

## MAJOR THEMES IN ACTS

**Jesus Christ Part II.** The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were meant to go together as a two-volume set. The main character is Jesus.

In one sense Luke and Acts are one book about what Jesus did before his resurrection and ascension (Luke), and what Jesus has been doing since his resurrection and ascension (Acts).

He makes this clear in the first verse of **Acts 1**:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach<sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven

The word *began to do* is used in such a way that it indicates that he is still at work and active. Jesus is still doing it. He is continuing to do and teach, and that is what Acts is about.

It is easy to think that Luke was about Jesus, and Acts is about the Holy Spirit. It's easy to think when reading Acts that Jesus has left the scene, he is distant and diminished, and now the Holy Spirit has been tagged in.

This is not the case. Jesus is the main character in the book of Acts. Sometimes we call Acts *The Acts of the Apostles*. For a long time, we many have said (myself included) it should be *the Acts of the Holy Spirit*.

After looking at this with fresh eyes and further reading, it would be more accurate to call this the *Acts of the Lord Jesus*. The risen, resurrected Lord Jesus is the main character.

**Witness to the world.** In Acts 1:8, Jesus declares to His disciples:

<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

"Witnesses" is a very important, central word in this book of Acts. In many ways here "witnesses... in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth" is the outline of the book. But more important than an outline for the book, this is Jesus' plan—the Resurrected King's agenda.

Over and again, Luke will tie the events in Acts back to this agenda from Jesus in Acts 1:8. We see the expanding movement of Jesus Christ beginning in Jerusalem and extending in an ever-widening radius from that point.

- Acts ch. 2-5 shows the witness in Jerusalem.
- Acts 6-12 describes the witness beyond Jerusalem.
- Acts 12-14 reveals the witness to Cyprus and Southern Galatia.
- Acts 15-18 entails the witness to Greece.
- Acts 18-21 describe the witness in Ephesus.
- Acts 22-23 speak of Paul's arrest
- Acts 24-26 describe the witness to Caesarea.
- Acts 27-28 depict the witness in Rome.

In Acts, believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ among both Jews and Gentiles, and in doing this they establish the church. In addition to this, Acts explains how Christianity, although it is new, is in reality the one true religion, rooted in God's promises from the beginning of time. In the ancient world it was important that a religion be shown to have stood the test of time. Luke presents the church as the fulfillment and extension of God's promises.<sup>1</sup>

***Witness to the Gentiles.*** The witness of the Gospel in Acts is inclusive of all kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, the physically handicapped, pagan mountain people, a prominent merchant woman, a jailer and his family, Greek philosophers, governors, and kings. (Acts 2–5; Acts 8:4–40; 10:1–11:18; 14:8–18; 16:11–15, 25–34; 17:22–31; 24:24–27; 26:1–29)

*“Acts, along with the Gospels, are the great hinge in the Bible between O.T. and N.T. If Acts weren't there, we wouldn't understand how the door turned. It wouldn't make much sense to us. What we see in the book of Acts is that God in fact has had a plan from the very beginning to redeem a people for himself, for His glory, from all the nations. And Acts explains how we got there: how we got from God's people, Israel, defined ethnically, to God's people, the true Israel, that includes both Jew and Gentile, no longer defined ethnically but defined by their faith in Jesus Christ the Messiah... So rather than viewing Acts as merely the story of the beginning point of evangelism and mission, rather than a place we go to figure out controversial issues about the H.S, we need to understand the book of Acts as the book that explains who we are as N.T. believers. And how God accomplished our inclusion in Christ.” -Dr. Michael Lawrence*

***The Gospel Core.*** What exactly is the central message of the Gospel? What is the good news the first Christians heard, shared, witnessed to and believed?

In Acts there are 42 units describing the message of the Gospel you can find. There are 10 full sermons. One by Stephen, four by Paul and five recorded by Peter. Peter and Paul are preaching to both Jews and Greeks. In addition, there are about 30 summaries of sermons.

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<sup>1</sup> ESV Study Bible Introduction to Luke

***The Gospel Audiences.*** When you look at the actual presentations of the apostles themselves you find that there was an amazing ability to present the Gospel in an amazing array of ways, yet it was still all the same Gospel. You see the same message presented time and again, in different ways slightly, but the core being the same.

When Paul is preaching to Greek Philosophers in Athens (Acts 17), he begins by arguing from their experience and reason. He doesn't cite scripture, he just begins with creation and reasons from there. But when they are speaking to a Jewish crowd, the disciples always begin with the O.T. scriptures.

They would argue that prophecies from the O.T. had been fulfilled in their lifetime. They were clear that the hope that God had promised was being fulfilled in their own day, and being fulfilled in Jesus. **The center of their message is JESUS.**

***The Gospel Responses.*** In each Gospel message, you see several different responses:

- In Acts 2, Peter's sermon people are cut to the heart. Crying out and repenting.
- In Acts 3 the temple, the message to the temple guards is that they seize and jail him
- In Acts 4, the sermon to the Sanhedrin ended by the Sanhedrin ordering him to withdraw.
- In Acts 5, you see the same... the Sanhedrin erupts in fury
- Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 is ended with them covering their ears and stoning him to death.
- In Acts 10, Peter's sermon to Cornelius is ended by God's Spirit falling on Cornelius' household.
- In Acts 13, Paul's sermon in the synagogue Antioch is maybe the only sermon in Acts that is finished as the speaker intended to finish it. They are invited for further conversation next week and speak again.
- In Acts 17, the sermon on Mars Hill is sneered at and scoffed at by the philosophers. As soon as the resurrection of the body was mentioned, it was dismissed.
- In Acts 22, Paul's to Jerusalem crowd is ended with the crowd shouting for Paul's death.
- In Acts 26, Festus says Paul is out of his mind. Mainly because of the resurrection.

***The Holy Spirit.*** Throughout Acts, we see that the power behind the witness is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is granted to all believers, both male and female, whom he empowers for witness. The Spirit guides witnesses in moments of special inspiration and is behind every advance in the Christian mission. (Acts 1:8; 2:1–13, 18, 38; 4:8; 7:55; 8:17; 10:44; 13:2–12; 19:6, 21)

There is much confusion about how to understand the Holy Spirit and some of the things we see in Acts. But when you step back and look at Acts as one unity, you see The Holy Spirit Falls in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, and then on the Gentiles in Cornelius. This is exactly the program Jesus said in Acts 1:8. What we see is that the Holy Spirit is falling to confirm that yes, the Gospel has come to the Jews, to the Samaritans, and also to the Gentiles.

**Unique Events.** A very Important interpretative question a modern reader must ask when reading Acts is, “what is normative, and what is unique?” It is not always easy to distinguish what is *descriptive* (describing a unique event that happened to followers of Jesus back then), and what is *prescriptive* (something that is applicable and expected of followers of Jesus today).

Throughout the history of God’s redemptive plan for humanity, there are certain events and acts that happen in the redemptive story once. For example, the Passover in Exodus, or the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are key moments in God’s redemptive plan that we do not anticipate will reoccur. We don’t read about the Passover or the Resurrection and ask, “when is that going to happen again?”

In the same way, there are some events and activities that happen book of Acts that are unique (ex. Pentecost in Acts 2). We will see in Acts, that these things had to happen once in order to accomplish God’s plan, and having happened, we now stand on that foundation. We don’t ask, “when is that going to happen again?”

**Spirit-Empowered Community.** Throughout Acts, we see glimpses of the kind of community and unity the Holy Spirit creates. Here we see that effective witness demands the unity of the church. (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–14)

**Dependent Prayer.** Prayer is mentioned in one form or another 10 times in Matthew, 12 times in Mark, and 5 times in John. But Luke mentions it 19 times in his gospel and 32 times in Acts.<sup>2</sup>

- What happened after the church prayed?
  - Pentecost (1:14)
  - Earthquake and Evangelism (4:31; 16:25)
  - Resuscitation (9:40)
  - Miraculous Release (12:5)
  - Healing (28:8) |
- What did the church pray for?
  - Its leaders (1:24; 6:6; 14:23\*)
  - The manifestation of the Holy Spirit (8:15)
  - Sinners to Repent (8:24; 26:29)

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<sup>2</sup> PRAYER IN THE BOOK OF ACTS By Mark E. Moore, PhD

- Missions (13:3\*)
- Physical safety (27:29)
- Healing (9:40; 28:8)
- When did the church pray?
  - In times of Crisis (7:59; 12:5, 12; 16:25)
  - When making decisions or establishing leaders (1:24; 6:6; 14:23)
  - When repenting (8:22; 9:11\*)
  - When saying "Goodbye" (20:36; 21:5)
- The church prayed habitually:
  - The whole church (2:42)
  - The Apostles (1:14; 6:4) & Leadership (13:3\*)
  - Peter (3:1; 10:9; 11:5)
  - Paul (22:17)
  - Cornelius (10:2, 4, 30–31)
  - Jewish Women (16:13, 16)
  - Actual prayers (1:24–25; 4:24–31)
- Accompanied by fasting

***Persecution and Boldness.*** The witness is guided by the providence of God, who preserves his witnesses for their testimony through all sorts of threats: murderous plots, angry mobs, storms at sea, and constant trials before the authorities, to name only a few. (Acts 4:5–22; 18:12–16; 19:23–41; 23:12–22; 24:1–23; 27:21–26)

***Miracles and Demonic Opposition.*** At epic moments where God is moving his redemptive plan forward, we see miracles and demonic opposition happen in a unique way. In the early days, the witness was often accompanied by “signs and wonders,” the “wonders” being the miracles worked by the apostles, which served as “signs” pointing to the truth of the gospel. Miracles usually opened a door for witness.

It is important to remember that the Gospel, God’s redemption, is not a philosophy. It is not an idea. It is something that needed to be accomplished in history. So at key moments in time, where God breaks in, we see a couple things. First, we see the enemy’s opposition intensify. We see forceful opposition to God’s work. Secondly, we also see God acting in ways to validate the legitimacy of His message, and this is precisely the role miracles play.

There are several places in the O.T. where we see dramatic miracles and visible demonic opposition. For example, we see this at the Exodus. We see it again with Elijah and Elisha, who are themselves prophesying the need for a new Exodus. In the N.T., we see it again in the time of Jesus. And we also see it in the book of Acts.

When we look at the O.T., for vast period of time, you don’t see miracles going on. That wasn’t the normal experience of God’s people in the O.T. The Bible is presenting us the highlights of the story.

***Divine and Human Responsibility.*** In Acts, you see on display God's partnership with humans to accomplish His purposes on earth. The book of Acts could, in many ways, be divided into two big sections from a human standpoint: The ministry of Peter from Acts 1-8, and the Ministry of Paul from 9-28. At the end of Acts, you see the baton passed to the churches. The implied application seems to be declaring to followers of Jesus today, "it is our turn."

All throughout Acts, we see that acceptance of the Gospel message depends both on human response and on the divine sovereignty behind the response. Yes, Acts is about Jesus' work, but we also see that followers of Jesus must act as faithful witnesses for this work to be accomplished. (Acts 2:47; 11:18; 13:48, Acts 4:4; 11:20-21; 13:48-49; 17:4; 18:6-11; 21:20; 28:30-31)