

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts_Introduction_Part 2)

Title and author – the title of the book of *Acts* or *Acts of the Apostles* is a little misleading, even though we have references to it as such as early as A.D. 150-180. The book only contains a few of the acts of some of the apostles, primarily Peter and Paul. Evidence both internal and external to the book points to Luke as the author of the book. Internal evidence includes the numerous references in the first person plural that is commonly accepted as a reference to Luke.

Date and place of writing – the book was probably written in the early 60's as Luke did not mention some of the very significant events that occurred in the mid to late 60's. There is no mention of the persecution under Nero that began in A.D. 64, Paul's death in A.D. 68, and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. We do not know the place of the writing of this book but it is possible that Luke composed the book over a period of years while in various locations and put it in its final form while in Rome where Paul was in confinement for two years (Acts 28.30-31).

Scope – the events mentioned in the book of Acts cover a period of about 30 years beginning with our Lord's ascension in A.D. 33 to Paul's two year house arrest that ended about A.D. 62. There is not universal agreement among scholars on the dates and the order of events, especially in the 1st half of the book. We know that the book opens ten days prior to the Jewish feast of Pentecost, or forty days after the resurrection of Christ (1.3). Upon first reading, one might get the impression that the events mentioned in the first eleven or twelve chapters of Acts occurred within the space of a year or two. However, a much longer period of time is involved. The conversion of Saul occurred anywhere from two to seven years after the opening of the book. The conversion of Cornelius occurred anywhere from three to seven years after Saul's conversion.

Certain events in Acts help us with the dating since they are events that are documented in secular history and that are well-known. For instance, the famine of Acts 11 occurred while Claudius was emperor of Rome in A.D. 45-46. This would mean that the first preaching to Gentiles at Antioch occurred in 45-46 A.D. The church at Antioch had been established by Jews who were scattered by the persecution that arose over the stoning of Stephen. These Jews preached to Jews only, but when certain Greeks from Cyprus and Cyrene arrived, they preached to the Greeks.¹

Another event that helps us affix a date to a portion of Acts is the mention of the proconsulate of Gallio in Achaia (Acts 18.12). This proconsulate lasted from A.D. 51-52. Paul was in Corinth on his second missionary journey during this period which would place the beginning of that journey at about A.D. 49 or 50. Since the council of Acts 15 was held just a few months prior, then the Jerusalem Council meeting of Acts 15 occurred in the same timeframe. If Paul's conversion occurred fourteen years prior to that Jerusalem Council (Gal 2.1 cf. Gal 1.15-17; Acts 11.30; 15.1ff), then Paul's conversion must have occurred around A.D. 35 or 36. (If Paul's conversion occurred fourteen years prior to his 2nd visit to Jerusalem in Acts 11, the date of his conversion would be around A.D. 31 or 32. This would be prior to Pentecost if one accepts

¹ Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 6, 9, 10.

A.D. 33 as the year of our Lord's death). If we add three years to the date of Paul's conversion, we should arrive at the date of Cornelius' conversion, i.e. 38 or 39 A.D.²

Purpose – the book of Acts manifests more than one purpose. 1) Historical – to show the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem toward Rome, the uttermost part of the Gentile earth; 2) theological – to manifest the changed course of God's plan for Jews and Gentiles; 3) Apologetic – many Roman officials are mentioned by Paul and none opposed the new faith. This would have made Acts an apologetic tool against unbelievers who tried to deny that Jesus was the Messiah as He and His followers claimed.

Some Unique Features – 1) Acts is the only NT book that continues the historical story that was begun in the Gospels; 2) since Acts contains the history of Paul's journeys, it is indispensable in understanding the epistles that Paul wrote; 3) it is the only book of the Bible that presents the transition from the Age of Israel to the Church Age.

A Geographical Pattern – Luke follows a distinctly geographical order as he progresses through the narrative.

- Jerusalem (2.42 – 6.7)
- Judea and Samaria (6.8 – 9.31)
- Palestine/Syria (9.32 – 12.24)
- Gentiles in the eastern part of the Empire (12.25 – 19.20)
- Paul's defense of the Gospel and entry into Rome (19.21 – 28.31)

Exposition

Acts – Chapter 1

Verse 1 – Of course, Luke is referring to His Gospel when he references “the former account...of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.”

Who was Theophilus? Some interpret the name “Theophilus” as a reference to a large body of people since the Greek name means “lover of God.” This interpretation of “Theophilus” was apparently first promoted by Origen and later adopted by some of his followers.³ According to this theory, Luke was addressing all “lovers of God” who might read his book. Others have suggested that “Theophilus” is a reference to Luke's financier.⁴ I tend to favor the view that “Theophilus” was an actual person since the name is a fairly common Greek name and the tone of the address tends toward the personal. Both Acts and the Gospel of Luke are addressed to this person who is described as “most excellent” in Luke 1.3. The same preface is used later in Acts in reference to the Roman governors Felix and Festus (23.26; 24.3; 26.25). Therefore, Luke's use of “most excellent” may have referred to a highly placed Roman official – an actual person.⁵ The name “Theophilus” appears as a proper name at least three centuries before Luke and the practice of dedicating books to distinguished individuals was common in the 1st Century.⁶ Either way, this is a fairly insignificant point considering the much greater panorama of issues that the book provides.

² Ibid.

³ Frank E. Gaebelin, general editor, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989-1998), electronic version.

⁴ Stanley Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 353.

⁵ Gaebelin, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, electronic version.

⁶ Ibid.

Verses 2-8 – Activities between Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension – These verses represent a very unique insight into the forty day period between the resurrection and the ascension that only Luke provides us. We are not told where Jesus and His disciples were located at all times during those forty days; only that He made several appearances during that period to His apostles. Even though the forty day period marks the end of the last time Jesus was seen on earth, it was not the last time Jesus was seen. Stephen saw Jesus seated at the right hand of God while he was being stoned to death (Acts 7.55, 56) and Paul states that “last of all He was seen of me” (1 Cor 15.8). Paul did not only receive his revelations through the Holy Spirit’s ministry in His life, but Paul received significant revelation from Jesus Himself (Gal 1.12 – “For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”).

Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit – Verse 2 is an amazing testimony to the fact that Jesus carried out His ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, this verse provides the basis for statements that I have made throughout our study of the Gospels that Jesus carried out His earthly ministry in total reliance upon the power of the Holy Spirit versus His divine nature which was set aside during His earthly residence (cf. Phil 2.5-11).

Fourfold Emphasis in the Book of Acts is Introduced – In a slightly revised form, Luke recounts Jesus’ instructions in Luke 24.48-49 – “And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.” Luke elaborates upon this command and provides further insight into some of the dialogue between Jesus and His disciples at the time it was given in Acts 1.4-8. These verses introduce a fourfold emphasis in the book of Acts.

- ✓ The witness mandate – reflected in the geographical progression of the narrative – Jerusalem, Judea/Palestine, and ultimately to the far reaches of the Roman empire through Paul’s missionary journeys.
- ✓ The prominence of the apostles
- ✓ The ministry of the Holy Spirit
- ✓ Jesus’ resurrection, ascension and acceptance into heaven as evidence of His rightful claim to be the Messiah – apart from the resurrection and ascension and session of Jesus, there could be no salvation since these acts validated His sacrificial death and provided proof of the Father’s acceptance (cf. Rom 4.25; 10.9; 1 Cor 15.1-4, 14-19)

The Apostles – By strict definition, “apostles” (Gr. ἀπόστολος) simply means messenger or one who is sent. On this basis, I have heard some attempt to apply the term to themselves and other believers who are witnessing, evangelizing and/or serving. However, I have yet to find any Scriptural basis for such a use of the term.⁷ Here in Acts 1.2, Luke is referring to the remaining eleven of the original twelve “apostles” specifically selected by Jesus (see Matt 10). These men were specially gifted and tasked. These men were also promised a unique and special place in the kingdom – to sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Lu 22.29). Of course, at the time of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, there were only eleven of these chosen “apostles” remaining. We’ll discuss this topic more when we arrive at Acts 1.15 ff – Luke’s account of the choosing of Matthias.

⁷ “Apostle appears seventy-nine times in the New Testament [thirty-four] times in Luke’s writings; thirty-four times in Paul’s; only once each in Matthew, Mark, and John (though not in the usual sense in John 13:16), Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Jude; twice in 2 Peter; and three times in Revelation. Over eighty-six percent of the occurrences are in the writings of Paul and of his companion, Luke. In all these occurrences the word always designates a man sent with plenipotentiary authority.” Robert D. Culver, “Apostles and the Apostolate in the New Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134:534 (April-June 1977): 131-43. Note: plenipotentiary means to be invested with full power.

“Infallible Proofs” – This Greek word is *tekmeōriōis* (from Gr. τεκμηριωσις). This word refers to incontrovertible evidence as contrasted with the mere statements of a witness. This word only occurs in Acts 1.3 in all of the New Testament. By using this word, Luke is establishing the cornerstone of the entire book of Acts – the fact that the resurrection of Jesus was an indisputable fact. Paul later builds upon this idea in 1 Corinthians 15, especially verses 14-19.

The Significance of Forty Days in Scripture – The period of forty days is associated with several significant events in Scripture. The 40 days between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension preceded God’s fulfillment of promises to man.

- ✓ God sent rain upon the earth for 40 days and nights during the Flood associated with Noah (Gen 7)
- ✓ God instructed Moses for forty days on Mt. Sinai in preparation for the establishment of the Israel as a nation of God’s elect, i.e. the Jews (Ex 24.18)
- ✓ Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness prior to the beginning of His earthly ministry (Lu 4.2)

“Things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” – The term “kingdom” occurs only eight times in Acts, but it occurs thirty-nine times in Luke and eighteen times in the New Testament epistles. This “kingdom” is a reference to God’s earthly kingdom program for Israel that was the subject of so much OT prophecy and that was the subject of the “gospel of the kingdom” proclaimed by Jesus and His disciples during His earthly ministry. Sometimes the phrase or words to the same effect can be interpreted as a reference to God’s universal rule such as in Psalm 109.19. However, here in our passage, the best interpretation of this phrase in context is in reference to that same kingdom that was the subject of Jesus’ earthly ministry and which was predominant in the thinking of the apostles.

Dispensationalists believe that Jesus will rule on earth as Messiah in the future; however, there are variations among dispensationalists on this topic. Progressive dispensationalists, along with covenant premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists, believe that the messianic kingdom began during Jesus’ earthly ministry and that the church is the present form of the messianic kingdom on earth. Most classic and revised dispensationalists believe that the Jew’s rejection of Jesus during His first advent resulted in a temporary withdrawal of the kingdom and that the church is a distinct entity, not another name for the messianic kingdom, present or future.⁸

“The Promise of the Father” – There are seven references in Scripture to baptism with the Spirit. Five are prophetic (Acts 1.5; Matt 3.11; Mark 1.8; Lu 3.16; Jn 1.33); one is historical (Acts 11.15-16); and one is doctrinal (1 Cor 12.13). The doctrinal reference is clearly in reference to one of the unique truths related to the Church Age believer. We shall explore this phrase in greater depth in our next lesson.

The Apostles Question – the Restoration of the Kingdom – This is a most intriguing question for the disciples to ask of Jesus in His resurrection body prior to His ascension. It probably provides us with insight into just what the disciples believed that their fulfillment of Jesus’ commands would lead to. Jesus had taught them that He was going to restore the Kingdom to Israel and He told them to pray for that Kingdom to come (Matt 6). However, Jesus could not answer that question yet since there was evidently a very important condition to be met prior to knowing one way or the other. Could that condition be related to Peter’s preaching in chapter 3? We shall see.

What was not predicted – Jesus’ prediction in verse 8 that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit was come upon them was an enduement of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of empowering them to witness about Him. It was accompanied by the power to perform miraculous

⁸ See Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” at www.soniclight.com

works. It is interesting to note that there is no association with this baptism by the HS and the baptism into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12.13).