

# Bible Study Series: The Book of Acts (Week One Notes)

March 5, 2013



Acts 1, from a 14th-century Greek manuscript of the New Testament

Sometime between 70 and 100 A.D., the book of Acts was written. The author was Luke, the man who wrote almost one-quarter of the New Testament. It is not just a story of the early church, but a story of the “church” as it was and is today. It deals with issues between Christians and Jews, Christians and pagans, Christians and the government, the problems of prayer, the purpose of preaching and teaching, and many of the other dilemmas that affect the church in our day.

It is the story of a community, formed by God, for without God there would have been no community. It is the same thing with our community here today. We did not form this community, we don't run this community, and we just live in this community that was formed by God. You will see as we read Acts that the stories are not about somebody else; they are our story. The names might be a bit different, but they are definitely our stories. We keep on telling these stories because they help us make sense out of the life we are trying to live.

We tell these stories for 3 reasons:

1. They make sense. They are stories that don't just mean something; they do something. They perform certain actions and help us to hear and remember them. God is not just a character in the story; God is the author of these stories, the one who make these stories possible and whose nature is revealed to us in the telling of these stories.
2. These stories not only depict the nature of God, but render the promise of God to give us a new heaven and a new earth. God shows his faithfulness in history, and that attests to his promise of faithfulness in the apocalyptic times to come. These stories are about a stubborn refusal to keep quiet and accept things as they are – what can, and will, happen to a community when it dedicates itself to the Good News. Not all of that is good. But it all is based upon the truth of these stories. These stories attest to the power of the promises of God to make a difference.
3. Acts has a purpose in forming and equipping disciples for their work. Jesus didn't come just to bring some interesting thoughts; he came to call people to a new way of living and dying. This story, like any good story, has adventure, frustration, hope, and torment. It helps us to see that the greatest argument we have for unbelievers is the story of Christians who lived then and now as they work out what it means to be living in the hands of the Living God.

The book of Acts is not really concerned with the acts of the Apostles. They are really bit players in this story. Some say the title should be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” but that wouldn't be accurate either. No, this is really a story of how the community acted when its members came to understand the power of the Holy Spirit. The community is really the major character of this story; it becomes a person in itself. While there are many figures in this story, they are all described as people who affect the life of the community. Nobody acts independently; it is all within the context of community. It is a *kerygma*, a proclamation of what happened, and what will happen. So while it is a story in time, it is also timeless – a story that we keep on living over and over again.

### ***Acts 1:1-26***

Who is Theophilus? Quite frankly, we don't know. It could have been a person, or a name to refer to anyone reading the story. The name means “Lover of God,” so it could be either or both. But one point is clear: It is the same “person” to whom Luke was writing when he wrote his gospel.

The story begins after the resurrection. Jesus comes to reassure his followers that it is not over, and, in fact, the best part is just beginning. He ascends into heaven in their sight, and then they do one of the most spectacularly intelligent things the church has ever done. Before they *did* anything, they went back to their rooms and prayed for 40 days.

Now to us, that may seem like a waste of time. There was lots to do; why didn't they get on with the program? Probably, if you had asked them, they wouldn't have known why they did what they did, but they did the right thing. Karl Barth called this a "significant pause" between the mighty acts of God in the resurrection to moving into action. During that pause, the "work" of the church was to wait and to pray.

Waiting seems like a waste of time, but this is not just killing time. This "holy waiting" is a period of preparation for what is to come. During this time, they met together, prayed together, called new leaders (including women) and another disciple to be an apostle (Matthias), and just basically got ready for the next thing to come. They did not know what was coming, but they knew it was going to be something spectacular.

Here is an important point. You must remember that we have the ability to see the whole story. We can see how things come out, but they couldn't. And in order to truly understand the story, it is important not to "think ahead" of where you are in the story. Just stay with it, and watch it unfold as though you were living through it with them, not observing their actions some 2,000 years later.

### **Acts 2: 1-47**

The Day of Pentecost is what happens next. They are all together in one place when violent winds and tongues of fire swirl about them and the fire lands on each one of them. They are suddenly filled with a power they have never known. The words of John the Baptist come to mind: "He will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit."

They come tumbling out of the room and begin talking with people in their own languages. This is a sign that the community is being prepared to go into all parts of the world and bring this message of salvation. Luke uses this miracle as an

occurrence for proclamation. It is not unlike God breathing life into the world in Genesis. The new languages they are speaking reflect the story of the tower of Babel.

This is a dramatic example of the power of the Holy Spirit. It belies the thought that such an experience is private; Luke says it is anything but private. It is very public! Wind and fire, new languages and an outpouring of public speaking about this newfound faith in Jesus Christ are not private experiences.

The crowd's reaction is strange. They ask, "What must we do to be saved?" Instead of rejecting the apostles, they are drawn to them and their message. We would expect the opposite, but God is teaching the community to expect the unexpected, and they go forth with this new message.

These new messages come some 28 times in Acts, mostly by Peter and Paul, and they account for almost one-third of the text of Acts. The messages tend to follow a particular form:

1. The age of fulfillment has come.
2. The coming of the kingdom has taken place through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
3. By his resurrection, Jesus now sits at the right hand of God and is the new head of Israel.
4. The Holy Spirit is the sign of Christ's presence in the church and its work.
5. The messianic age will be here shortly and will see the second coming of Christ.
6. Forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation come with repentance.

This technique of promise and fulfillment will be seen throughout Acts.

The response of the crowd is immediate. "What should we do?" They are told to repent and be baptized. It is not a message of "Save yourselves!" but "Let yourself be saved!" Faith will come from what is heard, and the disciples keep on telling people about Jesus. The message was working for them. Their numbers grew, and they met to break bread, pray together, and rejoice in their community.

### ***Acts 3***

The picture that we have of the church now is rather pleasant. They gather for teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread and prayers. But Luke goes to great lengths to show that this is not a retreat from the problems of the world, but a manner of dealing with those problems. The path towards significant prayer goes straight through, not around, human misery.

The crippled man is a great example of this. He asks for help – meaning a handout – but Peter says he has no gold, telling him instead in the name of Jesus to get up and walk. This community is not about band-aids, but real help.

The only power Peter has is the name of Jesus, and he uses that here and elsewhere to show what that name can do. But that good news is about more than just healing illness; it is about salvation, and after the healing Peter tells the story of Jesus so that the crowd sees that it is Jesus who heals, not Peter. Nothing magical happened here; there was no human control of this situation. This was all done by the risen Lord.

Peter then goes to great lengths to tell the people that it was not his power that healed this man. He makes the point that the people killed the one who heals, and God raised him from the dead. He urges them to become followers of Jesus. In this way, they will be followers of God. He explains to them how their heritage has been transformed from following Moses to now following the Messiah who had been in their midst. He warns them not to rely on the fact that they are children of Moses; they have to respond to this new calling if they are to receive salvation.

This is also a call to us to remember that simply because we had some water sprinkled on us at baptism, we don't get a "get out of jail free" card. We need to work at this just as much as did the people in the early church. We can't rest on our laurels; we have to get about the business of being Disciples of Christ.

#### ***Acts 4***

Well, here comes trouble. The people are all stirred up by what they have seen and heard, so here come the temple authorities to see what is going on. They were put out, so they had Peter and John arrested, but in spite of their efforts, 5,000 believed in Jesus.

The next day they met in council and heard Peter and John speak to them about Jesus. They didn't know what to do with them, so they told them to go away and speak no more about Jesus. That worked really well. As soon as P&J were released, they went back to their friends and told them all that happened. They got together to pray – not for protection, but for boldness.

Was this story being told to help a group of Christians who were being persecuted? We don't know, but we do know that the example of the disciples, to meet and pray for boldness, has been helpful throughout the ages to Christians as they suffered torment.

Notice the interplay between witness and worship. They seek the power of Jesus, and they ask for the strength to share that with others in the world. It would have been easy for them to ask for protection, but they didn't. They asked for guidance to see the next way they were to go.

Then we come to how the community dealt with the problems of possessions and money. This is the first of many examples of how the early church struggled with this. We have great examples of communal living, people selling their property to help the group, and of those who pretended to do so. The generous were rewarded, the miserly...

## ***Acts 5***

Chapter 5 starts off with the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They wanted to look like generous people, but were really holding back for themselves. That selfishness brought ruin and death to them. But we need to ask the purpose of this story. Was it to threaten people that they had to give up all their goods or they would be killed? Or was there another purpose that was meant to bring life to the community instead of death?

Think about it: We still struggle with our possessions. We say "you can't take it with you" but then we write wills with all kinds of stipulations that direct how it is to be distributed after we are gone. Now, I am not saying to ignore this part of your life, nor am I saying you shouldn't have a will. But I believe that the story of Ananias and Sapphira is there to remind us that we need to keep such things in perspective.

Martin Luther once called security “the ultimate idol.” Security and control are idols in the fact that we tend to put *way* too much confidence in them. Think of the people, think of the families, think of the churches and communities that have been destroyed by seeking security. That sense of comfort becomes God for them, and they lose sight of what really counts.

Ananias and Sapphira swore to God that they were going to put everything into his hands, and then held back. In doing so, they were telling God that they had another god before Him. It wasn't the possessions that did them in – not all early Christian communities were communal – but it was that lack of confidence in God, and their holding back that was the problem for them. The lesson is clear for us too: We need to count on the real security that God offers us a whole lot more than the paltry efforts we can make. If we count on him, things will be just fine. If we count on ourselves...

After the stories of the ones who would deceive God, we go back to the life-giving stories of the Gospel at work. More healing goes on, and more miracles are performed. New converts come into the fold, and they treat the apostles with a sense of awe and wonder. Peter and the others responded as best they could, but there was always more need than they could fulfill.

The high priest had them arrested, but that didn't work very well because the angels of the Lord came and broke open the jail for them. They went right back to the temple to teach again. When they were confronted again, they responded that they were doing what they had to do. That didn't go over very well, and they were about to be killed except for the intervention of Gamaliel. He was one of the greatest teachers of that time, and he told those in authority that they had better beware. They might be opposing the one they were saying they were protecting, God. Gamaliel said that they should let this thing suffer the test of time. If it lasted, then you could see that it was from God. If not, it would crumble under its own weight.

The authorities were convinced, but had the apostles flogged just to be sure they got the message that they weren't welcome. But the apostles left rejoicing, undoubtedly confusing the heck out of those who just had them beaten. Their joy was found in the suffering that they had experienced. For now, they were one with their Lord. They had suffered in his name and earned their stripes. They were



happy in their suffering because they remembered his promise to be with them when they suffered in his name.

Their example can be easily applied to our struggles with the church. Gamaliel's words can be our guide as we look forward to our future. But most of all, the apostles' reaction to suffering – as reassurance not rejection – can be a powerful message for us in our lives.

## ***Acts 6***

There is something about religious communities that makes them tend to be very conservative and traditional. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were, in the best sense, people trying to protect their faith from this new incursion of the rabbi Jesus. His followers were trying to change everything that they held dear, and they felt it was their duty to protect their faith. (Sound familiar?) They were confronting a spirit-led community that didn't seem to respect order and tradition. They felt they had to do something, and this is where they start to do something about it.

In contrast to the anxiety of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Christians were organizing their new community along new lines. They begin to divide the labor of running the community. The Apostles realize that they can't, and probably shouldn't, do everything themselves. There are complaints that the widows and orphans of the gentiles are not being cared for properly. So they establish the office of deacon to care for them. The deacons are meant to do the more mundane tasks of waiting on tables and seeing to the distribution of the charity of the church. This tradition is carried on today in our office of deacon, when the deacon prepares the altar for the Eucharistic meal, and the social ministry of the deacon that is carried out by them in our church.

But mostly, the beginning of this story talks about how leadership arises in the church. It comes from necessity, it comes from the needs of the people for guidance and service, and it comes from the needs of the church to reach farther into the world than one, or a few, could do on their own. Luke reminds us here that the daily operation of the church is just as important as the more exciting ministries of witness, worship, and preaching.



### **Acts 6:8-8:3**

We now move to the ministries of two of those deacons, Philip and Stephen. Philip will be the one who exemplifies the works of the spirit, and Stephen will give his life demonstrating the cost of the discipleship they were both called to.

Stephen is introduced to us as a deacon who does more than wait on tables. He is shown to be arguing with the Hellenistic Jews, and defeating them in these arguments. But they are not about to let that go away easily. They launch a smear campaign against him, saying he defamed Moses and God. Stephen is brought before the high priest to face these charges, and his speech in response is the longest speech in the book of Acts. He goes through the entire salvation history of Israel to prove his point that Jesus is the “new Moses,” the “new deliverer.”

Luke uses Stephen’s message to prove that the now-ruined temple in Jerusalem (remember, Acts was written after the destruction of the temple by the Romans) is the proof that everything he was saying is right. We have to remember that this story has multiple purposes: It is an account of the events that were going on, but it is also a story being told to embolden a group of Christians in later years who might probably be suffering persecution. Luke takes advantage of the Stephen story to bolster the faith of those who are suffering in the day that he is writing.

Well, Stephen’s speech seals his fate. He has incited the crowd to the extent that they take him out of town to stone him to death. Jews couldn’t crucify anyone; only the Romans could do that. As a matter of fact, they had very few circumstances in which they could put someone to death, and then only by stoning. The martyr’s last prayer reflects the prayers of Jesus on the cross. But note that the ones who are going to stone him lay their cloaks at the feet of a man named Saul – showing that the next important figure in the story was there, and that he approved of the actions of the mob.

We have a hard time attaching to this event in some ways. We have this principle of freedom of religion that seems to protect us from such persecution. But stop and think about what is going on in our church and how we are almost ready to stone each other in many cases. True, it probably won’t go that far, but it might just be the next best thing. We’ll fight over property, who has the gospel, which church will be in and which one will be out. We have to be really careful as we go

forward that we don't start off to save the church and wind up with a bucket full of martyrs.