

# The Book of Acts

## Lesson 2

## Structure and Content

Faculty Forum



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## **Lesson Two: Structure and Content**

### **Forum**

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# The Book of Acts

## Lesson Two: Structure and Content

### Forum

With  
Dr. Hans F. Bayer

Students  
Larry Gwaltney  
Ra McLaughlin

### Question 1:

#### Can supernatural events happen in real history?

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, is there anything intrinsic to the idea of history that by necessity precludes the supernatural? If you admit one, are you discounting the other?

**Dr. Bayer:** That's an important question to understand history as a very important access to truth. The understanding since the Enlightenment is that history and the miraculous are mutually exclusive. There is a postulate in the light of the autonomy of reason that history must always reason function within an eminent cause and effect continuum. And so, if there is some claim of a transcendent activity or causation, it must be discarded as not historical. But what that actually shows is that that is a particular philosophy of history that contradicts the philosophy of history that we derive from Scripture which says that this universe is broader than a rationalistic framework in which the causation can very much lie with God who has the authority and ability to intrude, if you want to see it that way, or reach into our time-space continuum. And if you have that kind of a philosophy of history, the miraculous as the cause, or the effect of some phenomenon that we can analyze and demonstrate or perceive with our senses is well within the confines of that understanding of history, and that is why Scripture speaks of salvation history or implies the understanding of salvation in history and through history.

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, if I could interject, as you're talking about miracles and their historical reality, it makes me wonder how somebody standing outside the Christian faith might view our understanding of miracles. I think in terms of the way that we think about other religions or ancient mythology like Greco-Roman mythology, or we think about the claims of religions that we have considered to be false religions, and rightly so, I think. We look at the supernatural claims of those religions and we discount them in the same way that unbelievers look at the supernatural claims of our

**religion and discount our claims. How do we as Christians process all that in our minds and respond appropriately to it?**

**Dr. Bayer:** I would say an important question is in what context are the miracles seen? When you look at accounts of miracles in the Greco-Roman world, it is normally a spectacular, amazing thing that somebody did. Whereas, in the Gospels and in the book of Acts, you see that there is a context embeddedness of the miraculous. It has a purpose. The Gospel of John speaks of miracles as signs that point to something, so they are story embedded, they are message embedded. They are not just single, amazing events, but they actually authenticate and verify what is being said elsewhere. So they have a context, a milieu, a situational particularity. And that sets the miracles in the Gospels and the book of Acts apart as significant, as signposts. Although I would say that Jesus says, do not focus on the miraculous. Focus on the call of God to repentance. But the miraculous does authenticate. It does strengthen that claim that the early apostles had regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **Question 2:**

**Are there dangers in interpreting and applying narratives?**

**Student 1:** Dr. Bayer, once we have understood that Acts is largely narrative, and once we've figured out how it is we're going to get meaning out of that narrative, are there any dangers or problems that could crop up as we do that? What should we watch out for as we're interpreting and applying narrative?

**Dr. Bayer:** Ra, I mentioned in the lecture that the character of narrative text is an indirect approach to what the message actually is, at times at least, and so I would say there is a danger in understanding narrative texts by relativizing its authority. You read the text and you say it's narrative, so the danger would be to say I cannot take its authority as directly as a letter of Paul. So I would say that's a danger, but I have pointed out in the lectures that you can move with the narrative, the unfolding of the narrative, particularly repetitions and markers that guide you along so that you can emphasize what the account itself emphasizes, and be guided in that way to not under or over read the text and really follow its authority because as it develops the story, it has authority to challenge us.

**Student 2:** Okay, to kind of follow up something that Ra has been asking — and correct me if I'm wrong, Ra — are you asking, for instance, is it possible in using the narrative strategy for instance, that it could clash with say a systematic theology? Let's take the filling of the Holy Spirit for instance. We've got a story there, and yet we've got this theology, this systematic theology, that tells us what it means, and it's possible that the two could clash?

**Student 1:** Yeah, I'm feeling that tension, and I'm also feeling the tension of when a text is communicating to me implicitly, I'm worried that I might infer the wrong thing from it. So I'm looking for some sort of grounding, and systematic theology would be a place that I would naturally turn for grounding, but what happens when those are in tension? Those are the types of things that I'm thinking of.

**Student 2:** So what I would as the doctor here is how do I know if I've crossed a line? Because if narrative strategy is supposed to help inform our theology among other things, it's possible I could go too far and ignore the warning signs.

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, I think there is a danger, but in my own experience, it has been a wonderful discovery to see that systematic and explicit statements dovetail very well with narrative texts such as the book of Acts. Take the issue of the work of the Holy Spirit. When we look at the narrative, we see that there are constant factors. In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I have mentioned in the lecture that every person that comes into contact with the gospel that believes the message is filled with the Holy Spirit. But when you look at the narrative unfolding, there is variation in the phenomena, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but the reality is always affirmed, and that would be corroborated by what we read in Paul and other parts of the New Testament that affirms the same thing: "He who does not have the Spirit of Christ is not of him." So I would say this is a process. This is a challenge and a study, but in the end, we can be confident that there will be a unity and that we will be confirmed in the way we read narrative texts so that in the work of the Holy Spirit we see that what Peter says in Acts 2:38 is very much verified by the unfolding of the text in the book of Acts.

### Question 3:

#### What strategies did ancient writers use to communicate?

**Student:** Doctor, our lesson in Acts deals with understanding, the strategies, and methods that Luke used to communicate his views in his writings. Now, as modern readers, we are sort of used to, in modern readings, used to strategies and modern authors, for instance, using communication strategies and structures to do that. Very often, though, we don't associate those kinds of things with ancient writers. And what I'd like to know is if ancient writers had these things in mind as well as contemporary writers did.

**Dr. Bayer:** Very much so. The art of persuasion is noticeable throughout history. And ancient rhetoric, which is a very large field of study that does not only speak of oratory but of the entire process of communication, has very much the element of

persuasion. So again, just like what I said regarding the company that Luke keeps with regard to his historical veracity, it again is the question of the motive of persuasion; do you seek to persuade from an unclear, from a questionable motive, or do you seek to persuade because you are inspired by the work of God among his people. And the latter would be correct for the book of Acts that uses devices of persuasion, repetition, etc., that is based on this reality and this truth.

**Student:** If I could, I'm thinking in terms of a lot of modern objections to the types of persuasions that are used in different contexts. You know, people think of some types of persuasion as being manipulative or might think of subliminal things that are done where people don't know that they're being persuaded, that they're not aware of them. And I think in terms of contrasting that with Paul's strategy, say in 1 Corinthians 2 where he says, I could have come to you using all sorts of rhetoric, but I didn't, I held back so that it would be shown that any work that happened in you was the work of the Holy Spirit. How do we reconcile those types of ideas? You're not saying, I take it, that the persuasion that's going on in Scripture is like the subliminal messages that we get now or the manipulation. But how do we reconcile that persuasive strategy and rhetoric with say, Paul's strategy of wanting to see the Holy Spirit working?

**Dr. Bayer:** That's very good. What Paul refers to is rhetoric that is simply seeking to be persuasive without the substance of the content. That was a very big issue at the time of Paul. The particular form of persuasion that I see in the book of Acts, for instance, in the early speeches in the book of Acts, is appeal to God's revealed word, appeal to God's work already among his people, appeal to God's work in and through Christ. So it is, look what God has done, therefore, repent and turn to God and be reconciled with him. So there is a form of persuasion, but it is not manipulation. It is appeal based on revealed truth, it is appeal based on creation, it is appeal based on general knowledge, very much focused on the love gift of God in and through Christ so that there is persuasion, but there is not manipulation, and the persuasion is not merely rhetorical. It has the foundation of the work of God among his people.

### **Question 4:** **Why is Christianity so interested in history?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson emphasizes that Christianity has really focused on history, on real events and real people. But it seems pretty clear looking around that not all religions share this interest in history. Why is Christianity in particular so interested in preserving historical records and in proving its claims from history?

**Dr. Bayer:** I think that's very significant because the instrument God has chosen to reveal himself as we see it in the Old and the New Testament is in and through history. My wife calls that the watermark of God's self-revelation, that there is a particular combination between God speaking in and through history. It is not an oracle of Delphi. It is even to be distinguished from the understanding of revelation in Qur'an. So it doesn't come down. It is much more prophetic speech, prophetic speech, prophetic speech, promise and fulfillment continuum. And so in Hebrews 1:1, the author can say that God has spoken in manifold ways, in different times through his prophets, and now in the end times, he has spoken through his son. So this is a form of self-revelation that is unique to Christianity that God speaks in and through history but in a trajectory of redemptive history. So I would say it is a characteristic trademark of how God speaks to mankind.

**Student:** Do you think it would fair to say that Christianity is historical, but it's far more than that? For instance, there are many things that we can't yet prove historically about Christianity. They're not demonstrable, and in fact, many historical events aren't in that scientific sense. What is the space for faith, I guess, when we're talking about history, Christianity and faith?

**Dr. Bayer:** That is significant because certainly Christianity is not mere history. We would be reducing the totality of what is coming towards us. So it is what I would call, salvation history, redemption history. It is God's presence, God's word, God's self-revelation in and through the means of history, and so there are certainly many aspects that are hard to demonstrate. But let me give you an example. In the early part of the book of Acts, Peter says, "This one whom you crucified" — a reference to historical event — "has been enthroned as Lord and Savior." So there is a very close and intimate connection between the historical reference and the theological reality and truth. So it is true that many issues that are affirmed are beyond historical verification or falsification, but they are always associated with that.

**Student:** But isn't it also true, though, that that theological reality is historical. It's just not verifiable. I mean, he really is enthroned. There really is a heaven and he really is there.

**Dr. Bayer:** That is correct, because the affirmation of the apostolic witness is, the one we ate with, the one we learned from, the one who was crucified, the one who was buried, appeared to us alive and ascended to heaven with our eyes fixed upon him. So very much so a continuity, and you would say in some ways the revelation of God moves in and through history and goes beyond it to show the total glory and reality of God working among his people.



### Question 5:

#### Why were the apostles' words so important?

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, our lesson really stresses the emphasis Luke had on the actions and the words of the apostles and early church leaders. What I was wondering is, why would this have been important to Theophilus? And as we read it, what is the difference, and why should it really be important to us today? What's the difference between, for instance, the words of Peter and maybe a Christian who lived next door to Peter?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, I have tried to emphasize that a little bit in the lecture, but I did not have enough time to develop that, namely that the disciples lived with Jesus for an extended period of time, and as I'm convinced from studying the pedagogical approach of Jesus, he trained his apostles systematically by repetition, by various means, so that they were actually entrusted with what Jesus wanted to give them by his speaking and by his teaching and also by his actions. So the apostolic witness is not one of innate authority but is derivative authority, that they are called to testify to what Jesus taught, what he gave to them, how he shaped them really as people, including the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a total process of transformation. And so, that apostolic witness is significant for Theophilus and for the early church. That is why in Acts, the new converts devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. It was not that they were new great teachers of their own wisdom, but they had been appointed to give to the new converts what they themselves had received and to give that in an authoritative way.

**Student:** I've sometimes heard that the Holy Spirit rested differently on the apostles than on the rest of the early church, not in the sense of filling them and saving them, but in the sense of gifting them and superintending them in a way that would make them infallible as opposed to other witnesses in the first century who may even have known Jesus but who nevertheless did not rise to that level of infallibility in their teaching. Does that have anything to do with the authority that we give to the apostles, or does that really rest more in their appointment?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would focus on the appointment. When you look at the call of the disciples, a larger group than followers of Jesus, Jesus appoints the twelve to a particular witness ministry. So there is a particular call, a particular selection, of the twelve disciples to testify to what I have just described. So I would say that is where the authority lies, that Jesus in a particular way had the foresight that they would, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, at the beginning of the messianic church in the book of Acts, that they would then be reliable witnesses to that. Certainly, there is a prophetic enabling. Peter, for instance, arises as a prophetic preacher. But I would focus mostly on the calling aspect.

### Question 6:

#### Why are the summary statements in Acts so important?

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, in the lesson you talk about summary statements, a special kind of authorial comment that Luke makes throughout the book of Acts, and you mention that the literary structure of Acts in many ways revolves around these summary statements. I'm sort of fascinated by that. I haven't heard that idea before. Can you explain that a little bit more to me and tell me why it's significant and why Luke might have used the strategy and what it means for me today?

**Dr. Bayer:** We have mentioned before that narrative has more of an indirect approach to communication and to the actual message that is embedded in the narrative. And as we take notice of these repeated summary statements, we see that there is a certain natural emphasis. As an author repeats a certain statement, you are drawn to notice that as an emphasis. So that would be a guidepost that gives you and me a certain objectivity, so I do not say you have to understand the book of Acts as I do, or I have to understand it as you do, but we look together at the text, and it has this innate emphasis, and so we can agree to follow how the author guides us in interpreting particular elements. The same would hold true for the work of the Holy Spirit. We would see that there is variation in detail, so you and I should not focus on particular details in some sections and elevate that to a standard of normativity, when in fact, the variation relativizes some of these aspects, but the continuation that the Holy Spirit falls on every single person that comes close to the gospel would be something that you and I could uphold as being continuous and emphasized in the book of Acts.

### Question 7:

#### How did internal growth and tension interact?

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, I'd like to turn to questions of what the lesson termed as dimensions of growth, and I believe you used the terminology of "internal growth tension." Could you reassert what that means, and what challenges specifically did the early church have in the area of internal growth tension?

**Dr. Bayer:** Well, as the church grew and broke through different barriers — language barriers, culture barriers, religious barriers, many different types of barriers — people from these various groups and areas came together under the same Lord, and that created internal tensions. There were differences, there were preferences, there were prejudices, there were ballast thoughts and beliefs that were brought into the church. And so it created internal tension that had to be overcome, and the wonderful thing is as we look at Acts 6 and Acts 15, we have examples of how these internal tensions that came about with this growth of the church were handled and resolved, and so I would say the book of Acts shows us how despite internal tensions, the treatment of Greek-speaking widows in

Acts 6, or the treatment of uncircumcised Gentiles in Acts 15, how these problems were resolved for the growth and the maturing of the Christian church. So internal growth, internal maturing despite these oppositions that necessarily came about with the growth of the church.

**Student:** In the lesson, you also mentioned sort of a corresponding pair of elements related to that, the external growth and opposition. It seems fairly clear to me how a church that has the Holy Spirit and submits to Jesus can grow despite the tensions they feel on the inside. It seems to me to be a little bit different dynamic when you start looking at external growth and opposition. How does the opposition by the unbelieving world somehow lead to, or despite those things, how does the church keep growing externally? How do you get more and more people when what you're offering people is, join us and be opposed?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, that's a phenomenon. It's amazing to see that dynamic in the book of Acts, and it defies plausibility in some ways. But that's exactly what happens, that as there is numeric growth, as the gospel goes beyond these traditional cultural barriers and creates rather heterogeneous bodies of believers, that with the increase of opposition, there is actually further growth. And perhaps the best example is Acts 8:1 where the Jews, or believers in Jerusalem, are being persecuted, and with the exception of the apostles, these messianic Jews are expelled. And that persecution is the very cradle of further expansion. So at the very point where you have opposition, you actually see that God triumphs and these believers are spread all across what we would identify as Palestine, and are used as witnesses elsewhere. So we can see that dynamic that what we would perhaps consider as a catastrophe being the very cradle of God's further expansion. So we see then that in the book of Acts, external growth despite external opposition, internal growth despite internal opposition is truly the fact. And then one other thing is the spiritual warfare aspect, that there are possessed people. There is a satanic world that the early Christians have to face, and that would also be part of the external opposition. So it would not only be political and cultural and economic powers that oppose the spread of the gospel, but it would also be the satanic world. And so we have a triumph in the midst of suffering, not with the exclusion of suffering that we see because it is the mission of God that the early Christians are caught up in and that we are called to continue.

### **Question 8:**

#### **What are some practical strategies for interpreting Acts?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, you've talked about how Acts is the second of a two volume work with Luke. We've talked about how there's a very complex strategy within the book of Acts itself in different ways, the different types of text communicated within it. It all seems in some

ways very complicated. Can you offer some practical suggestions on how, when we read the book, we can make use of our knowledge of these different strategies and yet not get lost? It seems so complex that it would be easy just to follow one thing or the other, or even just be overwhelmed with it and not know what to do.

**Dr. Bayer:** I would say it is a matter of attentive reading. I've mentioned that Luke is very aware of the promise and fulfillment dynamic, Old Testament to the ministry of Jesus, Old Testament to the Gospel of Luke and to the book of Acts, but there is even promise and fulfillment within the Gospel of Luke and Acts. The Holy Spirit is promised by John the Baptist: "I baptize with water, but he who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." That is echoed in Acts 1. So it is attentive reading to be aware of these echoes of these correspondences. And one suggestion I would have is to read Luke 1–3 and then to read Acts 1–3, and there are many echoes, many parallels. Another example would be to read the narrative of the passion of Jesus towards the end of Luke's gospel, and then to pay attention to how Stephen is persecuted and martyred for his preaching. There are echoes, there are similarities, and when we move from these literary echoes to life, we will discover that what happened to our Master in terms of his suffering and his rejection, there is in a certain way, an echo to the suffering and to the rejection of Stephen, so that we are to expect that as our Master was rejected, our message might be rejected, we might be persecuted for what we speak about. Certainly, there is uniqueness to the suffering of Christ that is unparalleled and that will never be repeated, but there is also a certain pattern analogy to that.

**Student:** I wonder sometimes if an analogy of everyday life, many things we become more adept at through practice and rehearsal. And you say, for instance, read these other things and become familiar with them. I know Ra has had this experience when he learned to ride a motorcycle and there are a lot of variables involved in that. Both hands are working, both feet are working, and it doesn't seem intuitive when you first get on it and you're constantly on edge — what am I doing, what am I doing. But I think we read the Bible, read these other things and learn to look for them, after a while they just seem to emerge almost like a second nature. Do you think that's a helpful way of looking at it?

**Dr. Bayer:** Very much so. Take for instance as another example, Acts 7. Here in Stephen's speech, there are many echoes, many references to Old Testament figures that prefigure and that anticipate what happens to Jesus. So as we begin to be looking for these echoes and these repetitions or these connections, we will very easily discover them and see them.

**Student:** So what I hear you saying then is that, yes, it's a complex process; no, there aren't any shortcuts, but there are some good places to start getting a handle on this, but really, you need to work

**through all of the details and pay attention to all of them and find a way to manage them in the long run.**

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, and then they have a very spiritual ramification that we are brought into this story of promise and fulfillment. We are participating among the people of God, in what God is doing, leading us, protecting us, but certainly in and through suffering as well. So we do learn through our study of Scripture to align ourselves to how God works among his people.

### **Question 9:** **Is the book of Acts a success story?**

**Student:** Dr., Acts 1:8 contains a charge from Christ to the apostles to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, and yet the book of Acts seems to end on a perfunctory note. It ends with Paul in Rome. Does Acts leave unfinished business, or did the church succeed? Is Acts a success story? Exactly what is it?

**Dr. Bayer:** That's very interesting. If we look at maps of the ancient world, they certainly did not only show the Mediterranean Sea and a few countries around it. It was a much larger awareness even in the ancient world of what the ends of the earth would be. It was not a globe. It was not the entire world as we know it now, but a rather extensive area. So your question is very justified. I would argue that the book of Acts describes a paradigm, and that is, we reached the center of the known world of that time, and with the center we can reach the rest of the world. We know from Paul that he had intentions to travel to Spain using Rome as a stopover, so to speak, and so we should not understand that the mission is accomplished and finished with Acts. But on the other hand, we should not think that it was not accomplished. So the commission that Jesus gives to the disciples in a paradigmatic way was reached with reaching Rome, while the commission to evangelize all the world — Go into all the world, the Great Commission in Matthew — is still with us to this very.

### **Question 10:** **How can Acts encourage Christians who suffer?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, in both lessons we've seen so far, we've seen this wonderful pattern of the way that the gospel was unhindered in going forth despite the tremendous opposition that it faced. But I can't help but feel for the Christians who suffered under that opposition, under that persecution. I guess I'm really looking for a word of encouragement for believers today who suffer, who are martyred, as they try to hold fast to their witness and try to bring that witness to those around them. How can we turn to the book of Acts to gain

reassurance and confidence and a strategy for persevering in a proclamation of the gospel, seeing it go forth unhindered despite the tremendous persecution that many parts of the world face today?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yah, that's a very serious and important question. Sometimes I ask my Greek students to tell me what the last word in the book of Acts is, and obviously it is "unhindered." So the book of Acts ends on *akolutos*, not hindered. The message was proclaimed even when Paul was under house arrest in Rome unhindered. So there is this sense of triumph because it is the mission of God, not because the individual people like Paul or Peter or Stephen were successful, but because it is God's mission. So we have this encouragement, but you're quite right that God did not protect Stephen from martyrdom. Imagine that. He is spirit-filled man, a young man, a promising man with a great future to proclaim the gospel, and God allows this man to be martyred. And there are many other stories of persecution, of suffering, of difficulty, internal tension, external opposition, as I have mentioned, that the Christians had to endure. And I think we are being sensitized to the work of God, and that is that despite death, that despite persecution, God's message of reconciliation with himself in and through Christ is going out. And so we can take comfort in this protection of God's mission, while we need to encourage ourselves and especially those in different parts of the world who are right now experiencing persecution, that they're not outside of the mission of God, outside of the purview of God's protection. But we must pray for them that they would persevere, and that we would persevere, in serving God in such an abandoned way that the contingencies of our lives and the suffering that we encounter would not obstruct but actually be an instrument even towards the propagation of the gospel in the world.

### Question 11: What is the significance of Stephen's speech?

**Student:** It's interesting. You had mentioned Stephen. He is featured very prominently in Luke's work. There's an extended sequence where he recounts the history of Israel, and it is not well received, obviously. People are furious, and I find it sort of curious in that recitation of something that they all shared in common infuriated them so much. What was it that he said exactly that angered them so? And the fact that that recitation is in there, what does that mean as we read? How are we to understand that?

**Dr. Bayer:** That is a significant speech in Acts 7 that Stephen recounts, and you know, he doesn't give one history and one description. There are actually two. There is a history of those who resist the call of God, who resist the mercy of God and the pursuit of God in their lives, and then there is a history of people who respond to the call God throughout the history. So there is actually a history of salvation and a history a rejection and resistance. And the offence that Stephen brings to his audience is that he brings them

dangerously close to the history of those who resisted the call of God. That is part of the rejection. It is significant to know that Stephen is a member of the diaspora Jewish community, and as all those who live away from home remember and know, you love your roots being away. And so this is an extensive description of the redemptive work of God among the people, the Jewish people, that Stephen as a diaspora Jew would particularly feature. But his call is which group do you belong to? Which group do you associate yourself with, those who respond or those who reject the call of God? And to that they resist and respond with anger.

**Student:** It sounds like a message that you could easily apply to churches today as well. You know, you think about the church at large, and while thankfully much of the church is evangelical and embraces the gospel of Jesus Christ that we see throughout the book of Acts, there are many churches that have abandoned that gospel and probably could do with hearing a speech like Stephen's. They may be in our history and our tradition, but they have come very close or perhaps even crossed the line into those who resist and reject God's will. I wonder how we might be able to use to the teachings of the book of Acts to minister to them and perhaps try to recover them into the evangelical community?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would be personally hesitant to say what Stephen says at the very end of his speech in Acts 7, but I certainly would agree with saying that there are two groups of people in the history of mankind and that the call of the gospel is one of call to reconciliation with our creator and redeemer. And so we can learn a lot from this speech, and also we can see that God has been faithfully pursuing his people throughout the ages.

### **Question 12:** **How far should we go in pursuing reconciliation?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the picture we get of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts is one of an apostle who is willing to go to many different lengths to accommodate his message and his behavior to those around him. You see him doing even extreme things, having Timothy circumcised — of course I would see that more as Timothy going to an extreme means — but even so, there are many great sacrifices made on behalf of reconciling Jew and Gentile together in the church. This seems to be a big and important idea, and I'm wondering in our own reading of Acts and our own application of Acts to our lives, how far do we go in pursuing reconciliation, whether it's between Jew and Gentiles or between other groups that we're involved in.

**Dr. Bayer:** I did not mention that when we were talking about the question whether Luke wrote the book of Acts, but some critical scholars have said, because Paul has Timothy



circumcised, because Paul goes to Jerusalem and participates in some Jewish rites there, the author of Acts cannot have known the true Paul who would not have done that. So it is a very good question for us to see that there is a certain tension, principled in essentials, very conciliatory and open and collaborative, cooperative in nonessentials. That's how I would summarize what Paul does. You may remember in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says that he is seeking to be all things to all people, a Jew to the Jews, a Gentile to the Gentiles. That would not pertain to essentials, but that would pertain to nonessentials. And the issues that you have mentioned in the book of Acts, Paul would identify as means towards reconciliation and towards bridging gaps. You may mention the circumcision of Titus which Paul resists in Galatians, while he accepts the circumcision of Timothy for the very reason that the circumcision of Titus was an issue of belief. Does he need to be circumcised in order to be saved? Whereas, in the case of the Timothy, it was not a salvation issue. It was a "do we cause hindrance to our Jewish brethren if he is not circumcised" issue. So even there we can see that Paul was principled and very committed to the essentials while very much willing to bridge on nonessentials. And I would say for us today, that is the course that we need to discern: Where are we called to confess our Lord and our Savior? Where are we committed to non-negotiables? And in which areas for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of living out unity and reconciliation, must we be very tolerant and flexible? And I think Paul gives us some indication to that end as we compare the book of Acts and Galatians particularly.

**Student:** That resonates with me a lot when I sit on the session of my church, and we are confronted with decisions. The fact is our body is not exactly where we are as individuals sitting as elders. We often have different views on some things, and yet I can recall many times that we made conciliatory gestures toward people who might be concerned about certain things. I can see this every day. And I don't think it's just for elders, of course... I mean, everybody on down. And when I read things like this, I realize the lengths that Paul was willing to do to bridge those gaps. And it's not a question of how free I am at every moment; it's also the consideration of other people.

**Dr. Bayer:** And I think it is driven by love. When you read Romans 11, you see how deeply Paul loved his Jewish compatriots. And because of that love, he was willing to be flexible, but also because of that love to the Lord, he was willing to be very principled and clear.

### **Question 13:**

#### **How important is it to understand Luke's context?**

**Student:** Our lesson mentions that Luke communicated many things in his writings implicitly. Now, talking between contemporaries, for instance, when I talk to Ra, I can often make implicit statements and we have a common frame of reference and he picks up what I'm



saying, and it doesn't have to be explicitly stated. But we're talking about somebody who wrote a couple of millennia ago, and I'm not always sure that we can understand, for instance, some of his implicit statements. It seems to me that there is a risk in looking for that unless I share his common frame of reference. How do we overcome an obstacle like that?

**Dr. Bayer:** Well, I would say that as we read the book of Acts, even if we are ignorant of the historical background and the historical context, we should be able to get a rough understanding of what Luke is seeking to communicate. We have made mention of the summary statements and the echoes. So there are many markers within the text itself that help us to follow his flow, and in the end, to understand what God seeks to communicate to us. But as I have mentioned, it certainly helps and assists in our focus and understanding as we get a feel for the original audience, as we hear with the ears of those who heard the book of Acts, who read the book of Acts. And so, I would argue that the understanding of the context helps bridge the gap. The understanding of the background helps bridge the gap between then and now. And then to be able to say, as I understand what this message meant to the original hearers, I can make reasonable and responsible transfers to my own time, our own time. And I've already referred to the factors of continuity. It is the same God, it is the same world in many ways, it is the same human condition that we are still dealing with today that the book of Acts speaks of. We've spoken about suffering; we've spoken about God's mission. There are so many constant factors in that transfer. So I believe as we continue to study the whole literary structure and its historical background, we aid ourselves and those that we communicate the gospel to in making that responsible transfer and understanding what the intended meaning is.

**Student:** And is it also not true that while much of the teaching and narrative is implicit, it's not necessarily subtle or hidden, that you can make something very plain through implication, and that probably the big points, the big major points rather than finer points, but the big ideas that we need to get a hold of and apply in our own lives, it seems to me, as I've read Acts, that at least those, while they may be implicit are also in many ways obvious.

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, very much so. And I've mentioned in the lesson, the beauty of a story is that it draws in the whole person. It is not only appeal to your understanding, but your whole person, your feelings. Your responses are drawn in, and God speaks to the whole person, not just to the intellect. And so, as you read the story or the gospel narrative in Luke's gospel or in Mark's gospel, you're drawn in, and so your heart is being confronted with this message, not only your understanding. I believe that God holistically addresses us as whole people with his message, and the device of narrative is a wonderful one to appeal to the heart as well.

**Question 14:****Do our circumstances reflect God's approval or disapproval?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, one of the things that you talk about in the lesson is that we can see God's approval or disapproval of people and actions by the way that he responds to them, whether he might bless them and show his approval, or he might curse them and show his disapproval. I'm wondering how that principle can be applied to our own lives in the modern world. Is it true that I can look at how I'm being blessed or not blessed and use that to judge how closely I'm aligned to the will of God, or do I have to make adjustments?

**Dr. Bayer:** Well, certainly we receive guidelines in the book of Acts of how God responds and works with various circumstances and people. Take the example of Ananias and Sapphira. This is a very shocking and a very conspicuous example. They were not punished for not giving. They were punished for pretending to be doing something that they were actually not doing. And so we do see that there is a continuity and a demonstration of moral absolutes regarding dishonesty. There is other moral issues that are described in the book of Acts. There is a continuity of who God is. There is a continuity of who human beings are in their need for repentance, in their need for salvation. So in the total flow of the book of Acts, we see many signposts that support or question that bless or curse from the sight of God regarding the action of human beings. And so I would say there is a transfer to our own day because God has not changed. The moral absolutes have not changed. Our human condition has not changed. So while we need to be careful in cultural particularities, we can learn much in the book of Acts, especially if we read the book of Acts in the context of the rest of the scriptures, and I have already made reference to the promise and fulfillment, the echo to the Old Testament. And so as we do that, we will be guided in a very strong way to understand who God is and what he has saved us towards in terms of our moral conduct individually and corporately.

**Student:** Is there some way that we can use that paradigm to explain things like suffering in the modern world? I would hate to think that the Christians who are suffering for the name of Christ are somehow being cursed by God for their sin. It strikes me as completely the opposite of what's happening; that they're being oppressed by the world because of their faithfulness. How do we use that paradigm in those other circumstances like modern persecution and suffering?

**Dr. Bayer:** I think that's very important. We have made mention of Stephen, and there's only blessing of God for Stephen, and yet he is martyred. So your point is well taken. We have to be very careful as we look at suffering, human suffering, and we will see both in the Old Testament, but then particularly in the New Testament that there is a place for suffering that is very much in the context of God's work and God's will, God's blessing. It is a challenge that even in the Old Testament Psalms is

taken up in the suffering of the righteous. Why does God allow? Why does he permit such a contrast? If he's a good God, why would he expose to such suffering? And so we have to understand that God is a God who has his hidden purposes, who has his unsearchable purposes, and we can latch onto what is clear in the book of Acts, we can endorse and embrace the reality of suffering, and we must not draw the wrong conclusion that where there is suffering there is sin.

### **Question 15:** **Why can't we just do what the Bible says?**

**Student:** In hearing you two talk about application, I recall our lesson saying that the book of Acts wasn't written directly to us, that we're essentially overhearing conversation to somebody else, Theophilus and the original audience, and that we could conceivably make a mistake in just reading Acts, simply doing as it says, but isn't the Word of God just directly truthful and applicable? Why can't we just simply do what it says?

**Dr. Bayer:** Well, my appeal in the lesson is that we need to begin with the focus of Luke himself in the book of Acts, that we need to come together on its own emphasis. And that's why I'm emphasizing the summary statements. That is why I'm drawing attention to the issue of external and internal growth despite external and internal opposition. That's the common ground that we can begin and agree on. I think there is a danger if we apply one-to-one the message of the book of Acts to our lives because as I have mentioned in the lecture, there are some unique events. The most simple one is the death and resurrection and ascension that is mentioned in the book of Acts of Jesus Christ himself. These are not repeated actions. But I've also made mention of issues that occur perhaps as a model, perhaps as a possibility, but not as a norm. And I would draw attention to the fact of sharing possessions. It would be wrong to look at the book of Acts and say the book of Acts teaches that we must share possessions. But it would also be wrong to say the book of Acts does not speak about sharing possessions. It is a possibility. But Mary, the mother of John Mark, did not sell her apartment in Jerusalem. In fact, that became a basis for missionary work in Jerusalem. She maintained and retained her possession, and there is no condemnation of that. And then there are things that are repeated that I would say are presented in a normative way in the book of Acts, and I would say those are the repeated issues. And I've mentioned the fact that everyone who comes to Christ receives the Holy Spirit. That is something that is generally emphasized. So I would suggest meeting on the main emphases, on the common points that are conspicuous, and then carefully applying and seeing what aspects are relativized in the texts themselves, and where can we draw lessons from the book of Acts so that we are responsible readers of the book of Acts rather than transferring one-to-one.

**Student:** In the lesson you also mentioned...We've already spoken about there being some continuities between the original setting and ours, but you also mentioned some discontinuities. I would imagine that's part of what you're talking about here, too, and that there are differences between the original setting and the modern setting that would imply that while some of the principles might be obvious and the same, that the application may be different in light of these discontinuities. Sort of like even in the original context where you were drawing attention to the differences between Paul's response to the circumcision of Timothy and to the circumcision of Titus; that we're looking at even the same activity in two different settings appeals to different principles. So in the same way, the same principle in different contexts might apply in different ways as well. Is that...?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yah, that's very true. I would agree to that.

### **Question 16:** **Is Jesus a significant character in the book of Acts?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, in the lessons, as we're looking at the content and structure of the book of Acts, I noticed just talking about the summary statements and the different places and geography, even throughout the lesson we talked about things that the Holy Spirit has done in the proclamation of Christ, what I didn't see really was Jesus himself emerging as a significant theme or character in the book of Acts. I'd sort of like to get your comments on that.

**Dr. Bayer:** Yah, I think that should be emphasized very much as I believe that the reality of the resurrection of Jesus is in some ways the driving force behind the energy of the proclamation of the gospel. No doubt it is the outpouring of the Spirit that empowers and gives courage to that proclamation, but the very heart of it is the witness to the resurrection of Jesus. And I would like to just develop that a little more in that Jesus taught the disciples that he was the Messiah of God, and as such, he taught them that he came to suffer along the lines of the servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 42 following, particularly Isaiah 53, and that he is not only the son of David but the lord of David, according to Psalm 110:1 and following, and that he is the exalted son of man according to Daniel 7:13 and following, who comes into the presence of the Almighty to receive glory, honor, power and dominion, a dominion that will never end, a lordship over a people that will never end. And so, this teaching is a claim during the gospel time of Jesus. And so, the proclamation that Jesus was raised from the dead is the unique, divine authentication of those claims, the approval as we see in Acts 3 that God was pleased to have his *pais*, his servant suffer, and that he was pleased to exalt him and enthrone him as the Lord and Messiah over his people. And so I would say that self-revelation of Jesus and the divine authentication of that claim is the dynamite, is the driving force that

inspires Peter, that inspires Stephen, that inspires Paul and other early witnesses to go out and say this unique Messiah of God is truly capable to accomplish redemption, to accomplish reconciliation, and to bring all people to God who receive that atonement for their sins. And so, I would say that should be emphasized in a much greater way. Even the outpouring of the Spirit is identified as the work of Jesus in the book of Acts 2. So Jesus began and continues his work, now by means of the Holy Spirit, but he is very much the center of worship together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he is very much reigning and ruling as Lord and Christ. And so that is very important to understand and for us to see the collaboration within the Godhead between the Father's will, the Son's activity and the Holy Spirit's illumination and quickening the hearts of people.

### **Question 17:**

#### **If the gospel is so simple, why is interpretation so complex?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, our lesson says the gospel is simple, and yet it looks as if this very careful, detailed presentation of how to read Acts is complicated. It seems that... I would anticipate a lot of people looking at this lesson might think: if the gospel is so simple, I don't feel at all confident that I understand Acts as much as I thought I did since we have all these different parameters we have to take into consideration. How can this help us gain confidence? As complicated as this may seem at first sight, can it help us?

**Dr. Bayer:** I think there is a simplicity to the gospel that is wonderful and compelling emphasized in the Gospel of Luke and also in the book of Acts. It is a loving God pursuing a people in and through his son's death, of reconciliation with him, to inaugurate and messianic rule that has been in the mind of God throughout the ages as a fulfillment of ruling over his people. So I believe the message is simple, is straightforward, is compelling, but what is interesting and intriguing is that the way this message is communicated in various Jewish, diaspora Jewish, Gentile settings in the book of Acts indeed varies so that you can say when Peter speaks to Jews, he appeals to the Old Testament. When Stephen speaks particularly to Jews and diaspora Jews, himself being a diaspora Jew, he makes much of the redemptive historical sequence in the Old Testament. When Paul speaks to Athenian Stoics and Epicureans, many of whom were lawyers, he makes reference to creation and perhaps to political and government structures. So what this means is that there is a simplicity of the message that is communicated in very sensitive ways in the particular settings in which that is being presented, because for a Gentile audience in Athens, recourse to the Old Testament may not make much sense. Even though Paul, even there, uses Old Testament truth of the creation of mankind by God, he communicates it in such a way that Stoic and Epicurean philosophers would be able to understand even though they would not know the Jewish Old Testament. So I would say simplicity in content, complexity and sensitivity in application because that is the phenomenon of communication that we must not only speak clearly but reach our audience. And so, one small example would be the so-called

*captatio benevolentiae*, the initial praise of Paul in among the Athenian Stoics and Epicureans. There is a slight praise for their pious ways. And that word pious ways can be seen in two ways. It is ambiguous. But for Athenian sensitivities, you would not want to speak too much praise or too little praise. It has to be measured rhetorically.

And so, Paul is very sensitive, coming from the center of stoic thought in Tarsus to the sensibilities and sensitivities of this particular audience, for the sake of communicating the reality that they, being lawyers and judges, themselves will have to face a judge that has been appointed by God, who has been raised from the dead, and then the gospel is being presented to those would like to hear more. So that's how I would approach that, that we are challenged then to become much more flexible along the lines of 1 Corinthians 9 to communicate the gospel in different ways and not to be fixed and set in our ways of communication but to preserve the heart of the gospel which is glorious about the greatness of Christ and the challenge of our state individually and corporately which we must deal with, and the gospel actually addresses in a very sober and compelling way.

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