

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Acts

1. **Authorship:** Acts is the continuation of a two-volume work written by Luke, a first century physician who accompanied the apostle Paul throughout his ministry. Paul referred to Luke as the “*beloved physician*” (Col. 4:4), and it’s possible the Lord connected the two together as Paul dealt with serious health issues while on mission. Scholars have noted that like the Gospel of Luke, Acts was written by a well-educated man, such as a physician, because it contains advanced Greek and literary style. However, as Luke traveled with Paul, he would have heard many details about Jesus’ life and ministry and been connected to countless eye-witnesses, and been a witness himself to all the events that followed in the early church, making him the ideal person to record the early history of the Christian movement.
 - a. **Internal Evidence:** Acts contains a prologue (1:1-5) similar to the one found in the Gospel of Luke, making it clear that the same author wrote both. He references “*the first book,*” and it’s addressed once again to his primary reader, “*Theophilus.*” Throughout Acts, there are several “*we*” passages (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16), where the writer shifts from the third-person narration to a first-person narration, indicating that he was present when these events were taking place (Carson, 290). Furthermore, since different characters are mentioned in these passages and Luke isn’t named, it gives more evidence that Luke was the one writing.
 - **Acts 16:7-10** – “*And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*”
 - b. **External Evidence:** The Muratorian Canon (AD 170-180) explicitly identifies Luke as the author. The early church father Irenaeus (AD 200) claimed that the same author wrote the Third Gospel and Acts, referring to Luke (Against Heresies, 3.14.1). We find agreement in the writings of Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius, which was the unanimous position of the early church.
2. **Date:** It’s estimated by most conservative scholars that Luke wrote his Gospel in the late AD 50’s-early 60’s (see session four). If this range is accurate, Acts would have been written in the months or years following. However, it’s been noted that Acts concludes with Paul imprisoned in Rome in AD 62. Therefore, Acts couldn’t have been written earlier than AD 62. Since Acts doesn’t include any

other details of Paul's ministry (nor Nero's persecution, the destruction of the temple), it's likely that he was martyred not long after the final events are recorded. Therefore, Acts was probably written between AD 62-65.

3. **Audience:** Like the Gospel of Luke, he begins with a prologue that addresses a mysterious person/people named "Theophilus" (Gk. "Lover of God"). It's debated whether this was a real man named "Theophilus," or a pseudonym given to a high ranking Roman official who had converted to Christ, or the one paying for Luke's writing project, or a broad description of all believers. However, while Theophilus might have been the primary audience, it's clear that Luke was writing to believers throughout the world. The document circulated throughout the eastern Mediterranean, targeting Jewish Christians and Gentiles (Beale, 153).

4. **Purpose:** In the prologue of Luke's Gospel, he states that his purpose is to give "*an orderly account*" that will provide "*certainty concerning the things you have been taught*" (1:3-4). Therefore, Luke interviews eyewitnesses and researches the life and ministry of Jesus in order to produce an effective Gospel account. Likewise, he states in Acts 1:1 that he is continuing what he began in the "first book," with the goal of telling the rest of the story about the life, ministry, and growth of the early church. Some have tried to summarize Luke's work with the title, "Acts of the Apostles," since the history records how the apostles preached the gospel, led the churches, and performed missionary work throughout the world. However, others have argued that the book should be called "Acts of the Holy Spirit," since Luke emphasizes the Spirit's work throughout. Therefore, the overall purpose of the book is to glorify God and testify to believers the powerful work of the Holy Spirit fulfilling what Jesus promised in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Beale notes, "The primary purpose of Acts is to confirm Theophilus and others in the Christian faith by presenting a historical account of the triune God's special providence over the early church" (143). There are also secondary purposes: (1) Confirming the gospel is also for Gentiles; (2) Confirming that the gospel expands beyond ethnic, geographic, and historical boundaries; (3) To encourage believers to spread the gospel; (4) To show the power of God's Word; (5) To show God's control over history; (6) To confirm Scripture's promises concerning Jesus.

5. **Structure:** The structure of Acts is a fascinating study in itself. The writer clearly and intentionally structured the book to emphasize his overall goal, and there are two very important verses that reveal the structure.

First, in Acts 1:1-2, Luke writes, "*In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.*" The word "began" is critical, for it indicates that Jesus' ministry wasn't complete when he ascended to heaven, but only beginning. In other words, while Jesus completed our salvation through his life, death, and resurrection, the gospel ministry was just getting started. The church would carry out the task that Jesus commanded in the Great Commission. Acts is a history of how the Holy Spirit led the early church to follow Jesus' teaching.

Second, in Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the apostles, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” While some have understood Jesus’ words in terms of gospel prioritization, as in, “Once you reach your Jerusalem (local area), then go further out, etc.,” the essence of what Jesus emphasizes is the power of the gospel to move from local to global. In other words, the Holy Spirit is not going to stop drawing people to Christ in Jerusalem, but his power will extend out to the ends of the earth. Nothing will be able to stop his work through the church. However, such power will flow through the preaching of the gospel and the personal witness of believers.

- a. **Geographical Structure:** Acts 1:8 not only testifies to the Holy Spirit’s unstoppable power to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, but it also provides a “table of contents” for the book.
 - **Acts 1-7** – A history of the Spirit’s movement in the Jerusalem Church.
 - **Acts 8-12** – A history of the Spirit’s movement in Judea and Samaria.
 - **Acts 13-28** – A history of the Spirit’s movement to the ends of the earth/Rome.

- b. **Apostolic Structure:** The book is also structure to show how God used different apostles to lead the church and its missionary movements. However, the book is dominated by the ministries of Peter and Paul, who are both given almost an equal amount of attention.
 - **Acts 1-7** – Peter and John
 - **Acts 8-12** – Philip, Peter, and James
 - **Acts 13-28** – Paul

6. Characteristics

- a. **Determination:** The book of Acts highlights the determination of the apostles to take the gospel to those who need Jesus. From the early sections, we find apostles like Peter and John being persecuted, arrested, beaten, and threatened with death. However, they continued preaching the gospel, “*obeying God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). Paul survives much of the same treatment as he takes the gospel to the Gentile regions of Asia Minor, including surviving a violent shipwreck off the coast of Malta and a deadly snakebite (Acts 27). The apostles and early believers were Spirit-filled and determined to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

- b. **The Growth of the Church:** The book of Acts reveals the supernatural growth of the church. We find several summary statements where the word “increase/increased” is used (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). In other words, from beginning to end, the church continued to grow. It should not be overlooked that each of these summary statements include parallel statements about the “*word of God/the Lord*” increasing (Kruger, 147). Beale records that the “*word of God/the Lord*” occurs over twenty times in Acts, clearly indicating its importance (Beale, 155).
 - **Quote:** “The many references to the Holy Spirit in this book are a sufficient indication that the writer regards the development of Christian history as due to a superhuman control. He

does not gloss over the difficulties which the Christian mission encountered, but he purposes to show that God was directing each movement of history. As Christian influence spreads from Jerusalem to Rome there is no impression given that this progress is due ultimately to human achievement, not even to the dynamic and indefatigable labors of the apostle Paul. God was hedging his people around, preventing undesirable developments here and prompting to sustained evangelistic efforts there. In short, God was as active in the early Christian communities and in the messengers of the gospel as he had been in the movements and teachings of Jesus" (Guthrie, 352).

- c. **The Necessity of Regeneration:** One of the key themes throughout the stories of the early church is the insistence that one must trust Jesus through faith and repentance. In other words, only those who experience life-change in Christ will be saved. Baptism doesn't save a person. Performing good works and religious rituals doesn't save a person. Only through being born again in Christ will a person have salvation. Such an emphasis is a fulfillment of Joel 2 (Acts 2:16-21).
- d. **Life in the Early Church:** Acts presents modern readers with what life looked like in the early church. We find a church that is worshipful, holy, edified, unified, sacrificial, prayerful, organized, missional and evangelistic. While the early church wasn't perfect, most would consider it a model for what a Spirit-driven church should look like in all generations.