

## Introduction to the Book of Acts

### Authorship

Scholars agree that both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same author, under the name Luke. It is a long held belief that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were originally one volume. In fact the beginning of Acts overlaps with the end of Luke's Gospel. The author's writing style, vocabulary and themes remain constant throughout both books with a seamless continuity.

Irenaeus, a church father of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, maintained the tradition that Acts was written in its entirety by Luke, a traveling companion of Paul. Colossians 4:14 identifies Luke as a doctor, indicating that he is a person of education and social standing. It is believed he was a Gentile possibly from either Troas or Pisidian Antioch in modern Asia Minor. It was from this region that he joined Paul's Second Missionary Journey, according to church tradition dating from the time of Saint Jerome in the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century.

In Luke's narrative of Acts there is a shift from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative detailing the activities of the apostles, to a 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, or "we" pronoun, describing first hand witness to Paul's activities. This viewpoint shift occurs in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter when Luke joins Paul on his Second Missionary Journey, giving support to the idea that the Book of Acts was written by the same Luke who accompanied Paul in his travels.

Acts was written in Greek, as opposed to Aramaic, appropriate to a person living outside the Holy Land. Luke was part of the well educated elite of the Greek speaking population; he was also well versed in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah (Old Testament) used by Jews all over the Roman Empire. The Septuagint was written in Koine Greek, which is different than the spoken Greek of the Roman Empire. (It would be comparable to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians reading the King James Version of the Bible.) Luke's writing style is that of a well educated Greek theologian in contrast to Paul's (also well educated) pharisaic background, and vastly different from Peter's working class background. It is interesting to note, that taken together Luke-Acts comprises a full 25% of the New Testament, more than all of Paul's writings combined.

### Date:

There are three possible scenarios for the dating of Acts. The earliest and traditionally held date is an early date before 64 AD. It is the best answer to the abrupt ending of Acts. Acts mentions Paul's two year house arrest in Rome, but says nothing of his trial or execution. This date would fit nicely between Paul's arrival in Rome and his trial 2 years later. Additionally, Luke is mentioned as being present with Paul during this time frame in Paul's letters to Colosse and Philemon, thought to be written during Paul's imprisonment. Luke's history would then end with the 2 years in Rome, and Paul's ministry there.

Some scholars hold to a "middle date" falling between 70 and 90 AD. According to this view Luke wrote his two books in sequence, a natural assumption based on Acts 1:1 which says "*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach....*" Then the Gospel of Luke would have been written later than 65 AD. The fall of Jerusalem is predicted multiple times in Luke's Gospel, and becomes a reality in AD 70, perhaps encouraging Luke to emphasize these predictions in his gospel.

Finally, some place the date as late 95 to 100 AD. These scholars rely on the writings of the Roman historian Josephus who published his work *Antiquities* in 93 AD. Their claim is based on the assumption that Luke was dependent upon Josephus' reports for various events. Josephus was recording widely known Jewish events that Luke would have come across before their recording by Josephus. Those who adhere to this late of a date comprise a small contingent of scholars and is held to be the least likely scenario.

### Genre:<sup>1</sup>

Acts is a unique book in the Bible. It does not ascribe to just one genre of literature. Luke sets out in Chapter 1 with the story of the disciples and Jesus sharing a meal after the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus tells his disciples that they are to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Luke tells us at this point that the goal of his writings will be to recount how the Gospel spread from Jerusalem, through Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. It is a combination of literary styles comprising elements of Hellenistic historical monograph, or Hellenistic History, popular in the Greek culture of Jesus' time. Luke writes the early history of the church through formal speeches, detailed travelogues of Paul's journeys, and episodic descriptions of specific events. These styles are all elements common to this genre. It begins with a 3<sup>rd</sup> person historical narrative, but Luke does not hold fast to this one literary genre through the course of the entire book.

Acts does not just chronicle events in the growth of the church; it also is a narrative theology. Luke breaks away from the historical genre purposely revealing the concept that history unfolds under the direction of a sovereign God, and not subject to traditional Hellenistic thought of history being directed by fate or destiny. God's plan that the gospel should be taken to the ends of the earth is by divine direction employing human agents led and motivated by the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### Purpose:

Luke's purpose is to provide a solid grounding in the faith by means of an orderly account. This was his purpose in the Gospel of Luke, and follows the same course in Acts. Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were addressed to a person by the name of Theophilus, which means "Friend of God". It is not known if this was the individual's true name, or a pseudonym. Some believe that Theophilus refers to any and all believers as friends of God, in which case Luke is addressing all believers. Among scholars there is some belief that Theophilus was possibly a Roman dignitary to whom Luke was providing an account or defense of Christianity during a time of persecution to prove that Christianity was neither subversive nor sinister as many Romans were led to believe. The geographic framework of Acts lends credibility to this idea as the faith moved from Jerusalem through Samaria, Asia Minor and west through Greece and on to Rome.

Luke's Gospel also tells us his purpose: Luke writes, "*Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,<sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*" (Luke 1:3-4) The Gospel of Luke focuses on all that Jesus said and did during his ministry both before and after his resurrection. Acts continues the story of Jesus ministry through the advent of the Holy Spirit (as promised by Jesus in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:5) directing and preceding the movement of Jesus' disciples and the growth of the church itself.

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<sup>1</sup> The New American Commentary (NAC): Acts; John B. Polhill; Broadman Press; 1992.

## **Themes: 5 Major Themes<sup>2</sup>**

As we study Acts we will be following five major themes that run through Luke's writings. These themes become evident as they unfold in Luke's narrative as relevant to the church of his day and are still relevant and manifested in the church of today. These themes reveal spiritual truths that are just as relevant to our life as it was over 2000 years ago.

### ***Church Beginnings***

Luke has recorded the history of how our faith was founded, organized and resolved the cultural issues of the day. These first communities of believers came together through their belief in the risen Messiah, Jesus Christ in fulfillment of the Holy Scriptures. These communities were held together and protected by the power of the Holy Spirit empowering them to love, serve and share the gospel. Since these beginning years of church history, new churches have added their numbers to the body of Christ throughout the world, ever expanding across the globe. Only through faith in Jesus Christ and the divine power of the Holy Spirit can the church grow and flourish.

### ***Holy Spirit***

The church would never have survived without the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowered and emboldened the early believers to stand up for a faith that was often met with persecution and even death. These small communities of believers were protected, guided, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, God's presence in the absence of Jesus after the assumption. Christianity is supernatural. The church cannot move, grow, or withstand the powers of the world of its own volition or power. The Book of Acts recounts the activities of the apostles and early church in their spirit led ministry to evangelize the known world. Only by being led by the Spirit do the apostles make such bold strides in spreading the gospel and establishing the church. By faith in the power of the Holy Spirit all Christ's work on earth is possible to accomplish and any obstacle is surmountable, even under intense persecution.

### ***Church Growth***

Acts gives us the story that begins with a small band of believers which grows to encompass an energetic and constantly increasing, at times by leaps and bounds, body of believers stretching from Jerusalem to Syria, into Africa and Asia, and throughout the Roman Empire. Our story begins with a small Jewish community in Jerusalem and by the end of Acts, the body of believers has reached across 39 cities in 30 countries, islands and provinces that including Jews and non-Jews who have received the Holy Spirit and have been baptized in the faith. Nothing can slow down or thwart the movement of the Holy Spirit. A body of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit is active, enthusiastic and increases in number. The Holy Spirit motivates, energizes and encourages believers to spread the gospel across all boundaries without ceasing until the whole world receives the Good News.

### ***Witnessing***

Acts, or Acts of the Apostles, as it is also known, recounts the personal stories of several of the apostles and disciples – Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, Paul – as well as the thousands of unnamed individuals who comprised all the early churches, spreading the gospel and encouraging one another in the faith through the

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<sup>2</sup> Thematic Information is drawn from the Life Application Study Bible, NIV; Zondervan; 2005.

sharing of their faith. The apostles testified before men of power with boldness and preached before small and large crowds, alike. It is through witnessing, sharing our faith, that the gospel is spread. Without personal testimony and the work of the Holy Spirit hearts are not touched and changed, and faith is not received. God's plan from the very beginning was that his children would share the truth to all people everywhere. That knowledge of God would be shared and taught from person to person, generation to generation, reaching the whole world with love, tenderness and mercy. Sharing our testimony with others helps us to understand our faith, strengthen our beliefs and give answers to our hope in Christ when confronted by those who question us. Witnessing to others, by word and action, as to how our faith carries us through life is what will bring others into a relationship with Jesus.

### ***Opposition***

Early Christians and Christians at various points throughout history have been the target of persecution. In Acts Luke recounts imprisonment, beatings, riots, intrigues and conspiracies faced by the apostles as they carried the Word of God to new territories. They were persecuted by Jews, as well as Gentiles, which underscored the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit. The church grew rapidly in times of intense persecution contrary to common sense. Coming face to face with their persecutors the apostles found the God-given opportunity along with the God-given strength and inspiration to be a faithful witness, even unto death. The Christian faith was not the made up work of humans, but the work of God. Killing the humans who steadfastly proclaimed their faith did not bring Christianity to an end. Instead of recanting, each apostle went to their death full of the conviction of God's truth and sharing it with those who persecuted them. They were so convinced of the truth and love of God they publically chose to die for it, allowing their deaths to be a testimony itself.

### ***Conclusion***

Acts, while it records the activities of the apostles and early church, would be more accurately titled *Acts of the Holy Spirit*. It becomes apparent that the spread of Christianity cannot be separated from the movement of the Holy Spirit. All through Acts the Holy Spirit is not only present, he is active. He precedes the apostles into new territories. He prepares the hearts of new believers to receive the truth. He leads and at times redirects the apostles to the fertile soil of new believers. He moves above and around the apostles as blanket of protection, and het empowers their words and actions to fulfill the will of God.