

ACTS

Introduction

Author. The author of this work which serves as a sequel to the book of Luke is most likely Luke, the dear friend of Paul, the physician (Colossians 4:14). Please see the introduction to the book of Luke on Page 29.

Date. Two dates are possible for the book. The date of approximately 63 A. D. would be soon after the last recorded events of the book. The lack of later history such as the release of Paul or his martyrdom or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. might suggest this but they would be arguments from silence. It is possible that the book was written around 70 A. D. or later and that these later events were not included simply because of Luke's purpose of only wanting to record the spread of the gospel from Jew to Gentile and from Jerusalem to Rome.

Distinctives. Like Luke's first volume, this work displays a literary excellence and an historical detail uncommon in the New Testament. This book alone records the history of the early church and provides a historical framework for the understanding of the rest of the life and epistles of Paul. Its purpose, however, is much more important than simply a record of history.

Structure. The book is neatly divided into seven sections by six *progress reports* by Luke which serve to summarize and finalize certain sections. These occur at the following places: 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 19:20 and 28:30-31. In addition to these structural markers, the outline provided by Jesus' own words in 1:8 ". . . you will be my witnesses in *Jerusalem*, and in all *Judea and Samaria*, and to the *ends of the earth*" also provide a clear structure for the book. The outline presented here is based upon the combination of both of these structural indicators.

Occasion. As in the gospel of Luke, Theophilus is once again named as the primary beneficiary (1:1). Since the purpose of the book of Luke was to confirm the faith of believers, it may be surmised that the book of Acts has the same purpose. Rather than a tracing of history, the work is evidently designed to confirm the faith of believers about the saving work which God began in the ministry of Jesus. And, just as the gospel of Luke demonstrated that the salvation of Gentiles found its basis in the teaching of Jesus, so also this book confirms the place of the Gentiles in the program of the Church. While very little is mentioned in Acts about the relationship of the Jews to Gentiles in individual churches (that is a subject for certain of the epistles), the fact is made clear that Gentiles and Jews are both included in the program of God, indeed in one body, no longer known as the theocracy of Israel but now known as the Church.

Message Statement. *The scope of God's program now includes Gentiles as well as Jews, in one body, the Church.*

Argument

- 1A THE WITNESS IN JERUSALEM 1:1--6:7
 This initial section focuses upon the transition of leadership from Jesus to the apostolic band and the initial growth of the gospel in Jerusalem. Before the gospel or church could grow numerically or geographically, it had to be born! As the gospel is first preached in Jerusalem many people believe the message which is received well by all. Soon however, as with the ministry of Jesus, the leadership becomes skeptical and jealous and opposition mounts and soon turns to persecution. In addition to persecution from without, the Church endures internal growing pains and must purify itself. Through all of this, however, the word and work of God continues to grow and prosper.
- 1B The Birth of the Church 1:1--2:47
 This title is not meant to imply that the kingdom message has no place in this section. Rather in hindsight, after an initially apathetic and an eventually murderous response from the nation as a whole, it is clear that the Church as an international, and dispensationally unique body, has its beginning here.
- 1C Introduction 1:1-2
 Luke identifies this book as a sequel to his gospel, thus giving some direction for his purpose. A decided emphasis in Luke was Jesus' ministry to Gentiles. Also in Acts, the divine inclusion of Gentiles into one body with Jewish believers on equal footing is given an inspired foundation.
- 2C Jesus' final instructions 1:3-11
 While the Twelve were concerned about the coming of the kingdom, Jesus gave no indication of the timing of his coming. His response indicates that it is the preaching of the gospel which is their concern rather than the response to their message. If Israel would have responded to the preaching of the Twelve with repentance (highly unlikely since they did not respond to the same call when issued by both the forerunner and the Messiah himself) then presumably the kingdom would be restored (1:6; 3:19-21). However, that possibility is yet undecided, was out of the control of the Twelve, and therefore not their focus of attention. Their concern is to move into action in the temporary earthly absence of their Messiah after the divine empowerment arrives.
- 3C A necessary prerequisite to the kingdom 1:12-26
 As Jesus taught that the twelve apostles would rule over 12 tribes of Israel, Peter, the leader of the group, determined to replace Judas with another. Thus, Matthias was chosen extending the full complement of apostles back to the number twelve. This is the last occurrence of the casting of lots in the Bible. Apparently during this transition period from theocracy to Church, this theocratic method was still valid.
- 4C The divine enablement 2:1-13
 As Jesus taught, the Holy Spirit descended from heaven to empower the work of the believers. This experience is referred to in 11:15-16 as the baptism of the Spirit and occurs only once for each believer at the point of salvation. These people, were, of course, already saved. It is different from filling which can occur frequently. The point, however, is that as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism to empower his ministry, so also now the Spirit has come upon the apostles and their associates to empower their new ministries. The first and most obvious evidence of this power was the ability to speak in tongues. The text states (2:6, 8) that others heard each in their own dialect. Whether the miracle was in the speaking or in the hearing is difficult to determine. What is known is that the miracle served to authenticate the message of Pentecost.
- 5C Peter's interpretation of the event 2:14-41
 Peter's interpretation of the miracle of tongues is basically threefold. His first point is that the miracles are a fulfillment of prophecy (2:14-21). Joel had foretold that in the last days the Spirit of God would be poured out on his people. The second point is that Jesus is the Messiah (2:22-32). His resurrection was the fulfillment of prophecy and the supreme testimony to his Messiahship. His third point was simply that the risen Jesus had sent the Holy Spirit (2:33-35). These things being true, the application for the crowd was to repent of their sin of rejecting the Messiah and in turn receive him as their Savior.
- 6C The results 2:42-46
 The happy result was that nearly 3,000 people were saved that day. The believers shared things in common as needs arose. This was not a communistic effort but a voluntary demonstration of love as those who *had* shared with those who *did not*.

- 7C ***The progress report*** 2:47
This is the first of seven progress reports in the book. The status of the Church at this point was very positive. No opposition had arisen and God's blessing was evident upon the Church.
- 2B The Growth of the Gospel at Jerusalem 3:1--6:7
This section details the struggles and growth of the Church while still in Jerusalem before any foreign missionary campaigns had begun. Opposition from without and purification from within all serve to strengthen the Church and spur its growth.
- 1C Growth through opposition 3:1--4:31
This section signals the first opposition to the growth of the Gospel in the book. The opposition from the Sanhedrin, though mild at first, is simply an impetus for growth. After Peter and John's incarceration and release, the Sanhedrin simply makes verbal threats because they could not decide what to do with the men (4:21). After the opposition the believers gather together for prayer and God responds by shaking the ground as a sign of support and power. At this point in the Jewish people's response to the gospel Peter is still very gracious in his attributing their rejection of Messiah to ignorance (4:17). As the opposition grows, however, and becomes more studied the apostles are seen shaking their feet and deliberately turning to Gentiles (13:51; 28:28).
- 2C Growth through correction 4:32--5:11
The gospel continued to grow in the hearts of believers as was demonstrated by the voluntary generosity of Barnabas (4:32-36). Barnabas' example serves as a foil for the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter five. Their sin of appearing to have been more generous than they really were and therefore lying resulted in their deaths. The point of the chapter seems to be that rather than being a discouragement to the people, it actually caused the fear of God to be upon the young church and thus spurred its purity and growth.
- 3C Progression in more opposition 5:12-42
As the apostles continued to perform miracles and attract the attention and admiration of the populous, the fury and antagonism on the part of the leadership grew. When the leadership responds to Peter, Luke records that *they were furious and wanted to put them to death* (5:33). Luke's main point, however, seems to be that in the midst of increasing persecution *the apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name* (5:41).
- 4C Administration in the church 6:1-6
The problem in the Church at this point arose because of differences in the treatment of Grecian and Hebraic Jews. The solution demonstrates the flexibility and growth of the early church as they organized spontaneously to meet the current need. The solution seemed to be a very diplomatic one as seven Grecian Jews were chosen to care for the needs of the Grecian widows. Luke also uses this short section to introduce two of the major players in the following chapters, Stephen and Philip.
- 5C ***The progress report*** 6:7
The report placed at this juncture is particularly timely. Even after persecution from without, correction from within, and overcoming problems from within, the word of God continued to grow. The progress of the gospel is unstoppable (5:39).
- 1B THE WITNESS IN ALL JUDEA AND SAMARIA 6:8--9:31
At this point after the young church had done some "growing" in Jerusalem it was ready to begin fulfilling its universal mission. The initial step away from Jerusalem is taken at the martyrdom of Stephen. Luke then records the salvation of two persons who have peripheral connections with Judaism but are not "fully" Jewish, as a transition to Gentiles. Finally, God prepares the way for the gospel to go to the Gentiles by saving the premiere apostle, Paul, for that work.
- 1B The Rejection of the Gospel in Jerusalem: Martyrdom of Stephen 6:8--8:1a
The rejection of the Gospel in Jerusalem climaxes the opposition which has occurred in the book since chapter 3 and serves as a transitional step for the spread of the gospel elsewhere. It seems significant that the gospel really makes no advance outside the confines of Judaism until it is thoroughly rejected from within. After Stephen's death, however, there is no looking back, as the gospel spreads first to Judea, Samaria and then to the ends of the earth.
- Luke paints the martyrdom of Stephen in tones directly reminiscent of the rejection of Messiah. The

following are some of the parallels between Stephen's trial and execution, and those of Jesus: 1) *I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God* (Acts 7:56; Luke 22:69); 2) *At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices they all rushed at him* (Acts 7:57; Matthew 26:65); 3) *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit* (Acts 7:59; Luke 23:46); 4) *Lord do not hold this sin against them* (Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34); 5) *"Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him* (Acts 8:2; Luke 23:50-53). Thus, Luke sees the stoning of Stephen by the Jews as a statement of rejection as important as the crucifixion of Messiah. From now on the Gospel will spread to Gentiles *in spite* of the nation rather than *through* the nation.

2B The Spread of the Gospel to Non-Jews in Judea and Samaria: Ministry of Philip

8:1b-40

Philip, who, like Stephen, was one of the original Grecian Jews selected to serve, is the instrument for making the first steps of the transition from Jerusalem to Rome. Through his ministry the gospel is spread first to a Samaritan who had religious and racial connections with the Jews, (8:1b-25) and then to an Ethiopian proselyte who had no connection racially with the Jews but practiced the religion (8:26-40). Though small, these are the first steps toward Gentile reception of the Gospel. The work of Philip in Samaria is endorsed by the apostles and divinely confirmed by the pouring out of the Spirit upon the Samaritans (8:9-25).

3B The Preparation of the Spread of the Gospel to Gentiles Worldwide: The Man Saul

9:1-31

Although Paul had been briefly introduced previously (8:1, a Lukan trait) the story of his salvation is strategically placed at this juncture in the spread of the gospel. Although his missionary activity does not begin for some fourteen years it is appropriate that the apostle to the Gentiles be fully introduced now as an indication of the future of the gospel. His conversion is recorded (9:1-19) as well as his growth and early preaching (9:20-30).

4B The progress report

9:31

After the initial persecution, the Church evidently enjoyed a time of peace. This is significant because throughout Paul's ministry, and in his final return to Jerusalem in particular, the source of opposition to him and his message seems to concern not so much the essence of the gospel as its inclusion of Gentiles. After this point, the complexion of the Jewish church would never be the same.

1C THE WITNESS TO THE EXTREMITY OF THE EARTH

9:32--28:31

The final stage in the spread of the Gospel begins here. The section opens with Peter in Judea officially opening the door to Gentiles and closes with Paul in Rome declaring, in a seemingly final way, judgment on the Jews and concentrating his efforts on Gentiles.

1B The Preparation of the Church to Preach to Gentiles

9:32--12:24

This section leads up to and prepares the way for Paul's missionary journeys. It does so by theologically opening the door to Gentiles through the leading apostle of the time, Peter. The message is first given to Peter, then approved by the rest of the leadership and finally confirmed to the leading church outside of Judea, Antioch. What the early church had only accomplished in a peripheral fashion (taking the gospel to nominal Jews [see 2A above]), it is about to accomplish fully.

1C The preparation of Peter for acceptance of Gentiles

9:32--10:48

Because of the magnitude of this transition, the leading apostolic delegate on earth, Peter, is chosen as the instrument of revelation. Not only that, but Peter's ministry is emphatically confirmed through miracles of the greatest proportions just before the revelation is given. He first heals a man named Aeneas and sees all who live in his town come to the Lord (9:32-35). He next is used to perform the resurrection of Dorcas (9:36-43). These miracles must have been an encouragement that God's hand of blessing was upon the apostle as he was about to receive such startling, new revelation.

Much has been made of the interpretation of Peter's vision but one must be careful not to state more than the text states about the implications and application of Peter's experience. It is sometimes assumed that this vision implies the abrogation of the Mosaic food laws for the Jews. This conclusion is suspect for at least the following reasons. First, Peter himself, at the beginning wondered about the meaning of the vision (9:17, 19) and when it came time to interpret the vision his words pertained to the acceptance of Gentiles, not the abrogation of food laws for Israel, *God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean and I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear*

him and do what is right (10:28 and 10:34, 35). The fact that God accepted uncircumcised Gentiles does not necessarily mean that His desire for Jews had changed at this point. Second, the thematic flow of the book concerns the growing acceptance of Gentiles, not the breaking down of the Mosaic patterns for the Jews. Third, the Jerusalem Council which debated the issue of Gentiles observing Moses (15:5) would have been unnecessary if it had already been decided that Jews were no longer required to obey the Law. It is clear from Peter's loyal attitude toward the Levitical law as evidenced in his vision that he did not consider his association with a tanner to have been a source of personal compromise even before the vision. Otherwise he would never have stayed there in the first place. Thus, it seems best to understand Peter's vision as the opening of the door for allowing Gentiles into the church and nothing more (11:1, 20-21).

- 2C The preparation of the apostles for acceptance of Gentiles 11:1-18
 Because of the revolutionary nature of this change Peter had to convene with the leadership at Jerusalem. The particular criticism against Peter is his association with uncircumcised believers. Peter's conclusion to his defense was "If God gave them [the uncircumcised] the same gift as he gave to us [the circumcised], who was I to think I could oppose God?" (11:17). The conclusion of the leaders, then, was "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (11:18). This message had only to be propagated outside of Judea, a task which was soon accomplished.
- 3C The acceptance of Gentiles at the church at Antioch 11:19-30
 Although most of the scattered brethren had only preached the gospel to Jews, a few also preached to Gentiles as well. With the salvation of these Gentiles bolstered by the doctrinal confirmation from Jerusalem, the Church at Antioch began to thrive as a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. God, then providentially sent a famine to Jerusalem, allowing the mixed, and probably suspect, work to offer aid and financial support to the mother church in Jerusalem during its time of need.
- 4C The victory of the Church over her enemies 12:1-23
 As an evidence that God's hand of blessing was still upon the Jerusalem church, and particularly Peter, even in light of the recent doctrinal developments, Peter is miraculously released from prison the night before Herod had planned to execute him. In addition, Herod himself is the victim of divine judgment as the Church is protected from her enemies and even sees them vanquished.
- 5C ***The progress report*** 12:24
 As before, so also after the introduction of such "new theology" the Word of God continued to increase. God's hand of blessing was still evident.
- 2B The Extension of the Church to Gentiles in Asia Minor 12:25--16:5
 With the theological groundwork laid for the evangelization of the Gentiles, God began to move in the hearts of Barnabas and Saul to accomplish that task. Perfectly suited to the assignment by his understanding of Judaism, of the gospel and and by his Roman citizenship, Paul soon became the leader of the group. This section details his first missionary thrust into Asia Minor and the confirmation of his work by the Jerusalem pillars.
- 1C The call and dedication of Barnabas and Saul 12:25--13:3
 Luke helps the reader to understand the divine approval of this work by clearly stating that the Holy Spirit called for these two men by name. Before he takes the leadership of the group (13:6-13), he is still referred to by the name "Saul."
- 2C The reception of the gospel by Gentiles in Asia Minor 13:4--14:28
 The first missionary journey is covered in this section. The journey begins with a cameo of Paul's message. That is, in his first encounter, a Gentile named Paul receives the message of salvation while a Jew named "Son of Jesus" (who is actually a "Son of the Devil" 13:10) rejects the gospel and is judicially blinded. This short story sets the tone for the rest of Paul's ministry as Gentiles are welcomed into the kingdom and Israel, because of her obstinate rejection is judgmentally blinded by God (Romans 11:7-8). Paul's first preaching on the mainland finds him rejected by the Jews (11:44-45), turning to the Gentiles (11:46-47), and finally accepted gladly by Gentiles (11:48). Paul's experience on the rest of the journey reflect his initial experiences.
- 3C The confirmation of the mission to Gentiles at Jerusalem 15:1-35
 Although the groundwork for Paul's mission had been laid long before he departed for his first campaign, the radical nature of the gospel being preached to Gentiles caused the need for reconfirmation by the leadership of the Church. The basic problem did not involve the acceptance

- of Moses *per se* but rather its acceptance by Gentiles, *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses"* (15:5). The problem was not precipitated by Judaizers¹ (Gal 1:8-10) but rather, by believers who desired a righteous observance of the Law. After a report by Paul, and the testimony of Peter, James concluded that Gentiles ought not to be required to obey Moses. They were expected to observe common morality (15:1-21). This decision was then handed down to the encouragement of those at Antioch.
- 4C The confirmation of the churches in Asia Minor 15:36--16:4
Because of their differences about taking Mark with them, Barnabas and Paul parted ways. Paul, however, returned to the churches founded on his first missionary journey and carried with them the decision of the Jerusalem council.
- 5C The *progress report* 16:5
Despite the recent turmoil concerning doctrine and practice the Church continued to grow and thrive. This progress report serves to confirm the direction of the work after its initial testing.
- 3B The Extension of the Church to Gentiles in the Aegean Area 16:6--19:20
The spread of the gospel in these areas is the result of the second and third missionary journeys of Paul. With the theological direction of the early church set, little remains except the logical dissemination of the message, and growth of the church.
- 1C The call to Macedonia 16:6-10
Apparently as the Holy Spirit directed each apostle into the proper geographical locations, He prevented Paul and his company from moving into Bithynia and directed him toward Greece. His travels took him to Troas where he was joined by Luke before landing on Macedonian soil at Neapolis and Philippi.
- 2C The spread of the Gospel in Macedonia 16:11--17:15
Paul's travels in Macedonia involve primarily his efforts in three cities: Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. In each spot they experienced persecution and blessing. Persecution from Gentiles in Acts only occurs twice, and both times it is over the issue of a loss of profit incurred by businessmen because of Paul's preaching. In Philippi (like Ephesus, 19:23-27) Paul was persecuted by Gentiles over the issue of money, and then by Jews in Thessalonica and Berea who were jealous. In Philippi Paul was unjustly incarcerated, a fact which when discovered, embarrassed the Roman officials. Paul demanded a formal apology from the officials as a precedent which would benefit the believers in Philippi.
- 3C The spread of the Gospel in Achaia 17:16--18:18
Paul's advances in Achaia involve primarily the cities of Athens and Corinth. In the latter Paul received a cool reception which resulted in the salvation of a few but apparently not the establishment of a church. At Corinth, on the other hand, Paul enjoyed a long and fruitful ministry among the Gentiles. Soon after his arrival, the Jews became abusive (18:6) and, as he had done before and in keeping with the tone of his ministry, Paul stated, *From now on I will go to the Gentiles* (18:6).
- 4C The conclusion of the second missionary journey 18:19-22
Paul spent a very short time in Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquila to carry on the work. He returned to Jerusalem and then Antioch.
- 5C The spread of the Gospel in Ephesus 18:23--19:19
After a short time in Antioch Paul left again to confirm the Churches established on his first missionary journey. Meanwhile in Ephesus Priscilla and Aquila instructed a certain Apollos who, like others after him, were Old Testament believers. That is, they had only heard of the baptism of John and were not fully informed. When Paul arrived at Ephesus he met others of these believers

¹Notice the distance which the apostles place between themselves and those who precipitated the original problem (15:1, 24). Those who stirred up trouble evidently linked the keeping of the law with salvation (15:1). The actual issue at the conference concerned questions among true believers about the relationship of the Gentile convert to the Mosaic law (15:5).

who, upon hearing the message of Christ, were baptized into the name of Christ. As before, when the Jews became abusive, Paul's ministry was directed exclusively toward Gentiles (19:8-10).

- 6C ***The progress report*** 19:20
Even with the rejection of the Jewish nation again and again, the word of God continued to grow.
- 4B **The Extension of the Church to Gentiles in Rome** 19:21--28:31
At this point Luke records Paul's words *After I have been there [Jerusalem] I must visit Rome also* (19:21), which set the tone for the rest of the book. This book which began in Jerusalem both geographically and theologically is drawing towards its logical conclusion in the city of Rome.
- 1C The completion of the third journey 19:21--21:16
Paul's fruitful time at Ephesus is closed with the incitement of a riot and his rather forced departure. He then travels north to Macedonia and Achaia for a brief visit and then returns to Palestine in time for Passover. Though fully aware that trouble awaited him in Jerusalem (Romans 15:31; Acts 21:10-12), Paul was persuaded that it was a trip which was necessary (20:22).
- 2C Paul's imprisonment at Jerusalem 21:17--23:32
Paul's arrest at Jerusalem is a curious matter. It occurred evidently because of Paul's associations with the Gentiles (21:28-29; 22:21-22), even though Paul took pains not to unnecessarily offend the Jews. In order to convince the believing Jews that he was still faithful to Moses he agreed to pay the expenses for certain men who had taken Nazirite vows (21:20-26). After his arrest Paul spoke to the crowd which patiently listened to all Paul said about Jesus, but balked at his mention of Gentiles (22:3-22). The next day, at his trial before the Sanhedrin, Paul deliberately caused a division between the Pharisees and Sadducees by claiming himself to be a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee. The objection which Jerusalem had with Paul was his association with Gentiles.
- 3C Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea 23:33--26:32
Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea was a long period in which Paul was allowed certain freedoms. His case was heard by three men, Felix, Festus and Agrippa II. Festus allowed Paul to languish for two years, attempting to please the Jews by leaving him in prison. Both Festus and Agrippa II, after hearing his case, agreed that Paul was innocent and could have been let go had it not been for his appeal to see Caesar.
- 4C Paul's imprisonment at Rome 27:1--28:29
The major portion of this final section involves Luke's detailed account of the sea journey/shipwreck of Paul to Rome. The reason for such emphasis may be that it is a device to heighten the impact of the climax of the transition from Jerusalem to Rome. It also demonstrates the sovereign hand of protection upon Paul as he survives and leads throughout the trouble. Finally, it may heighten the stature and importance of the man Paul, as God's man who was carrying his message to the Gentiles which were best epitomized at this time by his progress toward the capital of the Roman world, Rome itself.
- After arriving at Rome, Paul's encounters with the Jews and his pronouncement on them serves to summarize his ministry and the status of God's program at this time, *The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people and say, You will be ever hearing but never understanding;' Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen* (28:25-26, 28).
- 5C ***The progress report*** 28:30-31
Thus the message of Acts was complete. The final years of Paul's life were not important to the message of Acts. What was important was that the word of God had continued to grow and the message of God's kingdom which began with the Jews was now accepted by the Gentiles; what began in Jerusalem was now completed at Rome.

