continue. He also achieves his overall goal of briefing Theophilus so that his friend the apostle Paul might be declared innocent at his trial. At the same time God intended that we should understand how He is at work in building His kingdom, so that whoever we are and wherever we live we might be clear about the ideals for which we should work and pray.

I look forward to going through this book inmuch more depth over the coming weeks and months and to see what God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is going to do is us. The Apostles!