

## **The Acts of the Apostles**

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

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I have been very interested in the history of the church for a long time, in fact not long after first becoming a Christian (August of 1970). My interest was peaked because I looked at all of the denominations and some very important contradictions in basic beliefs between denominations and wondered “how did the church get into such a mess?” After I first became a Christian I wanted to really be a Christian but how does one do that when there are such diverse teachings about basic belief systems. I wanted to be active in the visible Church<sup>1</sup> and became chairman of the Ecumenical Council in my church. After a few regional meetings among other people in the Ecumenical movement I became very disillusioned with that movement. The main group of this movement wanted to bring all of the Christian denominations together but to do that many of the most important beliefs had to be “smoothed out”. I finally have to become specific! Here are some examples of “problem beliefs” that had to be merged: how one becomes a Christian, once saved always saved, the role of the Holy Spirit, the Pope, the definition and role of faith, etc. You can see why I became very confused and dropped out of that assignment. I naively thought that surely how one becomes a Christian should be basic to all Christian denominations, but I found out that it was not given a uniform understanding. So then I had to wonder how I became a Christian and if I could lose my salvation. These are very basic questions and they are not uniformly answered in all the churches.

I have always attended a visible church since I was very young. My mom, dad, and brother lived with my mom’s parents and we attended church as a family although my grandfather attended a Baptist church and the rest of us attended a Methodist church. I tithed, went to Sunday School, Sunday morning and night services, and Wednesday night services as well as being active in the youth group. I did not really understand why my grandfather attended a different denomination; he walked by himself to his church and the rest of us rode together to the other church. I was only going to church because we always went to church and it was not until I took a course in Practical Christianity in the Methodist Church after I was married, had a child, had earned my Ph.D., and had been teaching at a university for three years that I really wondered why I was spending time going to a church. My wife and I decided that either Jesus Christ was Who He said He was and He deserved our total dedication or either He was not Who He said that He was and He deserved none of our attention. We then dedicated ourselves to Jesus Christ and began a time of devotion to Him that has had its ups and downs, as is the usual path for new children of God. But just because we had always “been” Methodist did not mean that denomination was where we should be.

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<sup>1</sup> The church can be divided into the visible and the invisible church. The visible church is any organized church such as a local Methodist church. The invisible church consists of members who are really children of God and only God has this list. All members of a visible church are not necessarily members of the invisible church. All members of the invisible church should be members of some visible church.

I then began trying to understand the beginning of the visible church and how it became so permuted throughout the centuries. That also led me to the question of “what church best fits the first church’s structure and belief system?” I certainly wanted to belong to that church! Some books about church history are referenced at the end of this chapter<sup>7-11</sup> that helped me somewhat in my quest for the “best” church. I remember Pastor Adrian Rogers saying one time: “if you find the perfect church, don’t join because you would ruin it!” He said this a bit facetiously, I presume. I think that the problem to which he referred is that different people have different beliefs and the addition of more people tends to bring the organization away from any perfect structure. Since we began our new journey, we have changed to Southern Baptist and then to PCA, a reformed denomination.

So, have I found the perfect church? First I have to define the “perfect” church and I would say that such a church is one that follows the structure that God told us it should have. Therefore a study of Acts is a logical starting point to try to determine just what a perfect church is. I will save my answer to the end of this study. As you read through this document you should start keeping notes of what elements in this book help you define the perfect church.

## Introduction

**Acts 1:1 “The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach,**

**Acts 1:2 until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.”**

Thus begins the writings of Luke who had already written his book to which he refers as “the first account I composed”. Luke wrote first about the work of Jesus in all that He did and of His teachings. His first account dealt with the life of Jesus until the day that He was taken up by the Holy Spirit to return to His home of forever. We too, in our studies, have studied the teachings of God through Jesus by studying the book of Ephesians and the book of Romans. After studying those wonderful books on theology we then studied the teachings of James on how an individual should live out those teachings in this world. Now we are ready to study how to apply the teachings of theology to the work of the church as a group of Christians living in the world to glorify God. It is my hope that all of us who will have studied Ephesians, Romans, James, and Acts will not just sit here and wait on the coming of Jesus but that we will walk in the world as victorious ambassadors of Jesus Christ both in our individual actions and in our actions as members of the group of Christians throughout the world.

Originally The Acts of the Apostles circulated as a two-part set of the book called Luke and this book of The Acts of the Apostles. We can easily see from the writing of Luke that such was the original intent of Luke:

*Luke 1:1 “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us,*

*Luke 1:2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us,  
Luke 1:3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus;  
Luke 1:4 so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”*

We see that both were written to Theophilus even though we do not know who this gentleman was. It seems that Luke was writing to Theophilus in two books with the first book containing information about who is Jesus and the second book explaining what happened to Jesus and His teaching after His resurrection.

But during the late first or second century the books became separated with Luke being associated with Matthew, Mark, and John as the four books of The Gospel. The book is a bit of a misnomer in that it does not deal with the acts of all of the apostles but mainly with the work of Paul and Peter in advancing the church as part of the kingdom of God in the world. The book of Acts presents us with an excellent historical context of the development of the early church and any serious study of the church must begin with a major study of Acts. To begin our study, let's look at a bit of the history of the book itself.

The date of the writing of the book has been the subject of considerable debate with people generally taking three spans for the writing: A.D. 115-130, A.D. 80-95, and prior to A.D. 70. It could not have been written after the fall of Jerusalem because the third Gospel could not have been written after then and the third Gospel was written earlier than the writing of Acts. The book reflects no knowledge of the books of Paul, which seem to have been first collected and circulated in A.D. 96. It would seem that the book was written before the death of Paul because of the triumphal way that the book ends. It would seem that Luke brought the book to an abrupt end because he had brought it up to the present time of its writing. Surely he would have included information about Paul's later trips if they had occurred by that time. So it seems likely that Luke wrote it during the time of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. Luke was even with Paul during his second imprisonment (2 Tim 4:11) so he surely would have written of this event if it had occurred prior to the writing of Acts. Probably the strongest reason for placing the writing of Acts early is because there is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Surely if that awful destruction had occurred before Luke wrote Acts he would have included some discussion of this event. The persecution of the Christians by Nero began in A.D. 64 and Luke makes no mention of these awful events and surely he would have done so if they had begun before he wrote this book. Luke also makes no mention of the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus, in A.D. 62 but he did speak of the martyrdom of the apostle James and of Stephen so surely he would have written of the death of Jesus' brother if it had occurred before the writing of the book. It certainly does seem very reasonable that Luke wrote Acts prior to A.D. 62.

Although Luke did not write in detail of the first 30 years of church history he did give us considerable detail about the spread of the Gospel and the work of Paul and Peter. We can certainly say that Luke's primary purpose of writing this book is to give an account

of the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world. Also note in Acts 1:1 that the works Luke reported were about the works that Jesus **began** to do and that means that He is not finished! Jesus Christ is still active and the church is still supposed to be doing only what He commanded it to do. The message of the church is not how to improve the world but how God's children are to live in the world without being of the world.

It is truly amazing that from a group of men with no formal training and no financial backing how the message of Jesus spread throughout the world and that less than 300 years after the death of Jesus even the Roman Empire declared Christianity to be the state religion. What makes this story even more amazing is that Christianity is not a teaching; it is not about a philosophical set of principles and rules but that it is about the resurrected Jesus. The Jews were expecting the Messiah to be a political revolutionary but Christianity is not about politics. To understand Christianity one does not start with the teaching of Jesus, as one would do with other "religions", but one starts with the person, Jesus. Remember also that the person whom these people were presenting as the risen Messiah was also the person declared an enemy of the state and who was crucified for His crimes against the state. They would have faced the wrath of the ruling Jewish leaders and the Roman Empire, but they feared more the wrath of God and so they went into the world declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, that He is truly God and truly man. Now 2000 years later the word about the person of Jesus is still spreading across the world. But there are still many enemies of the true church, but many of the enemies of more subtle than they were 2000 years ago and this is a main reason why it is so important for us to know how God intended for the church to function.

The resurrection is at the very center of Christianity so that if there were no resurrection there would be no Christianity. We will talk more about this later but remember how crushed the disciples and apostles were after the crucifixion and burial of Jesus and then the tremendous change that occurred in them after the appearances of Jesus. These people were transformed from a group of defeated followers of a Rabbi into a group of people dedicated to the spreading of the truth about Who is Jesus.

We will use the same outline as given by John MacArthur:

I. Jerusalem (1:1-8:4)

- A. The beginning of the church (1:1-2:47)
- B. The expansion of the church (3:1-8:4)

II. Judea and Samaria (8:5-12:25)

- A. The witness to the Samaritans (8:5-25)
- B. The conversion of a Gentile (8:26-40)
- C. The conversion of the apostle to the Gentiles (9:1-31)
- The witness to the Gentiles (9:32-12:25)

III. The remotest part of the earth (13:1-14:28)

- A. The first missionary journey (13:1-28:31)
- B. The Jerusalem council (15:1-35)
- C. The second missionary journey (15:36-18:22)

- D. The second missionary journey (18:23-21:16)
- E. The journey to Rome (21:17-28:31)

The beginning of the book is an extremely important defining moment for the church as we will discuss when we discuss the first section. As noted above the book of Acts does not end with the end of the works of the Apostles. Luke ended the book at the time of his writing of it and there was still a lot that was done by Paul and others before the end of the beginning of the church era. I think that it would have been best for Luke to have waited a bit so that we would have the complete story of the work of the Apostles in setting up the first church era. There is also speculation among scholars that Luke intended to write a third volume taking up with Paul being released from prison and more of his acts. But God is the One who told Luke when to write his book and what to include. I, of course, bow to the wisdom of God. Much of the rest of the story is contained in the epistles and in the uninspired writings of early historians such as Josephus. As we probe through this book we will encounter some of the other writings and try to understand what should be the perfect church.

So now let's try to understand what Luke had to tell us about the true function of the church of Jesus Christ.

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