

# *Introduction to the Book of Acts*

By Steve Gregg

## **I. Value of the book of Acts**

A. Filling the gap in the New Testament canon between what the second century Christians called “Gospel” (i.e., the gospels, which *anticipate* the church) and “Apostle” (i.e., the epistles, which *presuppose* the church)

1. How did the teaching of Jesus develop into the doctrine found in the epistles?
2. Introducing Paul: who was this writer of so many epistles (and why care about him)?
3. How did the gospel, which was confined to Israel at the end of the gospel accounts, reach places like Galatia, Asia Minor, Greece and Rome, as we find to be the case in the epistles?

B. Proof of the Gospel—Acts as apologetic

1. Evidence of Christ’s resurrection: eye-witness testimony of apostles, continuation of the miracles of Christ through His body, the church
2. Evidence of Christ’s superiority to the demonic religions: confrontations with sorcerers, demon possessed individuals, and pagan priests
3. Evidence of Christ’s sovereignty over governments: The futility of official resistance, miraculous releases from prison, judgment upon persecutors (e.g., Herod), favorable court rulings, etc.
4. The supernatural success of the gospel in its unstoppable expansion to many lands, and among all classes (2:47/ 5:14/ 6:7/ 9:31/ 12:24/ 13:12/ 16:5/ 19:20)

C. Taking our own temperature

1. Prototype of genuine revival
2. The measure of true discipleship and ministry
3. The dynamic of the Holy Spirit: Real or surreal to us?

## **II. Circumstances and contents of the book of Acts**

A. The name and canonicity of the book

B. Written by whom—and when?

1. Believed to be Luke from the middle of the second century onward
2. The author sometimes accompanied Paul, and was with him in Rome (“we” sections: Acts 16:10-17/ 20:5-15/ 21:1-18/ 27:1-28:16/ comp. Col.4:14 & Philem.24)
3. Timothy and others mentioned by name in the book must be ruled-out
4. Author shows familiarity with the vocabulary of Gr. Medical writers (Col.4:14)
5. Relation to the third gospel (Acts 1:1ff): same addressee; same Greek style and structure; same emphasis on Gentile sympathies and the significant roles of women; picks-up the story where the gospel left-off

6. Written between the second year of Paul's house arrest in Rome (AD 62) and the beginning of Nero's persecution (July, AD 64). (This places the writing of Luke's gospel even earlier!)
  - a) a "hopeful" outlook on the potential for Paul's (and Christianity's) imperial vindication
  - b) though familiar with Roman/Jewish conflicts, the author makes no mention or allusion to the outbreak of the Jewish rebellion in AD 66
  - c) could not have been written after Paul's death (AD 67?) without mentioning it (especially after including the deaths of James and Stephen)
7. The author himself may (possibly) have died before or shortly after Paul's death, else he would probably have at least attempted the writing of a sequel, a third volume

### C. Written to whom—and why?

#### 1. Purpose:

- a. Like the gospel, to establish an orderly history from previous fragments?
- b. To trace the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome?
- c. As an apologetic for Christianity in a time of tension with pagan authorities?
- d. As a defense of Paul in anticipation of his impending trial?

#### 2. Who is Theophilus?

### D. Controversies associated with Acts:

#### 1. The question of Luke's sources

#### 2. Accuracy of the facts

*"Luke was an able and deliberate historian, writing more than one-fourth of the volume of the New Testament - more than any other man. Modern research has vindicated the quality of his work."* [W.T. Dayton, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible: "Luke"*]

Luke's correct use of local political titles, which varied from time to time and place to place throughout the Roman Empire has often impressed historians. Luke consistently refers to "asiarchs", tetrarchs", "proconsuls", etc. by their proper titles. Luke used the term *politarchs* to denote the civil authorities of Thessalonica (Acts 17:6). Since the term *politarch* was unknown in classical literature, this was considered by critics to be an error on Luke's part. Today, some 19 inscriptions have been found that use this title, five of which are in reference to Thessalonica.

In Acts 28:7, Luke speaks of Publius, the chief man of Malta, as "first man of the island." Inscriptions have now been found which give him the title "first man." [source of above examples: F.F.Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament" in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. C.F.Henry, p.325-327]

*"Readers with some knowledge of ancient history often have occasion to note Luke's careful writing. [Acts 13:7] is an example. In 22 BC Augustus made Cyprus a senatorial province...It was therefore governed by a proconsul or deputy. The name of a proconsul called Paulus has been discovered in a North Cypriot inscription...Luke is a consummate historian, to be ranged in his own right with the great writers of the Greeks."* [E.M.Blaiklock, Professor of Classics, Auckland University, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp.103, 89]

Luke was at one time accused of inaccuracy in Luke 3:1, where he made reference to Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene, ruling at the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry in 27 AD. Critics said the man never existed. The only Lysanias known to historians was a King Lysanias executed by Antony at Cleopatra's instigation in 36 BC - much too early to be the man mentioned by Luke. Then was found a Greek inscription from Abila (from which Abilene takes its name) containing a reference to "Lysanias, the tetrarch." The inscription is dated between 14 and 29 AD.

*"Both Conzelmann and Hänchen discover in Acts 5:36f a definite error in historical order given to Theudas and Judas, since Josephus dates a Theudas in AD 45, a full decade after Gamaliel's speech in Acts. In other words, Luke made a double mistake: a gross anachronism and faulty order. Such a conclusion does not jibe with our knowledge of Luke's general trustworthiness elsewhere. Is it not more probable that Luke is referring to another man named Theudas, otherwise unknown to us, who lived before Judas? It seems uncommonly bold to jettison the accuracy of Luke and the inerrancy of the Bible on the mere supposition that Josephus is always right, and that no evidence could possibly turn up to clear Luke's reputation. While insisting on their right to treat the Bible 'like any other book'...some critics proceed to treat it like no other book, by bathing it in the acid solution of their skepticism and historical pessimism." [ Clark Pinnock. A Defense of Biblical Infallibility, pp.22-23]*

*"Luke...should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." [Sir William Ramsay, archaeologist, one-time skeptic of the reliability of Acts as history, The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament, p.222]*

### 3. Is that the real Paul?

- a. Paul's attitude toward the observance of the law by Christians (Acts Vs. epistles)
- b. Catalogue of events following Paul's conversion (Acts 9 Vs. Galatians 1)
- c. Support of the Jerusalem Council & conflict with Peter (Acts Vs. 1 Cor. & Gal.)

E. The theme of the book: the continuing ministry of Christ through the Spirit-filled Church (what a difference 50 days can make!)

### F. Parallels between Peter and Paul in Acts:

1. Each has one lengthy sermon recorded (chs. 2 & 13) and several shorter ones
2. Both heal lame men (chs. 3 & 9)
3. Both incur judgment by a word (chs. 5 & 13)
4. Peter's shadow, and Paul's clothing are instrumental in healing (chs. 5 & 19)
5. Both confront sorcerers (chs. 8 & 13)
6. Both raise the dead (chs. 9 & 20)
7. Both are miraculously released from prison (chs. 12 & 16)

### G. Outline of contents:

#### **1. The birth and growing pains of the infant church in Jerusalem (chs 1 thru 7)**

- a. Tarrying in Jerusalem and replacing the defector (ch.1)
- b. The dynamic beginning of the church (ch.2)
- c. The church grows as a result of a dramatic healing (ch.3)
- d. Growing conflicts with the Jewish authorities (ch.4-5)
- e. The apostles delegate some duties to seven stewards (ch.6)
- f. The sermon and martyrdom of Stephen (ch.7)

#### **2. God expands His harvest efforts to non-Jewish people (chapters 8 through 12)**

- a. Samaria receives the gospel through Philip (ch.8)
- b. Saul's conversion and early Christian activities; Peter's ministry abroad (ch.9)
- c. The first uncircumcized Gentiles are admitted into the church (ch.10-11)
- d. James is martyred; Peter arrested, and escapes (ch.12)

**3. Focus on Paul's mission among the Gentiles** (chapters 13 through 20)

- a. *First missionary journey: Cyprus & Southern Galatia (ch.13-14)*
- b. *Jerusalem Council (ch.15)*
- c. *Second missionary journey: Macedonia & Achaia (ch.15:36-18:22)*
- d. *Third missionary journey: Asia Minor & Greece (ch.18:23- ch.20)*

**4. Paul's arrest and adventures as an ambassador in chains** (chapters 21-28)

- a. *Paul's last trip to Jerusalem; his arrest and incarceration there (ch.21-22)*
- b. *Paul is transferred to Caesarea and imprisoned two years there (ch.23-26)*
- c. *Paul's trip to Rome and two years' ministry as a prisoner (ch.27-28)*

**III. Benefiting from the study of Acts**

- A. The case for "primitivism"
- B. Distinguishing between the descriptive and the prescriptive elements
- C. Relevant topics in Acts
  - 1. The Holy Spirit in Acts
  - 2. Prayer in Acts
  - 3. The presentation of the Gospel in Acts: its situations
  - 4. The presentation of the Gospel in Acts: its content
  - 5. The nurture of converts in Acts
  - 6. Church growth in Acts
  - 7. Church unity in Acts
  - 8. Church government in Acts
  - 9. Patterns of church gatherings in Acts
  - 10. Church economics and ministry finances in Acts
  - 11. Church community in Acts
  - 12. Selection and training of ministers in Acts
  - 13. Prophetic ministry in Acts
  - 14. Speaking in Tongues in Acts
  - 15. Miracles in Acts
  - 16. Team ministry in Acts
  - 17. Missionary strategies in Acts
  - 18. Spiritual warfare in Acts
  - 19. Church/state relations in Acts
  - 20. Persecution in Acts