

for All Its Worth

Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Why Acts?

Why have a separate lesson for a stand-alone book, especially when it is a historical narrative like many other books of the Bible? The book of Acts is immensely important to understand where we are in time right now, the New Testament age. Acts stands unique among the books of the New Testament and other historical narratives because in many ways, we are trying to imitate its practices today. Many distinctions among denominations and even between local congregations within the same denomination can be traced back to how Acts is interpreted. It will be helpful for us to step back and give some serious consideration to how we are interpreting this book, to make sure that it is reasonable, and that we are applying these principles consistently.

All about Acts

Author & Date

Acts was likely written in the late 50's or early 60's by Luke, the physician who often traveled with the Apostle Paul. Paul was probably still alive when this book was written and had not yet written many of his epistles or been imprisoned a second time.

Purpose

What was Luke's intention in writing Acts? Let me ask this question a different way, what was God's purpose in recording the Acts of the Apostles for us? Why do we still have it today? There are many events and issues covered in Acts and plenty that was left out. There are thousands of conversions that are not mentioned or just briefly addressed, yet some are recorded in great detail (e.g. the Apostle Paul). Although the book is formally titled, "The Acts of the Apostles," it only focuses on two: Peter and Paul. Christian history indicates that all of the apostles had active and fruitful ministries in various parts of the world.

To decipher this purpose, we should start with the text and develop a tentative framework from the content of the book that reflects any clear statements of intent. Luke begins Acts by referencing his prior writing (the Gospel of Luke) and the ascension of Jesus. This was the conclusion to his gospel, but the introduction to Acts. Read Acts 1:1-11 and look for indication of the purpose of this narrative work.

Jesus told the disciples that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit very soon and thereafter they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the remotest part of the earth.

It is readily agreed that Acts traces the church from its beginnings in Jerusalem through its spread into Judea, Samaria, and into the rest of the world. The entire book of Acts covers a period of around 30 years! It records the realization of Jesus' prophecy and sets the stage for its continued realization in our day.

Yet it is important to recognize that Acts does not broadly cover the history of the early church. It starts with a focus on the Church at Jerusalem and the ministry of the Apostle Peter, the early leader among the Apostles and Elders (Chapters 1-12). The book then transitions to the ministry of the Apostle Paul and his various missionary journeys (Chapters 13-28) that allowed the gospel to eventually make its way to Rome, the capital of the civilized world. There are no doubt thousands of conversions that are not mentioned and many local congregations established during the first 30 years of church history that are not recorded for us.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

The authors of How to Read the Bible for All its Worth suggest that there is a repeated theme throughout Acts that divides the book into six sections. Each of these sections is distinguished by presenting various challenges the early church (or the later churches) faced followed by a time of unhindered (or less hindered) spiritual prosperity. Note the six key passages that conclude these sections below. Identify the conflicts and events preceding each passage and the key characters that were the focus of Luke's writing.

Acts 6:7 – *“And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”*

Conflicts/Events: Ascension of Christ; replacing Judas; Pentecost; lame man healed; Peter and John arrested and forbidden to preach Jesus; prayer for boldness; Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church; Apostles arrested, jailed, freed, tried, and flogged; dispute between the Hellenistic Jews and native Hebrews; ordaining of “the seven”.

Key Characters: Holy Spirit; Peter, John and Apostles; Ananias & Sapphira; Deacons

Acts 9:31 – *“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.”*

Conflicts/Events: Stephen's defense and martyrdom; Saul's persecution and the scatter of the Jerusalem church through Judea and Samaria; the evangelization of Samaria by Philip; the salvation of the Ethiopian Eunuch; Saul's conversion on the Road to Damascus and baptism

Key Characters: Holy Spirit; Stephen; Philip; Saul

Acts 12:24 – *“But the word of God grew and multiplied.”*

Conflicts/Events: Peter's miracles in Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa; The Lord tells Peter to eat unclean animals; Peter preaches to the Gentile Cornelius and he and his household are saved and given the gift of the Holy Spirit; the apostles and brethren recognize the evangelism of the Gentiles; Evangelism of the Gentiles begins around Antioch; Barnabas departs to find Saul; Herod kills James and arrests Peter, but he is freed by an angel; the Lord enacted vengeance on Herod

Key Characters: Holy Spirit; Peter; Cornelius; Barnabas; Herod

Acts 16:4-5 – *“And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.”*

Conflicts/Events: Saul and Barnabas ordained by the church at Antioch and sent on their first missionary journey; a portion of Asia Minor is evangelized, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch; a dissension arises over whether circumcision is required for salvation; Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem and the Apostles and Elders resolve the conflict; Paul and Barnabas part ways; Paul chooses Silas and begins to visit the churches from his first journey.

Key Characters: Holy Spirit; Saul/Paul; Barnabas; Peter; James (the elder); Silas

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Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Acts 19:20 – *“So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”*

Conflicts/Events: Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (with Silas); the introduction of the gospel into Europe (Greece); Paul and Silas arrested in Philippi and miraculously released; civil unrest breaks out in Thessalonica over the preaching of the gospel; Paul preaches at Mars Hill in Athens; Paul settled in Corinth for a year and a half, preaching the gospel; Paul returns to Antioch and then departs on his third missionary journey; Apollos is found and instructed by Priscilla and Aquila; the Lord magnified the ministry of Paul by various miracles.

Key Characters: Holy Spirit; Paul; Silas; Timothy; Priscilla & Aquila; Apollos

Acts 28:30-31 – *“And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”*

Conflicts/Events: Paul determined to go to Jerusalem despite several warnings to the contrary; civil unrest in Ephesus over the gospel; Paul preaches in Troas and raises a boy back to life who fell from a window during his message; Paul addresses the Ephesian elders one last time; Paul returns to Jerusalem and is counseled to purify himself and pay for the vows of four other men; Paul is recognized and a mob forms, he is arrested by Lysias and addresses the mob; Paul appears before the Sanhedrin and is then transferred to Caesarea to appear before Felix because of a local conspiracy to kill Paul; Paul is held by Felix and has the opportunity to witness to him; Festus takes over for Felix and Paul appeals to Caesar; Festus allows Paul a hearing in front of King Agrippa; Paul witnesses to Agrippa and is transported to Rome; he is shipwrecked along the way and then taken into house arrest in Rome; he preaches to the Roman Jews and declares that he will continue preaching to the Gentiles

Key Characters: Holy Spirit; Paul; Lysias; Felix; Festus; Agrippa; Julius

What are your thoughts regarding this method of organizing Acts?

It is an intriguing method of organizing Acts. There were significant events that moved the gospel forward in the early church: resolving internal conflict; conversion of a persecutor; God’s vengeance on a persecutor; resolution of a broad doctrinal controversy; prosperity of Paul’s ministry; and Paul’s house arrest (with freedoms) in Rome. It is not entirely broken into distinct segments by time or events, but rather by obstacles that were overcome by God’s Spirit, sometimes through the work of cooperative believers.

What are some other options for organizing Acts?

Acts could be organized by discrete or thematic events (e.g. Pentecost; Peter & Cornelius; Paul’s 1st, 2nd, 3rd journeys, etc...)

Main Character

At first glance, it appears that the main characters change throughout Acts. We begin with a general focus on the apostles that narrows to Peter, then to Stephen and Philip, and eventually to Saul/Paul. However, one character remains central throughout the entire text. Identify this character and discuss their role in Acts.

It is the Holy Spirit. He was promised at the Ascension and the apostles were to wait for Him because He would empower them to take the gospel to the world. The Book of Acts recounts this progression from Jerusalem to Rome. Not only does the gospel touch the Gentile world, it gains a significant foothold.

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Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Purpose: Take Two

You will notice that we did not definitively determine the purpose of Acts in the last section. We will refrain from dogmatism in this section as well, but we do want to narrow down the possibilities and suggest a purpose that may help you to make more sense of this important book. Let's proceed by asking some questions about Luke's (or the Holy Spirit's) intent?

Was it biographical?

Although we do learn about key events in the lives of some figures, it is not entirely biographical of any character. Many of the apostles are not even mentioned by name and those that are active in large portions of the text are not covered in complete detail. For example, we do not know how the ministry of Peter or Paul ends.

Was it historical?

Luke does recount Christian history for us, but it is not a complete history by any stretch of the imagination. It tends to cover a beeline of the gospel movement toward Rome from Jerusalem. No doubt the gospel went in many other directions during the same time period but we are not told about it.

Was it intended to standardize church practice?

This is a tricky question. There were several unique things that occurred in Acts. Some examples include casting lots to determine a matter of church business, the miraculous giving/receipt of the Holy Spirit, the practice of all members selling their goods and property and sharing with one another, the ordination of seven men (never called deacons) who serve the Church in Jerusalem but some of which later go to do the work of evangelists and perform miracles, the formation of an authoritative apostolic church council that produces dictates to be read to all churches, Paul's model of first preaching the gospel to the Jews in a community before evangelizing Gentiles, ordaining elders shortly after they are saved, etc... It is difficult to take all aspects Acts and make it a standard for church practice in all times and places. That isn't to say that some things from Acts don't provide a standard of sorts. In the next section, we will talk about some precautions we should take before declaring a precedent to be a standard.

Was it intended to be a model for the church?

In Acts, we see the Holy Spirit moving the gospel forward to fulfill the Great Commission through the agency of the church. We encounter various apostles, missionaries, and churches, but the grand scheme is the furtherance of the gospel through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We do see several themes that serve as a model for the church today. Examples include evangelism, ordination, resolving church issues prayerfully and expeditiously, maintaining doctrinal purity, etc...

Based on this study, I see Acts serving as a model for the continuous movement of the gospel forward to fulfill the Great Commission given by Christ. Through the main character, the Holy Spirit, we sense a pull of spiritual gravity towards the spread of the gospel that is not withstood by forces internal or external to the church. This book serves as an example and source of encouragement to churches throughout Christian history, regardless of their cultural circumstances. The Lord has established His church, given her a Commission, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Principles for Interpreting and Applying Acts

The question we must answer when approaching Acts is whether *what happened* reflects what *should happen* in the future, meaning that it represents a norm or standard for churches of all ages. Biblical history in general records many events that describe what happened but do not intend to suggest that we follow suit. For example, Abraham lied twice about his relationship to Sarah (Genesis 13 and 20). This is what Abraham did, but it is not intended for us to imitate. Let's consider an example from Acts.

Read Acts 2:37-47. Does this passage teach us to sell our possessions when we become Christians or does it teach us something else? See also 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

The early church sold their possessions and shared with others because there was great need in the congregation among displaced Jews that stayed in Jerusalem after their conversion rather than returning home. Additionally, it was something they did voluntarily (Acts 5:4) at the compulsion of the Holy Spirit. We see that in other situations, early Christians were generous but not required to sell all their possessions to put into a centralized, socialized pot of money for redistribution. Acts 2:37-47 is an example of Christian love, not a standard to be enforced among Christians.

There are some occasions however, in which it is appropriate to derive instruction from historical descriptions. The authors of How to Read the Bible for All its Worth provide six principles for interpreting biblical precedents from Acts. I have somewhat reorganized, condensed, and modified these principles based on my convictions and for the sake of clarity. Examples are provided of each principle.

1. The word of God in Acts that may be regarded as a command for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative intended to teach.

Example: What is a primary purpose of the account of Ananias and Saphiras lying to the Church at Jerusalem (see Acts 5:1-11)? What are we being taught?

The purpose is to show us that an action we take against the body is an action against God (His Spirit in this case). We must respect the church and cannot assume that our sins against this body will be ignored by God.

2. Details that are incidental to the primary purpose of a text must not become primary as we seek to apply the narrative today.

Example: We see how God judged Ananias and Saphiras immediately by striking them dead in Acts 5:1-11. Is this the primary teaching purpose of the passage (i.e. God will immediately kill anyone who lies to the church) or an incidental detail?

God judged Ananias and Saphiras to set a precedent for church members (and others) to respect the Lord's church. The fact that He judged them is a primary purpose; how He judged them is an incidental detail. It was not intended to imply that all who dishonor the church will be immediately judged in like fashion. However, God will judge sin and one who dishonors the church should not assume that because they were not immediately struck down that God will not enact chastisement or punishment upon them. We will be required to answer for all of our deeds in the flesh (Matt. 16:27).

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

3. It is probably never valid to use a single, stand-alone Biblical precedent as giving Biblical authority for present-day actions.

Example: Does Paul's rebuke and curse upon Barjesus the sorcerer in Acts 13:6-11 teach us that we should do the same when we encounter a scorner who interferes with our evangelism.

No, Paul was under the control of the Holy Spirit when this occurred and did not do this of his own accord. Later in Acts, Paul is interrupted by Festus while witnessing to Agrippa (Acts 26:24-25), but did not respond in like manner. He remained respectful to Festus despite his scorn.

4. Biblical precedent must be interpreted by clear New Testament teaching, rather than the other way around.

Example: The selection and ordination of the seven Greek Christians in the Church at Jerusalem is often considered to be the ordination of the first deacons (see Acts 6:1-6). Should the standard used by the Apostles for selection of the seven take priority over Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 3:8-13?

The standard Paul provides to us in 1 Timothy is clear and intended to be explicit instruction from God. It could be seen as a clarifying evolution of the standard used by the apostles in Acts 6. Use of the broad principle in Acts 6 in lieu of Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy would be improper. 1 Timothy helps us to better understand and apply the underlying principle in Acts 6.

5. For Biblical precedent to be a standard for today:
 - a. It must be related to the clear intent of the passage.
 - b. Occurrences of similar events must be represented consistently throughout Acts or if they are represented differently, there must be clear explanation as to WHY they are different.
 - c. Other Scriptures should either support or not contradict the practice or doctrine you are recognizing as a standard.

Example: We see at least two ordination services occur in Acts 6:6 and 13:3. In both ceremonies, the apostles or elders prayed and laid hands upon the candidates. Should this be considered a standard practice for all ordination services today? See also 1 Timothy 4:14 and 5:22.

I believe it should be considered a standard because the patterns are related to the clear intent (a need was presented to a church and it ordained men in response) and is consistently repeated throughout Scripture. This standard is also implied in Paul's first letter to Timothy.

6. Although application of a Biblical precedent may not have been the author's primary intent (and therefore it would not qualify as a standard), these narratives do have value as illustrations of Biblical truths and as a pattern that could be followed today. Biblical patterns are especially useful if the principle behind the pattern is clearly taught somewhere in Scripture.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Example: In the account of the ordination of the seven Greek Christians in Acts 6:1-7, we find that there was a need that presented itself to the congregation which resulted in their ordination. Should a need in the congregation be the reason for the ordination of deacons today or should we ordain deacons as a matter of habit or duty?

It is my personal conviction that ordination should be the result of a need in a church, not a matter of habit or duty. This is the patterns with every ordination we witness in Scripture. However, I don't believe that an ordination conducted out of habit or duty is invalid as it is the prerogative of the church that calls for the ordination and legitimizes the ceremony.

7. In matters of Christian practice, a Biblical precedent may provide a useful pattern, but still not be recognized as a mandatory standard of Scripture.

Example: As we see Paul go on repeated missionary journeys, he always appeared to have at least one other missionary laboring with him (e.g. Acts 13:2, 15:40, 20:4-5). Is this a useful pattern that should be repeated whenever possible or is it a biblical standard that requires that two or more missionaries labor together for mission work to be scripturally valid?

There is strong biblical precedent for missionaries going out two-by-two both in the gospels and in Acts. It is a good pattern that we would do well to heed. At the same time, I don't believe that a missionary work conducted by a single missionary is invalidated by Scripture and necessarily bound for failure because a standard has been violated. A parallel argument could be made about churches with only one pastor when the Scriptural model is for a plurality of elders. Having only one elder does not invalidate a church, yet a church is better served by a plurality of godly leaders.