

# The Book of Acts

## Lesson 2

## Structure and Content

Manuscript



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## Lesson Two

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## INTRODUCTION

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As a teacher, I sometimes have the opportunity to travel in many countries around the world. Before each trip, I always make sure I understand two important things. First, I need to know where I am going. And second, I have to know how I will get from place to place. Will I take an airplane? Catch a bus? Or use some other form of transportation? Well, something similar is true when we read the book of Acts. It helps to know where the story is going and what literary techniques or strategies Luke uses to guide us to our destination.

This is the second lesson in our series *The Book of Acts*. In this series, we're exploring the record of the early church as it continued the ministry of Jesus. We've entitled this lesson "Structure and Content" because we'll be looking at the ways Luke organized his material and at the message he intended to teach.

Our exploration of the structure and content of Acts will divide into three parts. First, we'll examine the book's rhetorical strategy and how Luke's approach to writing Acts should influence the way we interpret it. Second, we'll examine the book's content. And third, we'll suggest a model for the modern application of Acts. Let's look first at the rhetorical strategy of the book of Acts.

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## RHETORICAL STRATEGY

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Whenever we read a book in the Bible, it is important to become familiar with the way the author persuades his readers of his points of view. We have to ask questions like: Why did the author write this book? What authorities did he appeal to in order to establish his case? And how did he design his book to guide his readers to the proper conclusions? The answers to these questions yield so many insights that we should never ignore them.

As we approach the book of Acts, we'll focus on three aspects of Luke's rhetorical strategy. First, we'll speak of his stated purpose. Second, we'll mention his reliance on authority. And third, we'll speak of some structural patterns he employed throughout the book. Let's start by examining Luke's stated purpose for writing the book of Acts.

### STATED PURPOSE

When people write works of significant length and complexity, they normally have many intentions and purposes. As Luke wrote his two-volume work of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, he no doubt hoped that his writing would impact his readers

in many different ways. So, we have to be careful not to oversimplify his purposes. Even so, Luke explicitly stated that he had a purpose for his work.

Luke's stated purpose was twofold. On the one hand, he desired to write a true and reliable historical account of the church in the first century. On the other hand, he wanted to convey and confirm the truth and significance of the gospel message. Let's start with Luke's intention to write a true historical account.

## Historical Account

In the prologue to Luke's gospel, in 1:1-3, Luke wrote:

Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account (Luke 1:1-3).

Luke's concern with writing a true history is apparent in several ways in this passage. First, he referred to the "things that have been accomplished among us," that is, the true historical events that had taken place. He then mentioned that he had consulted eyewitnesses and that he had closely followed — or as it may be translated, "carefully investigated" — the details he recorded. He also took care to write an orderly account so that the truth would be communicated clearly and accurately.

**Luke consulted eyewitnesses in compiling his gospel, and I think that's true of the book of Acts as well. I think Luke talked to people like Mary the mother of Jesus and, of course, the apostles. They accurately conveyed to Luke what had happened. They represented the events in which they were participants. But Luke did not just check it with one person. We have good evidence, as he says in chapter 1, that he researched everything carefully. He is shown again and again to be amazingly accurate. Yes, Luke's gospel was written to edify the church, and it has a certain perspective and a certain point of view. Luke was not a neutral history writer. But no history writer writes from a neutral unbiased point of view. There is always a perspective. To have such a perspective, to have a theological agenda, which Luke certainly has, does not preclude the accuracy of the accounts. So, we have an inspired account that is historically reliable and theologically edifying at the same time.**

— Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner

Luke intended his two-volume work to provide a true historical record, beginning with the life of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, and continuing with the first-century church in the book of Acts. Luke was concerned about recording true history because he understood a basic principle repeated throughout the Bible: God reveals himself in real

history, in space and time, and he works through history to bring about his salvation and judgment.

Unfortunately, in recent centuries, many critical scholars have argued that the history of God's salvation and judgment is not real history. Generally, they've asserted that supernatural acts of God simply do not occur in actual space and time. They believe instead that real history is merely natural, not supernatural. As a result, when critical theologians read about supernatural acts of God in Scripture, they often treat these accounts as expressions of nonfactual religious sentiments, or sort of "pious fiction." But Luke himself made it clear that he was not trying to write pious fiction. He intended to report real history. In fact, he wrote in a way that made it easy to verify or disprove his claims.

For example, Luke located his accounts within well-known historical contexts. In the book of Acts, we find references to men such as Gamaliel, in 5:34; Gallio, in 18:12; Felix, in 23:26; and Festus, in 24:27. All of these men were well-known in the ancient Jewish and Roman world. By mentioning them by name, and offering other historical details, Luke made it possible for his readers to examine his research independently. They could speak with others who had knowledge of the people and events he reported. And in some cases, they could read the writings of others on the same subjects. Had Luke's reports not been true to fact, it would have been easy for skeptics to refute them.

Especially since the end of the 19th century, a number of scholars have examined the historical veracity of Acts by comparing it with many extra-biblical texts and other archeological data. Many of these studies have indicated multiple ways in which Luke was a reliable historian. But for the sake of time, we'll only mention two specific examples.

First, in Acts 27:21-26, Luke described Paul's actions onboard a ship in ways that have been confirmed by historical research. Luke wrote that Paul spoke to the entire crew of the ship that was carrying him to Rome, advising and encouraging them during a great storm. Many critical scholars in the past argued that it would have been impossible for Paul, as a prisoner, to speak openly in this manner. For this reason, they concluded that Luke had created a fictional heroic portrait of the apostle. But more recent research has revealed that first-century maritime law permitted anyone on board to speak and to advise the crew when ships were in serious danger.

Second, in Acts 28:7, Luke reflected knowledge of specific historical terminology. In this verse, he referred to the leader of the Island of Malta as "the first of the island," or *tō prōtō tēs nēsou* (τῷ πρώτῳ τῆς νήσου) in Greek. This unusual terminology has puzzled many interpreters through the centuries. But recent archeological investigations have shown that this term actually was the leader's official title at that time.

These examples illustrate Luke's fidelity to the facts of history. His intention to write an account of actual historical events reminds us that God's eternal truth is not somehow detached from the concrete realities of life. Rather, in biblical faith, salvation comes in and through real history. This is why Luke was so concerned with writing a true historical account.

With the reliability of Luke's historical account in mind, we should mention a second dimension of Luke's stated purpose: conveying the reality and power of the gospel message in the book of Acts.

## Gospel Message

Listen to Luke 1:3-4:

It seemed good to me ... to write an orderly account ... that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

As we can see here, Luke wrote the history of Acts to confirm what his primary reader, Theophilus, and others had been taught. Luke wanted Theophilus and his other readers to embrace certain points of view and certain theological convictions. He hoped they would develop certain perspectives on the theological significance of the events he reported.

Luke wrote during a time when Jewish Christians were being evicted from synagogue communities, and many Gentiles were converting to Christianity. He wrote to assure Theophilus that the true church includes both Jews and Gentiles and that Jesus is the true, risen Savior of them all. And he wanted them to be assured that no matter how complicated their lives became, Jesus really was building and strengthening his church.

As we saw in an earlier lesson, Luke viewed the world and all of history through the lens of the lordship and kingdom of Christ. He saw the Old Testament hopes and promises being fulfilled through Jesus and the church. And he wanted Theophilus to view his record of the early church through this same lens. He even patterned his books after Old Testament prophetic histories in a way that suggests a continuation and fulfillment of that history.

Luke wanted Theophilus to see how Christ, through the Spirit of God, had established, and was continuing to build up, the kingdom of God. And he was expanding it to include all peoples. So, as we read the book of Acts today, we must always keep in mind that Luke was not just recording true facts so that we would know what happened long ago. Rather, he was also drawing attention to teachings that were foundational to the church — the reliable witness to the continuing work of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

**The book of Acts was written as a history of the early church, a history that explains the beginnings and development of the early church. Of course, it is not simply a book of history, it is also a book of theology. On the one hand, we have the church, and the message of the book is to help us understand how the work of the church was born and developed, and on the other hand, to understand how God works through the church, in this world, through this supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that descended at Pentecost. Furthermore, this book also functions as a book of testimony, a testimony that bears witness to Jesus Christ, a testimony which must be conveyed from right where a person lives, expanding progressively towards the farthest edges or outer limits of the earth.**

— Dr. Daniel Fodorean (translation)

With Luke's twofold stated purpose in mind, we're ready to consider a second aspect of his rhetorical strategy: his reliance on authority.

## RELIANCE ON AUTHORITY

Luke didn't assert the historical and theological truths he recorded on the basis of his own authority, but on the authority of Christ and his apostles. In this way, Luke served as a true witness of the gospel.

One thing that is striking in Acts is the amount of material devoted to the words and deeds of those who served as key witnesses to Christ. When Christ ascended to heaven, he named his apostles as his witnesses and gave them authority, in dependence upon him, to continue his kingdom work. He periodically empowered prophets and other prominent church leaders to proclaim his message as well. And as Luke sought to persuade Theophilus and the wider church of his perspectives, he turned time and again to early church leaders, especially apostles and prophets, to illustrate and to authorize his own outlooks.

**Jesus, with all authority, at the end of the Gospels, delivers and gives authority and responsibility to his followers so that they continue with the message of the gospel. And so, Luke illustrates in a very descriptive way — with stories, with narratives, with journeys, with interactions between the disciples themselves — how Jesus delivers authority, gives, grants authority to his followers, so that they continue with that message to the ends of the earth.**

— Prof. Teddy Torres (translation)

To explore Luke's reliance on authority in more detail, we'll focus on two matters. First, we'll consider the way Luke appealed to authoritative words. And second, we'll look at his references to authoritative deeds. Let's begin with Luke's emphasis on words that carried authority in the church.

## Words

As we mentioned in our prior lesson, Luke was not an apostle. He probably came to faith after Christ ascended into heaven. During his travels, both with and without Paul, Luke investigated the ministries of Jesus and the apostles, and recorded the testimony of the Lord's chosen eyewitnesses.

Now, in one sense, all followers of Christ are his witnesses. But, when the church was being established, Jesus commissioned the apostles to be his *infallible* witnesses. They were the only ones he appointed and empowered to serve as permanent, authoritative witnesses on earth in his absence. Beyond this, the Lord called prophets and other authorized church leaders, such as Luke, to testify authoritatively on an occasional basis.



The most prominent way Luke presented authoritative words was to record speeches. Rather than simply commenting on the teaching of the church, Luke regularly recorded extensive discourses, allowing the Lord's authoritative representatives to speak for themselves as active characters in his history.

In fact, about 30% of Acts is composed of debates, dialogues, monologues, sermons, and other types of oral presentations. This is a far higher percentage of speech material than we find in other ancient narratives, probably because Luke relied on speeches as an appeal to the authority of the apostles. Altogether, there are about 24 speeches in Acts: eight from Peter, nine from Paul, one from Stephen, one from James, and a few from others. The vast majority of these speeches are made by apostles. The rest are mostly made by prophets and prominent church leaders.

But why is this important? The speeches in Acts tell us who the early church leaders were and what they thought about many issues. They show us why the disciples were willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. They bear witness to the apostles' service to Christ and record their instructions for building his kingdom. They also authorize Luke's perspectives on the history of the early church.

**The book of Acts gives us a lot of the history of the early church. And along with that it gives us a number of apostolic speeches. There's a really long speech from Peter in Acts 2, a really long speech from Paul in Acts 13, James gives a speech in Acts 15. The apostles had an important task of explaining Christ to the world, and we can see in those speeches, we have this great gift in the speeches to see the ways, in multiple ways, that the apostles proclaim the gospel of Christ to a variety of contexts. Some of them are in synagogues. Some of them are more of trial setting. Some of them are to — in Acts 17 — the Council in Athens. And so, there's a number of different approaches the apostles have to explaining the gospel, and we can understand the main emphases of the gospel from many of those speeches.**

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

In recent centuries, many critical scholars haven't accepted that Luke provided true reports of the speeches he included in Acts. And there are a number of examples in the ancient world of historical accounts in which speeches are not based on fact. But both critical and evangelical scholars point out that many historians before, during, and after Luke's day worked hard to ensure the speeches in their histories were true representations of actual speeches. And, as we look more closely at the speeches in Acts, we find convincing evidence that Luke was one of these reliable historians. The speeches he included really do represent authoritative apostolic teachings.

We have confidence in the veracity of the speeches in Acts primarily because the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write an infallible and authoritative history. Nevertheless, there are at least three other ways we can see that the speeches in Acts are accurate representations of real speeches.

First, the speeches have their own style. By comparison with Luke's more complex style in other portions of Acts, the speeches are simpler and more

conversational. Some of them employ rough, unpolished Greek. This shows that Luke was more concerned with writing down what the speakers actually said than he was with refining and modifying their speeches.

Second, the speeches are integrated into their respective contexts. Rather than being carefully crafted to suit Luke's own audience, the speeches in Acts address the people and situations that Luke described. For example, in Acts 4, we read Peter's speech to the Jewish leaders after he healed a lame man. Peter proclaimed salvation in Christ — which we might expect if Luke had invented the speech — but Peter spoke directly to those who had witnessed the miracle, not to those reading about it. And he appealed to the healing itself as proof of his words. And, as Luke documented, the unbelieving Jewish leaders could not refute him because they themselves had witnessed it.

In a similar way, Paul's speeches in Acts reflect their respective contexts. For instance, Paul spoke very differently to Jews and God-fearers in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13 than he did to Stoics and Epicureans in Athens in Acts 17.

**When Paul was presenting the gospel in Athens, invited to a place called the Areopagus to talk with different philosophers. He shared the gospel with those Athenians in a different way than he shared the gospel with other groups of people, for example, with Jews in Pisidian Antioch. In his presentation to the Jews in the synagogue in Acts 13, he walks through the story of the Old Testament. He charts what God has been doing from the beginning, from the source, the Scriptures, that he and his audience shared together. And he drives toward Jesus and how God has fulfilled the Old Testament by sending Jesus to die and raise again. That's how he presents the gospel to Jews in a synagogue. But when he stands in front of Greek philosophers who have asked him to share more about this resurrection thing that they scoffed at, he does not mention the Old Testament a single time. He presents God as the Creator who created everything, who established from one person all nations. So, you can hear Genesis in Paul's words, but he did not say that it's from his Scriptures. In fact, you can find some of those descriptions of creation and the establishment of nations in lots of other sources.**

— Dr. Jonathan D. Worthington

Third, each speech reflects the speaker's individuality. While common themes are to be expected, each speaker displays individual characteristics. For example, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 has an amazing number of parallels to Paul's letters. This is just the sort of speech we would expect from the author of these letters.

In these and a number of other ways, we can be assured that Luke provided historically true speeches. He didn't invent or fabricate the speeches in Acts to suit his purposes. Instead, he rested the authority of his own comments and narrative elaborations on the actual authoritative witness of the apostles.

In addition to recording authoritative words, Luke also relied on accounts of authoritative deeds performed in the early church to support his theological message.

## Deeds

To validate their gospel message, the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles, prophets, and some other early church leaders to perform miraculous signs and wonders. Through things like dramatic spiritual gifting, healing, and raising the dead, the Holy Spirit testified that the apostles were Christ's authoritative representatives. Consider what Luke wrote in Acts 13:7-12, where Paul's ministry was validated before the proconsul of Paphos:

The proconsul ... a man of intelligence ... summoned Barnabas and [Paul] and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician ... opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But ... Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "... [T]he hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord (Acts 13:7-12).

As Elymas tried to hinder the gospel, the Holy Spirit empowered Paul to strike him with blindness. And Paul's teaching and actions persuaded the proconsul that the gospel was true.

Luke recorded authoritative words and deeds so that his readers would be persuaded of the truth of his accounts. He wanted his readers to see that the apostles were authorized by the Lord Jesus. Moreover, the church, in all places and generations, was obligated to follow their witness as it continued to build the kingdom of God in dependence upon Christ.

Now that we've looked at Luke's stated purpose and reliance on authority, we're ready to turn to a third dimension of Luke's rhetorical strategy: the structural patterns that Luke employed throughout the book of Acts.

## STRUCTURAL PATTERNS

The book of Acts displays many structural patterns, but for the sake of time we'll focus on two facets of the structure of Acts. First, we'll mention the pattern of repeated summary statements. Second, we'll look into the pattern of church growth in Acts. Let's begin with the way Luke used summary statements.

## Summary Statements

Biblical writers make their presence known in narratives on many different levels. Sometimes, for all practical purposes, they hide themselves behind the action of a story.

At other times, they step forward to make explicit comments on what takes place in their accounts. We speak of this latter technique as “authorial comments.” Luke made many authorial comments throughout Acts. He gave background information, revealed the intentions of characters’ hearts, described settings and so on. He did this to ensure that his message was presented clearly and faithfully. One of the ways he often commented on events in his book was through summary statements.

Many readers have noticed that the book of Acts describes the gospel’s progression from Jerusalem outward. In writing his history, Luke commented on this progression using six summary statements as the gospel spread from Jerusalem; to Judea and Samaria; to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch; to Cyprus, Pamphylia and Galatia; to Asia, Macedonia and Achaia; and finally, from Jerusalem to Rome. As one example, in Acts 5:42, Luke summarized the church’s success and activity in Jerusalem in this way:

Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus (Acts 5:42).

And listen to his summary in Acts 28:30-31 after Paul reached Rome:

[Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).

Luke regularly provided these types of summary statements throughout the book of Acts to highlight the stages of the success of the gospel and the growth of the church.

**Like many early historians, Luke used summary statements for a lot of different reasons, but one of the more important reasons is to really bind the narrative together and give it some structure and help his audience understand the progress that is being made throughout the history, and its success. And so, we see that summary statement in Acts 6:7, and it explicitly says that the word of God grew and that believers were multiplied — this language of growth and multiplication — in Jerusalem, that even some of the priests were becoming obedient. In 9:31, the next geographic section, it is again explicitly mentioned that the church through all Judea, Galilee and Samaria was growing and that they were multiplying in the sense of the peace of the Holy Spirit and the comfort they had from the Holy Spirit was being multiplied. And then we see this continuing in chapter 19, now beyond Palestine out into the pagan world and the great city of Ephesus, we see that the word of God grew and multiplied. And then finally at the end of the book of Acts, in chapter 28, when Paul comes to Rome, he’s under house arrest, but it says that he proclaimed the kingdom of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ with boldness and unhindered, that without hindrance he continued**

**to do this. So, right there at the end, even in the great city of Rome, we see that the witness of the early Christian church, the word of God is continuing to spread despite severe persecution, despite internal tensions. It's continuing to grow. And so, the summary statements tell that story and mark that story in a very important way.**

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

Now that we've introduced Luke's use of summary statements, we should look at the structural pattern of church growth that emerges between these summary statements.

## Church Growth

When Luke described the growth of the church, he regularly mentioned two pairs of dynamic forces. On the one side, he wrote about internal growth and tension within the church. And on the other side, he wrote about external growth and opposition from outside the church. Let's consider what we mean by these terms.

For our purposes, the term "internal growth" refers to the positive effects of the gospel within the Christian community. This was a form of qualitative growth, furthering the spiritual maturity of individuals and of the church as a whole. And by the term "tension," we have in mind the problems, questions, controversies and struggles that occurred within the church. In the book of Acts, Luke regularly demonstrated that there was a reciprocal relationship between internal growth and tension. Internal growth led to tension, and tension led to internal growth.

The second pair of elements in Luke's structural pattern of church growth is external growth and opposition. By "external growth," we have in mind that the church increased numerically by adding new members. This form of growth was quantitative. And the term "opposition" refers to the conflict that frequently arose between the church and the unbelieving world. Once again, there's a reciprocal relationship between these two ideas in Acts. External growth sometimes led to opposition, and at times, opposition led to external growth.

Moreover, Luke often demonstrated that there is a reciprocal relationship between internal growth and tension on the one side, and external growth and opposition on the other side. In other words, Luke regularly pointed out that internal growth and tension yield external growth and opposition, and that external growth and opposition cause internal growth and tension. As we'll see later in this lesson, this pattern for church growth appears so frequently in Acts that it forms a kind of conceptual framework or skeleton for the book.

The summaries Luke made throughout his book explain that every major section of the book of Acts depicts the growth of the gospel as it spread through the witness of the early church. And just imagine the effect these comments should have had on Theophilus and others who read Luke's book. They would have encouraged believers everywhere that no matter how great the tension or how terrible the opposition, God is always working through the gospel for the internal and external growth of his church.

They would have inclined the early Christians to read all of history from this perspective. And they would have assured them that if they remained faithful witnesses to their Lord and Savior, they would see the growth of the gospel in their day too, despite their internal and external problems.

With Luke's rhetorical strategy in mind, let's consider the content of the book of Acts. While there are many ways to summarize Acts, we'll focus on the development of the church as the partial realization of God's kingdom on earth.

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## CONTENT

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Luke's two-volume work of the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts explains how Jesus brought and began to build God's earthly kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel. In Luke's gospel, he described the foundation that Jesus laid for the kingdom during his earthly ministry. And in the book of Acts, Luke described how Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit to empower the apostles and the church to continue his kingdom-building work. In this way, God's kingdom is the overarching story of both volumes of Luke's work. So, as we explore the content of Acts, we'll pay special attention to the way the kingdom continued to expand under the leadership of the apostles.

When Jesus commissioned the apostles in Acts 1:8, he instructed them to serve as witnesses, proclaiming the gospel, first in Jerusalem and then spreading it to the rest of the world. Listen to his words to the apostles in Acts 1:8:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, NIV).

Here Jesus laid out a geographical strategy for the gospel witness of the church. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the apostles were to begin witnessing in Jerusalem. Then, they were to carry the gospel to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth, expanding the kingdom everywhere they went.

**“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.” That is the outline of the book of Acts. It starts out in Jerusalem with the Holy Spirit coming and Peter preaching and thousands of people coming to Christ. But then the persecution becomes evident, and Stephen is executed, and people are scattered. And they go from there to Samaria to the other places. To go to Samaria! I mean that would just be hard for a Jewish disciple or evangelist or missionary to say, “I’m going to Samaria to reach people for Christ.” Although Jesus, in John 4, you know, he went there, and**

**they received him better than the Jews did. So, Samaria, then the uttermost parts of the earth.**

— Dr. Rodney Orr

Many scholars have observed that Luke organized the book of Acts around Jesus' call for geographical witness expansion. This organization is in line with the outward progression of the gospel that we identified earlier. So, we'll follow this same pattern as we survey his work.

- First, we'll look at the way Luke described the growth of the gospel in Jerusalem in Acts 1:1–8:4.
- Second, we'll turn to the growth of the kingdom in the general area of Judea and Samaria in 8:5–11:18.
- Third, we'll focus on the way the church carried the gospel to the further ends of the earth in 11:19–28:31. Here, we'll focus on four separate stages of growth:
  - first, in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch in 11:19–12:25;
  - second, in Cyprus, Pamphylia and Galatia in 13:1–15:35;
  - third, in Asia, Macedonia and Achaia in 15:36–21:16; and
  - fourth, from Jerusalem to Rome in 21:17–28:31.

We'll look at each of these sections in more detail, focusing on the patterns of internal growth and tension and external growth and opposition that we described earlier. Let's begin with the way the kingdom in Jerusalem was established through the gospel witness of the apostles in Acts 1:1–8:4.

### **JERUSALEM (ACTS 1:1–8:4)**

Jerusalem was the capital city of ancient Israel, God's special nation in the Old Testament. It was the starting point of Luke's account because of the central role it played in God's kingdom throughout the Old Testament, and also in Jesus' ministry. Moreover, Luke wrote about events in Jerusalem in several other places in the book of Acts to show that the apostles' work in spreading the gospel was still rooted in this special city. Luke reported the growth of the kingdom through the gospel in Jerusalem in four major narratives:

- First, the anticipation and outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 1, 2;
- Second, Peter's temple sermon and the persecution that followed in chapters 3, 4;
- Third, the story of Ananias and Sapphira and the persecution that followed in chapter 5; and
- Fourth, the selection of deacons and the persecution that followed in 6:1–8:4.

Within these narratives, internal growth appears in a number of well-known events that took place in Jerusalem, such as the apostles' commission in Acts 1; the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost in chapter 2; and the experience of miracles in Jerusalem, especially by Peter, in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

At the same time, we also see tensions within the Christian community in a number of ways, including the question of who would become the twelfth apostle in Acts chapter 1; Ananias and Sapphira's lie about the money they had donated in chapter 5; and discrimination against Hellenistic widows in chapter 6.

Beyond this, Luke's record of the gospel witness in Jerusalem also follows the pattern of external growth and opposition. For example, on the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people were added to the church in Acts 2; membership in the church grew to around 5,000 when John and Peter were jailed in chapter 4; and many Jewish priests were added to the church in chapter 6.

Even so, as we've already suggested, this outward growth was often set alongside strong opposition from the unbelieving world, such as the arrest and beating of Peter and John in Acts 5; the martyrdom of Stephen in chapter 7; and the church's scattering by persecution from Jerusalem in chapter 8.

We might have expected internal tension and outward opposition to discourage the fledgling church in Jerusalem. But under the power of the Holy Spirit, the reality was just the opposite. The gospel witness continued to go forth with great strength, ultimately unhindered in its progress.

The second major division of Acts focuses on the gospel witness of the church in the general area of Judea and Samaria in Acts 8:5–11:18.

### **JUDEA & SAMARIA (ACTS 8:5–11:18)**

The regions of Judea and Samaria were roughly equivalent to the southern and northern regions of the Promised Land given to Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus himself had ministered in these regions before his ascension. Luke's focus on the general area of Judea and Samaria can be divided into four main batches of stories:

- The ministry of Philip in Acts 8:5-40;
- The conversion of Saul, who was also called Paul, in 9:1-31;
- Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa in Acts 9:32-43; and
- Peter's ministry in Caesarea to the Gentile Cornelius in 10:1–11:18.

These stories draw attention to the internal growth of the church. For instance, internal growth continued as new believers were filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 8; Saul was made an apostle after his conversion in chapter 9; and Gentile believers received the Holy Spirit in chapter 10.

Hand-in-hand with these events, however, tension also built within the church. For example, questions were raised in Acts 8 about the Holy Spirit because some believers had not yet received him; Simon the magician tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from the apostles in chapter 8; and many Jews hesitated to receive Gentiles into full fellowship in the church in chapter 11.

On the other hand, the pattern of external growth and opposition also continued. For instance, the church continued to grow numerically in Judea and Samaria through the



many converts made through Philip's evangelistic ministry in Acts 8; the conversion of Saul in chapter 9; and the conversion of Cornelius and many other Gentiles in Acts 10.

Even so, this growth did not occur without opposition from unbelievers. For example, Saul persecuted believers before his conversion in Acts 9; and some Jews attempted to assassinate him after his conversion in chapter 9. Once again, internal tension and outward opposition ultimately failed to hinder the church. Instead, the Holy Spirit used these challenges to bring further maturity and numerical growth to the church.

The third major section of Acts describes how the gospel expanded further beyond the borders of the Promised Land to the "ends of the earth," as it was known in that day. As we mentioned, we'll look at this section in greater detail, beginning with the advance of the gospel in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch in 11:19–12:25.

### **ENDS OF THE EARTH: PHOENICIA, CYPRUS & ANTIOCH (11:19–12:25)**

This section concerns the first significant spread of the gospel beyond Judea and Samaria as it extended into the nearby Gentile lands of Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch in Syria. This portion of Acts divides into two main parts:

- The expansion of the gospel to Syrian Antioch in 11:19-30; and
- Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison in Jerusalem in 12:1-25.

Not surprisingly, the pattern of internal growth and tension continued here as well. For instance, Barnabas and Saul taught a large number of new believers in Acts 11; and the church was encouraged by Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison in chapter 12. And of course, there were related tensions. For example, some believers spread the word only among Jews while others went to the Greeks in Acts 11; and initially, many believers doubted the miracle of Peter's release from prison in Acts 12.

In this section also, Luke emphasized the pattern of external growth and opposition. For instance, he wrote of outward growth through the successful evangelistic ministry of Barnabas and others in Antioch in chapter 11. But this growth was not without opposition. This persecution included the death of James in Acts 12; and the imprisonment of Peter in chapter 12.

**In Acts 12, we find the story that actually begins even before Peter is arrested. It begins with the second martyr, who is James, that is arrested and killed by Herod. And Luke does not want us to gloss over the arrest and the martyrdom of James because... And even the way James is murdered is with a sword, helping us to realize that Luke wants us to see that Herod saw the apostles, the spread of the gospel, if you will, as a political thing that was coming under him or rather against him, and so, he wanted to destroy the leadership of the apostles that were responsible for spreading the gospel. And so, the destruction of the leadership of the apostles would enable him to put a stop to the spread of the message of the gospel. And then we're told that Peter is arrested, and it's a miraculous rescue from prison as the angel comes and rescues Peter. But Luke is careful to help us realize**

**that this is actually the beginning, this is the opposition, this is what the apostles are going to be facing; Peter and others, this is the opposition that they will be facing and it's going to be difficult.**

— Mr. Josiah Katumu

But despite the tension and opposition, the gospel witness was not ultimately hindered. The Holy Spirit continued to bless the church's evangelism and discipleship. By the Spirit, the church overcame racial divisions and persecution. And Peter was freed from prison in a miraculous way. No matter what hindrances were thrown into its path, the gospel continued to go forward.

In Acts 13:1–15:35, Luke turned to his fourth major section: the spread of the gospel in Cyprus, Pamphylia and Galatia.

### **ENDS OF THE EARTH: CYPRUS, PAMPHYLIA & GALATIA (13:1–15:35)**

In this section, the gospel moved further from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, stretching into the eastern portions of Asia Minor. This section of Acts divides into two main parts:

- Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13:1–14:28, and
- The council in Jerusalem in 15:1-35.

In keeping with his strategy, Luke reflected the pattern of internal growth and tension in this section as well. He pointed to internal growth through things such as Paul's strengthening of the churches in Galatia in Acts 14; and the decision of the Jerusalem council not to demand circumcision of Gentile converts in chapter 15.

Luke also mentioned internal tension in this section, especially as he wrote about the practical difficulties related to Gentile converts. For example, tension arose between Jewish and Gentile believers over the issues of circumcision and the rigors of traditional Jewish diet in Acts 15.

With regard to external growth and opposition, Luke mentioned many matters, such as the numerical growth generated by Paul's first missionary journey, as reported in Acts 14. But, as before, this growth was accompanied by strong opposition. For example, Paul and Barnabas were repeatedly harassed and rejected by Jewish unbelievers, especially in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, in Acts 14. Even so, the Holy Spirit continued to move the church forward and to overcome every obstacle in the path of his people. The unstoppable gospel continued to accomplish God's purposes.

The fifth major section of Acts runs from 15:36–21:16, where the gospel witness was extended to the Roman provinces of Asia, Macedonia and Achaia.

### **ENDS OF THE EARTH: ASIA, MACEDONIA & ACHAIA (15:36–21:16)**

This portion of Acts focuses on Paul's second and third missionary journeys. In these journeys, Paul traveled through eastern Asia Minor, as he had before, but then pressed on to the province of Asia in western Asia Minor. He then went across the

Aegean Sea to cities in Macedonia and Achaia in modern-day Greece. This section divides into two parts:

- Paul's second missionary journey recorded in Acts 15:36–18:22, and
- His third missionary journey in 18:23–21:16.

In the pattern that should be quite familiar by now, these chapters emphasize the relationship between internal growth and tension. We find many examples of internal growth here, such as the instruction of Apollos by Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18; and Paul's extended teaching in the synagogues of Ephesus and the lecture hall of Tyrannus in chapter 19. And of course, much tension accompanied this internal growth. For instance, Paul and Barnabas argued over Mark and parted company in Acts 15; and Paul warned the church to guard against church leaders who have evil motives in chapter 20.

We also read of external growth and opposition. For example, we see external growth in the many converts Paul gained, and the churches Paul planted in Acts 15–21. But we also see opposition, such as the angry mobs that tried to kill Paul; and the Jewish zealots who pursued Paul from city to city, in Acts 17, 20. Once again, Luke showed that the gospel spread effectively throughout the world. Internal tensions and external opposition were constant difficulties, but they could not stop the progress of the gospel witness empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the last major portion of Luke's narrative concentrates on the gospel witness from Jerusalem to Rome in Acts 21:17–28:31.

### **ENDS OF THE EARTH: JERUSALEM TO ROME (21:17–28:31)**

This section focuses on Paul's journey, including his arrest and imprisonment, as he spread the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. These materials roughly divide into four large sections:

- Paul's final witness in Jerusalem in Acts 21:17–23:11;
- Paul's imprisonment in 23:12–26:32;
- His difficult journey to Rome in 27:1–28:14; and finally,
- His witness in Rome in 28:15–31.

As we've come to expect, these chapters include the familiar pattern of internal growth and tension. We see several evidences of internal growth, including things like the Jewish believers' joy in Jerusalem when they heard that many Gentiles were coming to the faith in Acts 21; and the willingness of Paul and others to suffer and even to die to spread the gospel in chapters 21, 22. But we also see that this internal growth was accompanied by tension, such as the rumor that Paul was teaching Jewish believers to abandon their traditions in Acts 21; and the consequent tension his presence caused in the church in Jerusalem in chapter 21.

We also find the pattern of external growth and opposition. Luke recorded that the church made great strides in external growth during this period. For example, Paul was able to present the gospel to many high-ranking officials in Acts 23–26, 28; and he preached without hindrance in Rome in chapter 28. But Luke also pointed out that strong

opposition accompanied this growth, including Paul's arrest and four-year imprisonment by the Roman government in Acts 24; and Paul's imprisonment in Rome in Acts 28.

Paul's experiences in Rome highlighted the internal tensions and opposition facing the early church, as well as the impossibility of stopping the gospel. Even when the Romans imprisoned Paul, he continued to preach, "with all boldness and without hindrance." And the gospel continued to spread to the ends of the earth.

**If you can imagine Paul having to preach in the synagogues and on the streets and he's only able to speak to a certain of class of people. All of a sudden, through the journey of God, the work of God in his life, he's then moved into what you may call "confinement." But that confinement allows him to now speak to soldiers, Roman soldiers to be specific. On one of the nights, he was to be transported, two-hundred foot soldiers, two-hundred spearmen, and seventy horsemen had to lead him by night. Guess what they're talking about? Paul. The gospel. And now he's having to stand before governors and men, officials, that never came to the synagogue, that were never on the streets. His journey to Rome fulfilled a greater purpose in God's plan to get the gospel to everybody.**

— Pastor Johnson Oni

As Luke reported on the spread of the gospel, he was careful to include both the internal growth and tension and the external growth and opposition that took place in each area. In doing so, he proved that God's strategy for growing the church would not be hindered. God's people would continue to spread the gospel, and his kingdom would continue to expand throughout the entire world.

Each major section of Acts proves that the faithful witnesses of the gospel had not failed. The Holy Spirit empowered the church to take the gospel from Jerusalem to the very capital of the Roman Empire. Despite the internal and external troubles that the church endured, the unhindered gospel brought the church to spiritual maturity and numerical expansion as it spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Now that we've explored the rhetorical strategy and content of Acts, let's turn to modern application. How do we apply the truths of Acts in our own day?

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## MODERN APPLICATION

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To explore the modern application of Acts, we'll first focus on the literary character of the book. Second, we'll speak about some discontinuities between the first century and our day. And third, we'll affirm some important continuities that help us relate the original meaning of Acts to our own lives. Let's begin by looking at the literary character of Acts.

## LITERARY CHARACTER

Different kinds of literature communicate their ideas in different ways. For instance, we find many types of literature in the Bible. There are historical narratives, poems, speeches, parables, proverbs, law, and so on. And each of these types of literature communicates in different ways. If we hope to understand the book of Acts in a responsible way, we must consider the kind of literature it is and the ways this kind of literature communicates its ideas.

**The book of Acts is presented as a story of the church, what the apostles were doing. And in between you find some sermons; you find some quotations from the prophets, quotations from the Old Testament that are presented in the form of poetry. And it also talks about the future of the church which is more of prophecy of what is going to happen. And therefore, reading the book of Acts one needs to understand the stories that are presented, the narratives that are presented in the book, and also try to focus and interpret the poetry and the quotations from the Old Testament as you go through the book.**

— Rev. Joseph Kamau Kabui

There are many things we might say about the literary character of Acts, but time will only permit us to highlight three of its more prominent features. First, Luke was selective in what he reported. Second, he designed Acts to be episodic. And third, he communicated many of his teachings in implicit ways. Let's look first at the selective nature of the material in Acts.

### Selective

Every historian has to be selective. There are simply too many facts, people and events in the world for any human being to provide a comprehensive report of them all. The events in Acts span the years from the ascension of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome — a period of three or four decades. An astounding number of significant events took place in the church during this time, far too many to count. Yet Luke only wrote 28 fairly short chapters. So, we know that he reported only a tiny fraction of what could have been said. But how did he determine what events to include? How did he decide what to omit?

It helps if we remember Luke's twofold stated purpose: to write a reliable history of the church, and to convey and confirm the truth of the gospel. Luke was led by the Holy Spirit to select those bits of history that were critical to understanding Jesus' work through the apostles, and that would persuade his readers to embrace the apostles' central teachings. So, as we attempt to find ways to apply the book of Acts in the modern world,

we need to do two things.

On the one hand, we need to avoid the error of thinking that Luke recorded everything we might ever want to know about this period of church history. There are many questions he left unanswered, so we need to avoid looking for every answer to our modern problems in the book of Acts. On the other hand, we need to remember that each account in the book of Acts is there to help Luke accomplish his twofold purpose. So, we need to read everything in the book in light of how it helps Luke further his goals. We should constantly be asking questions like: “What does this teach me about the early church?” and “What doctrines does it encourage me to adopt?”

## Episodic

Besides being selective, the literary character of Acts is also episodic. That is to say, Acts is a successive collection of smaller stories and accounts.

As we read the book of Acts, it's important to note that each of its individual narratives is part of Luke's overall strategy and message. Each one contributes in some way to his overall mission of teaching Theophilus about the gospel of the kingdom of God in Christ. So, this big picture should serve as the backdrop and context to each episode we read in Acts.

Still, each episode is also distinct. Each one has its own smaller points to make and its own details to teach about how the church is to continue building God's kingdom in Christ through the gospel. And this means that as we read Acts, we shouldn't allow our attention to Luke's overarching purpose to overshadow his individual points. We must pay attention to both the big and the small picture. We must understand how each episode contributes to the greater goal, but also how each episode helps define the details of that goal.

## Implicit

In addition to being selective and episodic, the literary character of Acts is also implicit in the way that its genre communicates much of its teaching.

Broadly speaking, there are two main types of literature in the New Testament: argumentative discourse and narrative discourse. Argumentative discourse is literature that represents a sort of conversation, such as when a character in a book is talking, or when an author speaks directly to his audience. For example, the New Testament epistles consist primarily of argumentative discourse in which an author, like Paul, is speaking directly to the recipients of his letter. Of course, some epistles include snippets of narrative, and we even find the occasional song or proverb. But they are mostly composed of argumentative discourse. And the main point we want to make about argumentative discourse here is that it communicates most of its teachings directly and explicitly. When Paul wrote a letter telling his readers to think or to do something, he told them directly what he wanted.

On the other hand, narrative discourse is the dominant type of literature in the

four gospels, and more importantly for these lessons, in the book of Acts. Narrative discourse is literature that tells a story and provides teaching in a less direct way. To be sure, argumentative discourse appears in these books too, primarily in the speeches of certain characters, but the dominant literature of the gospels and Acts is narrative. And unlike argumentative discourse, which tends to teach things explicitly, narrative discourse tends to teach things implicitly, allowing the reader to infer its lessons. Narratives influence readers not through direct instructions, but in more subtle ways. They are designed so that readers will draw lessons from the attitudes, actions and words of the characters, learning to adopt those that are pleasing to God and shun those that are contrary to God's will.

Think about it this way. For the most part, narrative literature like Acts appears to state only facts — this happened, that happened, then something else happened. On the surface, it simply appears to be a report of events. Now, as we've seen, occasionally Luke commented explicitly on the significance of elements of his stories. But in general, he described events or facts with little or no comment. Even so, Luke's narratives were not written simply to report events. He wrote to instruct and assure Theophilus and the church, and these purposes are implicit in every narrative.

By way of illustration, consider a young child who has been told not to eat chocolate before dinner. But one evening she comes to the table with chocolate on her lips. Her father asks her if she has eaten chocolate, and she replies with a big-eyed denial: "I did not have any chocolate, Daddy."

This parent has two ways to deal with the situation. He can address the matter through argumentative discourse or through narrative discourse. If he chooses an argumentative strategy, he might say, "You are not telling the truth. I can see the chocolate on your face! You are in trouble." But he also has a narrative option, one that is more indirect and implicit. He can take his little daughter on his lap and say to her, "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a little girl who had been told not to play in her best dress. But she played in her dress anyway and got it very dirty. What do you think about the little girl's actions?"

A narrative rhetorical strategy like this works primarily on implicit levels. It invites the child to wonder, "Wasn't it bad that the little girl did not obey?" The beauty and power of narrative is that it communicates these kinds of ideas implicitly. If it is subtle enough, narrative involves the listener in the circumstances of the story. He or she becomes involved personally in ways that help the listener not to become defensive. It allows the listener to be much more teachable.

**Biblical authors who are writing narrative are still shaping the identity of the covenant community, in very important ways, using techniques of writing history. And we see this with Luke. He knows his Greek Bible, and he's quoting from authoritative texts for that community to shape their understanding of what's happening. But he's also using the techniques of narrative. He is using the narrator's evaluative point of view to help readers understand what's happening. With a situation like Peter and his relationship to Cornelius, for example, the audience is struggling, especially some of the Jewish-Christian members of Luke's audience, about what do we do about**



**Gentiles coming into the church? How are we to understand this? How are we to relate to them? And they are in parallel to Peter's own consideration of that question. What is he to think about what the Holy Spirit might be doing in Cornelius's life? Are he and his men supposed to eat with them in violation of the Old Testament food laws? How are we to understand this? Well, Luke tells the story three times, and the readers go through the same experience that Peter goes through to discern that, "Yes, indeed, we should eat together. We should see that the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of our non-Jewish but yet Christian brothers and sisters." And so, these are the techniques of storytelling that continue to shape the identity of the early Christian community.**

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

As we've just noted, the book of Acts is composed primarily of narrative storytelling. Luke aimed to share an accurate history of God's work in the early church. But rather than addressing his audience directly, as in argumentative discourse, he chose to tell a compelling and true story. He wanted his readers to infer conclusions from the facts within the narrative. So, as we engage with the book of Acts, it's crucial for us to uncover these implicit teachings as well.

Of course, one of the chief ways to evaluate and apply any biblical narrative to our lives is to see how God reacts to actions that take place. Above all others, his words and actions are perfectly infallible. As a result, we should always take note of the things in the book of Acts that God approves and blesses, as well as the things that he disapproves or curses. Whatever God blesses must be good, and whatever he disapproves or curses must be evil. As we read the book of Acts, we should seek to emulate the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are pleasing to God, and to avoid those that oppose him.

In addition to this, Luke depended heavily on the outlooks of prominent early church leaders. So, another reliable way for us to see Luke's implicit teaching is to observe examples Luke provided for us. When trustworthy people such as apostles, prophets and other respected church leaders did or said something, we can usually infer that we are called upon to be sympathetic toward them. Their actions were appropriate, and their witness is true. Consequently, we should respond in our hearts to this call and model our own behavior and thoughts after theirs. And the reverse is also true. When characters in the book of Acts are condemned by the apostles or the church, we can infer that their actions were evil, and that we should not follow their examples.

Now, these are by no means the only types of implications Luke made in Acts. But they do provide a relatively solid foothold for modern readers to begin learning how to make correct inferences from biblical narratives.

With this understanding of the literary character of Acts in mind, we should turn to the discontinuities between the first century and the modern world.



## DISCONTINUITIES

We must always remember that although the Bible was written for us, it is not written directly to us. We know explicitly that the original recipients were Theophilus and people in the first century A.D. So, in some sense, we are reading over their shoulder as we read Luke's book. We aren't so much hearing what Luke said to us as we are overhearing what he said to them. So, we should expect to find that at least some of the teachings in Acts apply differently to us than they did to Theophilus and Luke's other original readers. If we simply repeat what we see in Scripture, without taking these differences into account, we'll frequently misapply God's Word in harmful ways.

We'll summarize these discontinuities between Luke's world and ours in two ways. First, we live in a different time than they did. And second, we have different circumstances. Let's start with the fact that we live in a different time from those who first received the book of Acts.

### Different Time

It's very important to remember that the book of Acts focuses on the original apostles, the authoritative witnesses of Christ in the first century. Now, the word "apostle" simply means "one who is sent." And sometimes, the book of Acts uses "apostle" to refer to people that might also be called "missionaries," like Barnabas in Acts 14:14. Even today, some churches use the term apostle to refer to their own ministers or missionaries. But Luke insisted that the original apostles were different. To be counted among them, a man had to have seen the resurrected Lord and been appointed to the office directly by God himself. Many of God's activities through these apostles were specific to that time and place in redemptive history. They were groundbreaking, foundational accomplishments by men with unique authority and power.

**In Ephesians, we read, Paul tells us, that we are members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and Jesus Christ being the cornerstone. That really captures who the apostles were, that they were these men that were given this particular authority and commission by Jesus himself for a very specific task, to be the foundation for the church as we know it. If you think of a house, when you build a foundation, you don't need to build any more foundation because it's already been built. And so, we're not called to build the foundation of the church because that has already been built by the apostles and the prophets, as we read in Scripture. And so, we are called to follow the teachings of our founding Fathers, if you will, who were the apostles that were given this responsibility by Jesus Christ. And we get to enjoy what they did in terms of establishing the churches as we know it today. So, there really cannot be apostles in**

**the same sense as we had the apostles that were chosen by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.**

— **Mr. Josiah Katumu**

Unfortunately, many Christian groups have looked to Acts as a model of Christian living that should be precisely followed in every age. For instance, in Acts 2:1-4, the Holy Spirit was poured out in dramatic and miraculous ways on the day of Pentecost, and those who received him began to proclaim the gospel in various languages and dialects. But this was a special event that occurred at the initial outpouring of the Spirit to empower the apostles and other early believers for service to Christ. Similar events occasionally occurred in Acts, but only as a direct result of the work of the apostles.

What is *constant* in Acts is the fact that all believers must receive the Holy Spirit to be transformed in their character and to be witnesses. What is *not* constant in Acts is the presence or absence of particular manifestations of the Holy Spirit. When well-meaning Christians fail to account for the discontinuities between the first century and our day, they often try to apply the teaching of Acts in inappropriate ways.

**There is some discontinuity between the age of the apostles and the age that we continue in today. The continuity is that it is the continuation of the growth of the kingdom. The kingdom is inaugurated, we are continuing in the ministry that's been handed down, that we have the witness to through the testimony of the apostles and the prophets. So, there is that continuity, but when it comes down to some of the dynamic signs and wonders that were there present during the establishment of the foundation authenticating the ministry and the authority of the apostles, that does not continue in the same way today. I'm not saying that the power of God is diminished in the church at all, but God acts in different ways through different eras as he sees fit and as he has decreed and as providence flows toward his certain and planned consummation.**

— **Dr. John Norwood**

Besides living in a different time than the original audience of Acts, we also have different circumstances.

## **Different Circumstances**

All the events in Acts took place in the historical circumstances of the first century, and many aspects of Luke's accounts are conditioned upon these historical and cultural circumstances. Unfortunately, in an effort to be true to the teachings of Acts, some Christian groups have tried to return to the cultural practices of the first-century church. For instance, in Acts 5:42 we read that the church met in private homes. On this basis, some Christians have insisted that the church today must meet in homes and not in

church buildings. Now of course, there's nothing inherently wrong with the church today meeting in homes. But we must recognize that this practice was conditioned upon the circumstances of the first-century church. At that time, persecution necessitated meeting in homes. But in parts of the world where there is little or no persecution, the church does not need to meet in homes.

Insofar as our circumstances resemble those of the early church, these may be legitimate applications of biblical principles. But insofar as our circumstances are different, we may be obligated to apply these same biblical principles in different ways. In fact, we often find different applications of the same principle even in the book of Acts itself. For example, in Acts 2:44, 45, Luke described the members of the church in Jerusalem as owning their resources in common. Yet, within the book of Acts itself, we find that many of the churches established by the apostle Paul met in the homes of wealthy citizens or city leaders, with no mention of communal living, and no criticism of either practice. From the very beginning, the church has recognized that the same biblical principle must be applied in ways that are appropriate to the current circumstances. We must never settle for mere imitation as a substitute for responsible application.

Having described the literary character of Acts, and broadly outlined the discontinuities between Luke's day and ours, we should turn to some significant continuities between the first century and the modern world.

## CONTINUITIES

We may summarize the continuities between Christians in both time periods by saying that we have the same Triune God, who exists in the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the same goal to build the kingdom of God in Christ; and the same gospel that requires us to respond in faith, repentance and obedience. Let's look first at the fact that we have the same God as the Christians in the first century.

### Same God

Luke's record of salvation history reminds us that we serve and testify to the same Lord Jesus Christ that the apostles and early church served. Each Christian is empowered by the same Holy Spirit who was present in the first century. And we do all for the glory and honor of the same Father. Our Triune God has not changed.

God worked through the gospel in magnificent ways in the first century, and he continues to do so today. If God seems far removed from our personal lives, or from the life of our church or denomination, then things are not as they ought to be. If we do not see God at work, bringing salvation to the lost and building his church, then we must turn to God in repentance and faith, asking him to continue his gracious work of salvation history in our lives and churches.

## Same Goal

Besides having the same God, Christians today have the same goal that the church had in the book of Acts.

In the book of Acts, God's purpose was to build his kingdom in Christ through the apostles. They worked toward this goal by nurturing the church and increasing the size of the church through the gospel. But they also knew that expanding the kingdom of God to fill the whole earth would take more than a dozen men working for a few years. So, they prepared the church to labor alongside them and to continue after their deaths. We might say that just as Jesus assigned the apostles the task of building his kingdom, the apostles assigned this task to the church.

Of course, this task of kingdom building will not be finished until Christ returns in glory. So, the goal of the modern church is still to conform to God's mission of building his kingdom in Christ, to bring the whole world and all of life under his Lordship. And one of the primary ways we do this is by relying on the apostles' teachings about salvation, ethics, godly character, relationships, evangelism and every other matter in life. After all, if we are to honor and obey Christ, the church must submit to the authoritative witness of the apostles.

For example, Luke was careful to record the different ways the apostles expanded the kingdom across many cultures and situations. And following their example, we can use similar means to further the goal of the kingdom in our own day. Yes, we need to make adjustments in light of the discontinuities between the modern and the ancient world. But since we seek to submit to God's stated mission rather than to pursue our own agenda, the goal and the principles behind it remain the same in every generation.

**During the apostles' time, the goal was Jesus has to be the center of our faith. And this is why I'm saying that the church is still having the same goal. We are witnesses telling the truth of Jesus to all people because we are called to be ambassadors for the gospel, bringing people together to know Jesus who did not know sin, but he became sin for us.**

— Bishop Peter Phares Kissena

## Same Gospel

Finally, in addition to having the same God and the same goal, modern Christians are called upon to proclaim the same gospel as the church in the first century.

No matter how much the world changes, one thing remains constant — human beings are fallen in sinful rebellion against God and alienated from him, desperately in need of redemption. We all need the same salvation. And that salvation is available in Christ as he forgives our sin and brings us into his kingdom. This is the gospel message the apostles taught in the first century. It is the gospel message Luke proclaimed in Acts. And it's the gospel we must embrace and submit to today. As Paul and Silas told the

Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31:

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household  
(Acts 16:31).

This simple message has profound implications. It encompasses all aspects of our individual and corporate lives, challenging us to be transformed, to become gospel witnesses to the world.

The gospel remains the same for all people in all places and all times. All people are called to repent of their sinful rebellion and to trust in Christ. All people are to submit to his lordship and to build his kingdom. This call must go out to every person in our day, just as it has been proclaimed throughout the world since the days of the apostles. The summons to obedience is for Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, male and female, respected and despised. It overcomes all types of resistance and barriers, for it is the word of the reigning Christ, empowered by his Holy Spirit, for the glory of his Father. As the book of Acts teaches, no trial, no tension, no opposition is sufficiently powerful to oppose the growth and spread of redemption. This is why modern Christians must be authentic and bold in proclaiming and affirming the gospel of the apostles, calling everyone to repentance and faith in Christ, and joining them as loyal citizens of the kingdom of God.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've looked at the rhetorical strategy Luke used in the book of Acts, the content of his work, and the appropriate first steps to take toward the modern application of his teachings. Our exploration of these issues should provide us with a way to understand, appreciate, and live by his authoritative teachings in our own day.

In many ways, the book of Acts serves as the doorway between the time of Christ and the time of the modern church. It explains how Christ's person, work and teachings were understood and applied in the early church, and it lays the foundation for the ways modern Christians are to understand and apply those same ideas in our own lives. So, the more we are able to recognize Luke's purposes and methods in Acts, the better equipped we will be to live in ways that honor and serve our risen King.

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## GLOSSARY

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**Ananias & Sapphira** – Married couple in the early church who lied about the amount of money they received from the sale of their property and were struck dead by God as punishment (Acts 5)

**Apollos** – Eloquent Jewish speaker and teacher who worked with the apostle Paul to grow the early church, especially in Ephesus and Corinth

**Aquila** – Jewish tentmaker and Christian convert who had come to Corinth with his wife Priscilla after Emperor Claudius commanded all Jews to leave Rome; friend and coworker of the apostle Paul; instructed Apollos regarding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection

**argumentative discourse** – Literature that represents a conversation, such as when a writer speaks directly to his audience; literary device used to communicate ideas directly and explicitly

**Cornelius** – Captain of the Roman army from Caesarea who was converted to Christianity through Peter's ministry (Acts 10–11)

**Elymas** – Magician from Cyprus who miraculously was made blind, convincing the proconsul of Paphos to believe the gospel (Acts 13)

**episodic** – Consisting of a successive selection of smaller accounts

**Felix, Marcus Antonius** – Governor of the Roman province of Judea who tried Paul in Caesarea and kept him in prison for two years, expecting a bribe for Paul's freedom

**Festus, Porcius** – Governor who succeeded Antonius Felix in the Roman Province of Judea; sent Paul to Rome to stand trial after Paul appealed to Caesar

**Gallio** – Proconsul of Achaia around A.D. 51; refused to prosecute Paul because he considered the Jews' complaint against Paul to be a matter of Jewish law

**Gamaliel** – Respected rabbi, Pharisee, and member of the Sanhedrin who defended the apostles before the Jewish council; the apostle Paul's teacher before Paul's conversion

**Jerusalem** – City where David established his throne and Solomon built the temple during the united monarchy; capital of the southern kingdom of Judah that was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and later destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70; city where the early church began

**Jerusalem Council** – Meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 where the apostles and church leaders addressed concerns in the early church; in particular, whether or not Gentiles were required to follow the Mosaic law to be saved

**Judea** – Name used for Jerusalem and the surrounding areas after the Babylonian exile; southernmost of the three traditional divisions in ancient Palestine with Samaria in the center and Galilee to the north

**narrative discourse** – Literature that tells a story; literary device used to communicate ideas and lessons indirectly

**Philip the evangelist** – Name of a deacon from the church in Jerusalem who preached the gospel in Samaria and made many converts, including the Ethiopian eunuch; not Philip the apostle

**Priscilla** – Jewish woman and Christian convert in the early church who, along with her husband Aquila, worked and traveled with Paul and later gave instruction to Apollos in Ephesus regarding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection; also called Prisca

**Samaria** – Capital city of the ten northern tribes of Israel that fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.; also, central region of ancient Palestine located between Judea and Galilee

**Simon the magician** – Magician from Samaria who tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit

**Theophilus** – Person to whom Luke addressed both his gospel and the book of Acts