

Actions of the Early Churches

by James F. Holmes

To the many, especially the students who
have sat in the class of *Acts of the Apostles* at
Central Arkansas Baptist Bible Institute, who have
engaged in the study of the actions of Christians
in the early first century churches.

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Preface

These comments on the book of Acts had their beginning in a series of sermons developed while I was the pastor of Faith Baptist Church in North Little Rock, Arkansas. I discovered a real joy while preparing those sermons, and preaching them over a period of several months back in the 1980s. When I was invited to teach a course on the book of Acts at the Central Arkansas Baptist Bible Institute, I brought out the old notes and used them in preparation for a semester of study for second year students at CABBI. As I teach the course in every spring semester, I continue to discover valuable truths about the first century churches that can be aptly applied to our congregations today.

I have been encouraged by my students to publish this information for it to be available to anyone spending time in the book of Acts. These students have excelled semester after semester in their study of the early actions of the churches of the Lord. Dr. Paul Carter, President of Central Arkansas Baptist Bible Institute has been most encouraging in this effort.

I express my deep appreciation to Editor-in-chief Larry Clements of the Baptist Sunday School Committee and to members of the editorial staff for their willingness and cooperation in publishing this work.

It is the corporate desire of all who have joined together in producing this publication that our Lord Jesus will be magnified, and that churches will profit as beneficiaries of our efforts. May God bless.

James F. Holmes

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Introduction to the Book of Acts

In one sense Acts is the most important book in the New Testament regarding the early church. Without Acts, apart from what we could deduce from the epistles of Paul, no information about the first century churches would be available. History can be written in various ways. We can trace the course of events from day to day, week to week, and see a progression of historical occurrences, or we can open a series of windows and see vivid glimpses of great moments and personalities. The latter is what Luke appears to have done in the book of Acts.

The Name of the Book. *Acts of the Apostles* is said to be the name of the book. However, Acts does not give an exhaustive account of the acts and lives of the apostles. The only mention of all of them exclusively is in chapter 1, verse 13. Otherwise, apart from Paul, only three apostles are mentioned. Acts 12:2 tells of the execution of James, the brother of John and the son of Zebedee. John appears, but he never speaks (Acts 1:13; 3:1-11; 4:1-21; 8:14-25). More information is given about Peter, who is seen in the earlier chapters as a leading character but quickly passes from the scene. I suggest that the book is more about the actions of the early churches. It has been said that the literal title of the book is *Acts of Apostolic Men*.

The Writer of the Book. Although the book never says so, from the earliest of time Luke has been held to be the author. We really know very little about him. Three references are made to him in the New Testament (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phm. 24). From these references we

learn that Luke was a medical doctor, and was one of the most valued helpers and friends of Paul. We can deduce that he was a Gentile. Colossians 4:11 concludes a list of those who were of the circumcision, and verse 12 begins a new list and we assume that it is a list of Gentiles. If this is true, then, Luke is the only Gentile author in the New Testament. William Barclay suggests that we could have guessed that Luke was a doctor because of his distinctive use of medical terms. In Luke 4:35, in relating the account of the man who had the spirit of an unclean devil, he says, "When the devil had thrown him in the midst," he uses the correct medical word for convulsions. In Luke 9:38, while drawing the picture of the man who asked Jesus, "I beseech thee, look upon my son," he employs the conventional word for a doctor paying a visit to a patient. The most interesting example is in the saying about the camel passing through the eye of the needle. All three synoptic writers give us that saying (Matt. 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). For *needle* both Mark and Matthew use the Greek *raphis*, the ordinary word for the needle of a tailor or for a household needle. Luke alone uses *belone*, the technical word for a surgeon's needle. Luke was a doctor and a doctor's words came most naturally to his pen.

The Recipient of the Book. Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts to a man called Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1). We can only guess who Theophilus was. He is called "most excellent Theophilus," which really means "your Excellency." Maybe Theophilus was not a real person. "Lover of God" could have simply been anyone who loves God. He may have been a high government official. Or sometimes doctors, such as Luke, were slaves of wealthy persons, and it could be Luke was the slave of someone to whom he was addressing his writing. Who knows?

The Aim of the Book. Let me state in the beginning that we are predisposing that the book of Acts is the product of the verbal, plenary, inspiration of God, and partakes of the holy nature of God. Luke wrote Acts

because God chose him to be the human author of a divine book. But let's look a bit into his aim and direction with the book.

1. Luke seems to commend Christianity to the Roman government. He seems to go out of his way to show how courteous Roman magistrates were to Paul. In Acts 13:12, Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus, becomes a Christian. In Acts 18:12, Gallio is absolutely impartial in Corinth. In Acts 16:33, the magistrates at Philippi discover their mistake in abusing and imprisoning Paul and Silas and apologize publicly to them.

Luke was writing in the days when Christians were disliked and persecuted, and he told his story in such a way as to show that the Roman magistrates had always been perfectly fair to Christianity, and that they had never regarded the Christians as evil men. Some have suggested that the book of Acts is nothing other than a brief prepared for the defense of Paul when he appeared in his trial before the Roman Emperor.

2. One of the aims of Luke was to show that Christianity was for every country. The Jews found this hard to grasp. They had the idea that they were the chosen people and God had no use for any other nation. Luke shows Philip preaching to the Samaritans, Stephen making Christianity universal and being killed for it and Peter accepting the Gentile Cornelius into the church. Christians are preaching to the Gentiles at Antioch, Paul is traveling far and wide winning people of all nations to Christ, and Acts 15 shows the church making the great decision to accept the Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews.

3. The above are merely secondary aims. Luke's chief purpose in writing is contained in the words of the risen Christ in Acts 1:8, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." He stressed the expansion of the church, and how

the church, which began in Palestine, had in little more than thirty years reached Rome.

One writer, C. H. Turner, pointed out that Acts falls into six panels or windows, each ending with what might be called a progress report:

Panel 1: (Acts 1:1 through Acts 6:7). This concerns the church at Jerusalem and the preaching of Peter, and it ends with “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

Panel 2: (Acts 6:8 through Acts 9:31). This is the description of the spread of Christianity through Palestine and the martyrdom of Stephen, followed by the preaching in Samaria. It ends, “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.”

Panel 3: (Acts 9:32 through Acts 12:24). This part includes the conversion of Paul, the extension of the church to Antioch, and the reception of Cornelius, the Gentile, into the church. Its summary is “But the word of God grew and multiplied.”

Panel 4: (Acts 12:25 through Acts 16:5). This portion tells of the extension of the church through Asia Minor and the preaching tour of Galatia and ends, “And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.”

Panel 5: (Acts 16:6 through Acts 19:20). This period relates to the extension of the church into Europe and the work of Paul in great Gentile cities like Corinth and Ephesus. Its summary ends, “So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”

Panel 6: (Acts 19:21—Acts 28:31) Paul arrived in Rome and was imprisoned there. It ends with the picture of Paul “preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.” Why does the book

of Acts end as it does? It is an open-ended book, and we will discuss that later.

Sources for the Book. Luke was a historian and the sources from which a historian draws his information is important. Luke relied upon the records of the churches, stories that were told to him by church people and he relied upon personal experiences. In the early portions of Acts, he writes in the third person, but later “they” becomes “we” as he writes in the first person. As a writer of a part of the New Testament (two books), Luke had divine revelation. That is a part of infallible, verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible. (See 2 Timothy 3:16.)

It is my desire that the following pages will be instrumental in assisting you to grow in the Word of God.

James F. Holmes (July 2009)

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Into the World With the Gospel Acts 1:1-8

Introduction

Acts is the second of two volumes (The Gospel of Luke and The Acts) authored by Luke, the medical doctor companion of the apostle Paul. Acts 1:1, 2 states, “The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen” compares favorably with Luke 1:3, 4, “It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.”

Little controversy seems to exist concerning the authorship of the book of Acts. Early Christian writers of the second century, Ireaneus, Clemons of Alexandria, and Tertullian confirm Luke as the writer of the early history of New Testament churches in Acts.

The theme of the book of Acts seems to be embodied in the very name of the book. It is called “The Acts of the Apostles.” It should more appropriately be called “The Acts of the Early Churches.” Acts is a record of the heroes, the heroines and the heroics of the first century churches. It has been said that Acts is the story of “the Savior going up, the Spirit coming down and the Saints going out.” Without the book of Acts, we would have only a smattering of information about the early church. Church planting and church growth—immense church

growth—our model and example for leading people to Jesus Christ and the building of churches for the glory of God are recorded in its pages.

The book of Acts has an interesting and unusual conclusion. Observe Acts 28:31, “Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” “No man forbidding him” is translated from the Greek *akolutos* meaning “freely, or unhinderedly.” Acts ends without a conclusion. It is an open-ended book; the story is not complete. Looking at the beginning of the book, the command of the Lord is seen to go into all of the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, looking at the end of the book the record of Luke writing Acts concludes, but the preaching of the gospel continues unhinderedly. The book ends, but the work continues.

Unmistakable Proofs, (Acts 1:1-3).

The Founder of the Church. The author begins the book with the words, “The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (verse 1). The question is raised, “What did Jesus begin in His ministry that God had not begun before?” The answer is “The Church!” To many the question, “What is a church?” is very trite. However, beginning Bible students are emphatically told that a church is an assembly of called-out believers who have been scripturally baptized. Of that first church one might ask, “Called out when, from where and by whom?” Immediately, the mind of the Bible student races to Matthew 4:19, “And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” This verse answers the question. During the time of His own personal ministry, Jesus called out His disciples who had been baptized by John the Baptist. It was from the shores of Galilee that He called them. Jesus is the founder of the church, the assembly of called-out believers, and if we place the origin of the church anywhere else, and at any other time, we rob Him of the glory of founding His own church.

The Foundation of the Church. Not only is Jesus Christ the founder of the church, but also He is the foundation of the church. What did Jesus do to authenticate, validate and legitimize this institution called the church? Acts 1:3 reveals, “To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” He arose from the dead! And, then, He proved that He had risen from the dead. “Infallible proofs” is from *tekimeorion* meaning “unmistakable, indubitable, clear evidence.” In those forty days after the resurrection, Jesus unmistakably, indubitably, clearly presented Himself alive.

What distinguishes a New Testament church from all other religions in the world? It is the fact that its founder and foundation has overcome the powers of death and is forevermore alive. There are some likenesses between the church of Jesus Christ and other religions of the world. Mohammed founded the fast spreading religion of the world called Islam, but in AD 632, Mohammed died! An oriental named Siddhartha Gautama founded Buddhism, a religion to which millions adhere, but about 483 BC. Gautama, also known as Buddha, died. Jesus Christ, in His personal ministry on the earth, called out the early believers and founded the church, and in AD 33 Jesus died. But the great distinctive difference between Islam, Buddhism, or any other great religion of the world and the church of Jesus Christ is this one notable and historical fact—Mohammed remains in the grave, Siddhartha Gautama remains in the grave, and all other founders of religions remain in the grave, but of Jesus Christ it can be said, and it can be sung vociferously:

*Up from the grave He arose
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes.
He arose a Victor o'er the dark domain,
And He lives forever, with His saints to reign.*

Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church. Of Him and of the church the apostle Paul said, “For other

foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

Unresolved Problems, (Acts 1:4-7).

The Emphasis of Jesus. Jesus was in attendance with this small assembly prior to His ascension. He emphasized their agenda by commanding them to remain where they were. “And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me” (verse 4). He continued by informing them that they had been told that they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit in just a few days. A companion verse in the Gospel of Luke declares, “Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). Jesus wanted this young, small, New Testament church to be concerned with the enormous events that were about to occur.

The Error of the Disciples. While the emphasis of Jesus had been upon their waiting for the Promise of the Holy Spirit upon the church, the disciples seem to be more concerned about earthly things. They asked, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They appeared to be asking for freedom from Roman tyranny. Their eyes were focused upon the earthly kingdom of Israel, not upon the heavenly kingdom of God.

Jesus answered their inquiry. “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (verse 7). Some suggest the disciples are asking about the second coming of Jesus Christ. Whatever their inquiry is, Jesus reminds them of an urgent interest in the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church. He informs them that they will receive a special power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. It is interesting to think that Jesus never takes something away without giving something better.

Unlimited Power, (Acts 1:8).

The Strength of the Power. Jesus said, “But ye shall receive power.” The word *power* is translated from an interesting Greek word *dynamis*. The word means “energy power.” Several English words are derived from this one Greek word. Our words *dynamite*, *dynamo* and *dynamic* are all related. The same word is found in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” While the disciples were denied the date of the coming of Jesus Christ and the earthly kingdom, to them would be delivered the unlimited power to confront whatever the world would bring upon them as they delivered the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Source of the Power. Jesus said, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you” (Acts 1:8). This is Holy Spirit power. The power of God through the Holy Spirit that had been demonstrated in many ways and in many places is the power that was to come upon the church in Jerusalem. Genesis 1:2, 3 demonstrates the power of God, “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” Luke recorded the conversation Gabriel had with Mary, “And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

The holy power of God that hovered on the face of the waters and brought light to God’s world, the holy power of God that overshadowed Mary and brought a holy conception is the power that accompanies Christians when they witness to a lost friend, or that accompanies a pastor when he enters the pulpit to preach the gospel. The power of God came upon the church at Pentecost

and continues with churches today who are responding with the gospel to a lost and dying world.

Universal Presentation, (Acts 1:8).

(Special note: observe two “ye shalls” in verse 8.)

But Ye Shall Receive Power. Observe the order of the “ye shalls.” “Ye shall receive” precedes “Ye shall be.” Jesus emphatically informed the church not to depart from Jerusalem until the promise had been received (verse 4). The church was prohibited from being witnesses until they had received the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit. It was not until Pentecost when Spirit power was given to the church that the tremendous impact of the preaching of the gospel was felt. Churches not having the presence of the Holy Spirit in this age are anemic when preaching the gospel. Souls will not be reached without the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

And Ye Shall Be Witnesses. Jesus stressed that when they received the power of the Holy Spirit, then, they would be witnesses. “Witnesses” is from the Greek *martures* from which we receive our English word martyr. It would be necessary for the church to martyr itself to be an effective witness. We must be martyred to ourselves to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. When one serves Jesus Christ, his or her interests must give way and be in subjection to the interests of the Lord.

The church in Jerusalem would become engaged in a universal presentation of the gospel. Jesus established the boundaries for the work of the gospel. The local city of Jerusalem would be of primary interest, and imminent success is seen as thousands of citizens in Jerusalem came to know Christ as Savior. Judea was the local province in which the city was located. Out into the province they were to expand with the message of Christ. Samaria was a neighboring province, but it was populated by less desirable people who were not attractive to the Christian Jews. “Unto the uttermost part of the earth” was a most optimistic goal for the church. However, further studies in the book of Acts will reveal the success the missionaries

had in reaching other continents and other countries with the Word of God.

Conclusion

Churches founded upon Jesus Christ must not waste time and effort upon irrelevant matters. They are endued with the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to all the world. The model of the successes of the early churches in Acts can be copied by a New Testament church in this twenty-first century.