

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

- 1) Jesus is resurrected and appears to the disciples.
- 2) They see him ascend into heaven and he tells them to stay in Jerusalem for the promised blessing.
- 3) 50 days after the Passover/Good Friday, (Pentecost means 50 and is a Jewish festival 50 days after Passover) they experience a powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Jesus. Many are converted to 'the way' and the early church is formed.
- 4) The church is in Jerusalem. Believers meet in houses but they also go to the temple to worship. The church is formed of Palestinian Jews who speak Aramaic but also Jews from around the world who speak Greek and some other language or dialect as well.
- 5) The authority structure of the church is clearly centred on the Apostles. There are 12 of them, representing the nucleus of the spiritual Israel. With Jesus' resurrection, God's new kingdom has made its advent in the world. Even though the world continues to be a mess and the rulers of the age are corrupt and self-serving, God's Spirit has begun to shape hearts and lives toward a different way of living. Eventually, Jesus will return in full power to establish God's kingdom by overturning the false kingdoms of the world. His own followers will recognize him and welcome him. At this end time there will also be the resurrection of the dead.
- 6) The apostles appoint seven more helpers (deacons) to support the practical side of ministry in the church. Among these helpers are Stephen and Philip. They are Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) Jews and they begin to minister and evangelize Hellenistic Jews beyond the Palestinian church.
- 7) Threatened by the spread of the early church in and beyond Palestine, Jewish religious authorities launch a persecution. This causes social unrest which then leads to the expulsion of all non-Palestinian Jews who are Christian, from Jerusalem. Before this happens, however, Stephen is stoned to death. Saul (who eventually becomes Paul the apostle) is the Pharisee leader of the synagogue where this stoning happens. As Christians are expelled from Jerusalem, they spread the gospel throughout the then-known world. Philip is one of the evangelists spreading the gospel, and one of the first converts outside the traditional Jewish population is an Ethiopian Eunuch.
- 8) Saul (later Paul) is granted permission to pursue these errant Jews called 'Christians' wherever they are infiltrating Jewish communities throughout the empire in order to bring

them to justice. On the way, however, he encounters Christ and is converted to the Christian way.

3 THINGS THAT HAPPEN NEXT:

1) Peter encounters faith among Gentiles (i.e. Cornelius the centurion) and becomes convinced that the gospel has come to them as it came to the Jews. He also becomes a travelling missionary to Jewish Christians outside Palestine.

2) The Jerusalem Church is headed by James (Jesus' brother), and along with Peter, becomes head of the Christian movement, carrying immense authority.

3) Paul is commissioned to the Gentiles and much of the Acts of the Apostles chronicles his missionary journeys throughout the world. While his authority grows among the new mixed communities of the diaspora (Jewish and Gentile), it is questioned within Jerusalem.

4) The three leaders: James, Peter and Paul, represent three strands of early Christianity: Palestinian (James), Hellenistic (Peter), and Paul's gentile-dominant strand.

THEOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS:

1) The Holy Spirit becomes the active presence of God (as the flesh-and-blood Jesus was before his death, and God was for Israel in the Old Testament). Even as the book is called: the Acts of the Apostles, a more accurate title would be: the Acts of the Holy Spirit and the response of the apostles to such activity.

2) The new age of the kingdom of God has begun even while the passing age of the present world order continues. The resurrection of the dead is not just at the end of history. Jesus is the signal of its beginning. He is risen now, body and Spirit. Resurrection for believers happens in a spiritual way right now, in the body later at the end of the age (whenever that will be). There are other key signs of the new age. The first is that the Holy Spirit lives inside believers. It gives them bold courage to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Christ, and to embody his love's demands in a world of violent selfishness. Second, there is the overwhelming response of Gentiles to the gospel. Finally, there is the birth and growth of the Christian movement (the church), not simply in numbers, but in boldness of witness to this new way of living in community as the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ with each other and in the world.

3) A new problem requires new insight, namely, how non-Jews are to be welcomed into a largely Jewish movement. What is the relationship of the religious law to the gospel? What is required of believers? Paul comes into conflict with other leaders of the early church. In Acts, Paul's view of the way things should be wins out, and this view is that compromise is necessary

between the Jewish way and the non-Jewish background of the emerging church. Gentiles should not have to become like Jews in order to become Christians. But he faces great opposition from Jews in the church and outside the church and this is reflected in his letters and in Acts. Jews see Paul as a bad Jew because he has compromised essential requirements for believers. Paul moves beyond the compromise reached in Jerusalem to develop his own totally gentile-inclusive brand of Christianity, and an inclusivity that stretches traditional gender roles, identities and relationships also.

ACTS 1-2

General Comments:

As already mentioned, the Acts of the Apostles may also be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, so prominent is the Holy Spirit as the mover and shaker of the growth of the early church.

Luke the Gospel begins with the birth of Jesus and Acts begins with the birth of the church. The gospel describes the ministry of Jesus and Acts describes the mission and ministry of the early church. Jesus' trial in the gospel parallels Paul's trial in Acts. Stephen's words at his stoning are exactly the same as Jesus' words from the cross (forgiveness for his executioners). At every step, Luke is at pains to show how the risen and ascended Christ is now present in and through the ministry of the church and the believers that constitute its fellowship.

The Holy Spirit takes believers and the church into uncharted territory. One of the big shifts is how non-Jews are treated and welcomed into a church that up to this point was made up of Jews, and Jews who followed the Old Testament law with its daily rituals and yearly cycles. The Holy Spirit inspires and inflames the church with the movement of love, and love is not bound or fixed to rules and customs, but changes and adapts to times and places.

Chapter 1

The risen Christ appears among the disciples for a 40-day period. The significance of 40 in the bible is important. Whether it is 40 days or 40 years, this time frame is considered 'sacred time', a time of spiritual formation and overcoming of confusion and fear in discerning God's will with clarity and vision, and a resolve to act on it. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai before receiving the 10 commandments. Elijah was on Mount Horeb 40 days when he heard the 'still small voice of God.' The ministry of Jesus begins in the gospel with Jesus tempted by the devil 40 days and nights. And so, it is fitting that Acts begins with the disciples being formed by the risen Christ over a 40-day period.

Before leaving the disciples at the end of the 40 days, Jesus promises them that they will be visited by his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit will be his continuing presence upon them and within them for the time to come. He tells them to wait in Jerusalem until that

happens. They wait 10 more days (Pentecost means '50' and is a Jewish festival 50 days after Passover (which is Good Friday/Easter for Christians. And so Pentecost is 50 days after Easter).

Jesus ascends to heaven and this is not about direction (upwards) as it is about Jesus being with God. His body, now, may be in heaven but it is also on earth in the spiritual form of his instrument - the church and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is physically alive as we embody him together as his hands, feet, voice and heart toward each other and in the world.

The disciples are called to 'wait'. Waiting is not a waste of time if it is done prayerfully and in a focussed way. The disciples needed a power and source of inspiration they could not produce of themselves. In prayerfully waiting, they were developing a receptivity, openness and anticipation of the gift that became known as the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2

What is the power of the Holy Spirit?

1) The power of the Holy Spirit is manifested on the 50th day after Jesus' death. Pentecost is a festival which marks the giving of the law at Sinai 50 days after the Passover. The phenomena of wind and fire are also significant in biblical tradition. The wind of God is the movement of the Holy spirit in the creation (Genesis 1:2) and the fire of God is present around the mountain when the 10 commandments are given to Moses (Exodus 19: 16-18).

2) In the Old Testament, it was only to specific people that the Holy Spirit was given (i.e. prophets). At Pentecost, it is given to all together. This is a sign that the last days, as prophesied in the Old Testament, had come. The last days do not necessarily refer to the end of the world. It could also mean the beginning of the last stage of history before God renews the whole world. The last and final stage is the Spirit coming upon everyone.

3) The Spirit also comes to people of different races and languages. Even though all the people mentioned were probably Jews from all over the world come to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem, Acts outlines how beginning with Peter and developing in Paul, the Holy Spirit comes to the gentiles. Again, this is part of the sign of the final flowering of the new age and a sign that God has begun something new with the coming and rising of Jesus. Is our movement toward ever greater inclusion as well as healing and reconciliation with all those marginalized a shining witness of the new age of the Spirit?

4) The power of the Spirit is also manifest in Peter. From a scared, confused and self-deceiving follower, he has become the head and bold spokesman of the fellowship of 'the way.' Peter knows himself forgiven and in his sermon challenges his own people (the Jews) to repent in order to receive the healing joy of forgiveness as well. Receiving this forgiveness without Jesus

present in the flesh (and hence, through the Holy Spirit) is another sign of the power of the Holy Spirit come alive among them.

5) Finally, the quality of love that bound them in a fellowship, their generosity toward one another and for the sake of the community... this also was a sign of the working of the Holy Spirit. Those who experience forgiveness and acceptance become lovers of others. Loving others is always a challenge. But the Spirit drives us toward others ever convicting and energizing us to do better in our loving. As the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ we are inspired, empowered and emboldened in a whole new way, even as we continue to struggle to love at times as the old way is still in us. We are on a journey of becoming.