

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

Message #1

Various Texts

I love to read true stories. Awhile back I read a book that was a historical biography of the famous Miller 101 cattle ranch out West. It was absolutely fascinating. Some of the places that were named I've seen. Some of the people who worked on that ranch became famous - Buffalo Bill, Tom Mix the actor, a young man who could do rope tricks named Will Rogers, and Bill Pickett the famous black cowboy. Then there was a meeting with some from that ranch with the legendary lawman Wyatt Earp. It was a fun story to read. It was interesting and real. It was real life action.

But there is a far better story to read than this. It is a riveting story that is not only interesting, but it is inspired by God. God has a story He wants to tell us and that story features action. It is a unique story that features some very famous places and people. The story is found in a book we call Acts. Just as you would think, "Acts" is a book of "action." It presents truth about an active Church Age and an active and dynamic Church.

Acts is a New Testament book in the Bible that is totally unique. It is a book that requires careful, independent study; in fact, the very nature of the book requires that it be tackled independently because it is like no other. Jesus made a prediction when He was here on earth and His prediction was, "I will build My Church" (Matthew 16:18). The book of Acts tells us how He did it. Without this book we would have no clue as to how the Church began or developed. **Acts is the action story of God concerning the Church.**

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we get four very important accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. We learn about what Christ did and said **while He was here on earth. But in Acts** we get a record of what Christ did and said through His people by His Holy Spirit **when He was not here on earth.** It is the book of Acts that connects Jesus Christ's work to the rest of the New Testament; and as one writer said, Acts is "one of the most important and influential books of all time."

As is our custom, we begin with a series of eight introductory questions to help guide us as to what we are going to see and learn.

QUESTION #1 – Why study the book of Acts?

(Reason #1) - Because Acts is one of only 66 inspired books God put in writing in the Bible.

Acts is an inspired book of God with much evidence to support this fact. Early church leaders quoted from the book - Polycarp (A.D. 110-150), Hermas (A.D. 115-40), Justin Martyr (A.D. 150-55), Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-212), Tertullian (A.D. 150-220), Origen (A.D. 185-254). Several early church leaders said Acts was an authentic Biblical book - Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315-86), Eusebius (A.D. 325-340), Jerome (A.D. 340-420), Augustine (A.D. 400).

Plus the early major canon listings of books belonging in the Bible include Acts - Muratorian (A.D. 170), Apostolic (A.D. 300), Cheltenham (A.D. 340), Athanasius (A.D. 367). Furthermore all of the early church council meetings determined that Acts was an inspired book of God- Nicea (A.D. 32-40), Hippo (A.D. 393), Carthage (A.D. 397), Carthage (A.D. 419).

There is no question that Acts was widely circulated among the early churches, because many manuscripts have been found and preserved by God. We have two main Greek sources of manuscripts which have been preserved in history - the Alexandrian Greek text and the Western Greek text. **Many believe that the Alexandrian Greek text, which contains 18,401 words, is the one that actually came from Luke** and the Western Greek text, which contains 19,983 words, is a copy of the Alexandrian with a few revisions and elaborations. The Western Greek text adds some historical narration by early copyists. God has preserved several Greek manuscripts which have been copied from both the Alexandrian and Western texts, establishing that Acts is truly an inspired book from God which has great manuscript support.

In 1931, a collection of Biblical manuscripts deemed to be the oldest in existence were made public. The name of these manuscripts was "The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri." One of the manuscripts, which is dated in the first half of the third century, contains all four Gospels and the book of Acts (*Handbook To The History of Christianity*, pp. 89-95). The evidence is overwhelming. Acts is an inspired book of God.

(Reason #2) - Because Acts gives us a true Biblical picture of a true mission philosophy.

Acts shows us what real Biblical missions are and are supposed to be. Mission evangelism, missionary efforts, and the building of local churches all begin here. Acts shows how churches were planted and how they developed. It shows how the Gospel went from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and then to the uttermost parts of the earth. It shows how churches were given over to careful study of God's Word and God's doctrine and how they were blessed by God. H. A. Ironside said back in 1943 that the more we order things according to the book of Acts, the more blessings we will experience (*Acts*, p. 10). Although the process and dimensions of evangelism have changed dispensationally, God still desires to save people and get people in churches and uses us to do it.

(Reason #3) - Because Acts shows us how the Holy Spirit became so critical to the Church Age.

The book of Acts introduces us to the Age that features the Holy Spirit. We will see how He works in many ways. As one writer said, in seed form many Church Age doctrines are first revealed in Acts. You and I live in the dispensation that features the Holy Spirit; this book shows us how the Spirit came into this dispensation. As we track Him and His work through Acts, we get a sense of what God's Spirit really does and what He wants to truly do.

Acts shows us that we cannot do anything for God without the help and power of the Holy Spirit. In our own strength we will fall flat on our face; but in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can turn this world upside down as individuals and as a church.

(Reason #4) - Because Acts shows us the history of the Church in its first 30 years.

To try and figure out early Christianity without Acts is to proceed in a study of ignorance. There is a story of a Biblical scholar who was once asked by a student if he could recommend a good book on the "Life of Christ." Dr. James Denny replied - "Have you read the one written by Luke?" We might add to one who asks, do you know a good book on Church History? Yes, read the one written by Luke called Acts. Acts is the story of the early days of Christianity and many of the principles of those early days are needed today.

Recently someone asked me about the will of God for their life. I said you cannot look into the future and see what the will of God will be, but you can look to the past and see what the will of God has been. Acts does just that. It takes us back in time to when powerful things were happening in churches. This look back will challenge us to move forward.

(Reason #5) - Because Acts shows us how the gospel of God's grace spread all over the world and how important it is for us to evangelize the world with this Gospel.

The Gospel of God's grace did not spread by osmosis. God used ordinary people to communicate it. One of the most famous Gospel questions is asked in this book of Acts - "What must I do to be saved?" The answer is "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." This world needs to know this truth and it is our job to communicate it. There is no question that the pure grace message was stirring the pot in the religious world dedicated to works. But that is clearly the message that was being taught - faith in Jesus Christ plus nothing (Acts 13:38-39). One may be justified by faith in Jesus Christ apart from any works of the law. Acts forces you to face that reality.

(Reason #6) - Because Acts is a very misunderstood book.

There are many people who totally misunderstand Acts. The tendency is to pick a verse or two from the book and form some conclusion without careful study. For example, many cite their view of Biblical tongues from Acts 2 without even studying the entire chapter. David Thomas, a minister of the 1800s said - do not let a man preach in your pulpit who preaches insulated texts because no matter how powerful or eloquent or persuasive he may be, he will banish the taste for the truth of God's Word. Verses from the book of Acts have been used to butcher much of the true theology of the book. Therefore we need to study it and properly understand it.

QUESTION #2 – What is the title of the book?

The title "Acts" is not inspired by God. It is very probable that when Acts was first written, it did not contain a title; however, without exception, all the Greek manuscripts which copied the book added and have the title "Acts" (πραξιεις). The actual Greek word is one that refers to deeds or acts (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 376).

In the Greek manuscripts there are a variety of titles which all use the word "Acts." Some read simply "Acts." Others read "The Acts." Others read the "Acts of the Apostles." And still others read "Acts of the Holy Apostles." The Muratorian Canon uses "The Acts of all the Apostles."

The point of agreement is that the book may be legitimately designated “ Acts .”

There is no question that we will see that the book tracks the deeds and actions of the apostles and particularly two of the apostles. **Acts 1-12 tracks the acts of the Apostle Peter , whereas Acts 13-28 tracks the acts of the Apostle Paul .** This is a natural tracking because the Gospel is clearly moving from Jew to Gentile. In fact, Dr. Stanley Toussaint said it would be actually better to title the book “Certain Acts of Certain Apostles” (*Acts*, p. 349), and Ivor Powell said it would be better to title it “Some Acts of Some Apostles” (*The Amazing Acts*, p. 14).

However, we may carefully observe, that as we track both of these apostles, we discover that we are tracking the powerful acts of Jesus Christ, and particularly the powerful acts of the Holy Spirit , the third member of the Trinity, as He was forming the body of Jesus Christ, the Church. So perhaps a better title would be “Acts of the Holy Spirit Working Through the Apostles as They Reached Out to the Lost World and Began Establishing Churches.” **One thing is clear by the title “Acts.” It suggests that the Holy Spirit wants and produces action.** He leads God’s people to be alive, alert, and active.

QUESTION #3 – Who wrote the book of Acts?

The internal evidence is overwhelming. The first verse of the book, Acts 1:1, says that the book is compiled for a man named Theophilus. **The only man who went to this extreme for a man named Theophilus was Luke (Luke 1:3).** Furthermore, when one examines the contents of Acts, one discovers several “we” sections (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21; 27:1-28:16). Someone was traveling with Paul who was an eyewitness of the events and had a close relationship with Paul and Theophilus to whom the book is written. **The only person who fits this is Luke.** In fact, Homer Kent said that a scholar he knew tabulated all possibilities of traveling partners in the “we” sections and concluded all but two men can be eliminated - Titus and Luke. Then it is just a matter of determining which man had the connection with Paul and Theophilus. The answer is Luke. Luke had ample opportunity to travel with Paul and talk to eyewitnesses and track down historical data. Being led of the Holy Spirit, he penned the book of Acts. One other internal matter proves Luke wrote Acts. The Greek used in Acts is that of a very learned man such as a medical doctor. In fact, in Acts there are 413 Greek words not found in any other N.T. book. Luke had a tremendous grasp of language which his medical training would have given him.

The external evidence is also irrefutable as well on this point. The unanimous testimony from the early Church is that Acts was written by Luke , and never are there any other suggestions of another writing the book. For example, the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 160-200) says “Luke compiled” Acts. Irenaeus (A.D. 185) says Luke was the author. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-215) remarks “As Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates ...” Tertullian (A.D. 150-220) quotes from Acts and says it was written by Luke. Eusebius, who published his Church History in A.D. 324-325, says Luke wrote two N.T. books, Luke and Acts.

There is absolutely no question that Acts was written by Luke !

QUESTION #4 – What is Luke’s purpose in writing Acts?

Another way to think about this is - why did Luke select the specific materials he selected to form the book of Acts? Why does he focus on Peter and Paul and not John and James? What was Luke’s intention when he was moved by God to write the book of Acts? **Luke himself does not tell us what his purpose was.** There are no purpose statements that Luke gives such as he did in his Gospel (Luke 1:3-4). However, the mention again of Theophilus would seem to give us license to conclude that **he is writing to again give Theophilus exact data and truth concerning the work of God once Christ ascended into heaven.**

I am convinced that Luke’s purpose is to give an accurate beginning historical record of the development of the Grace Age which moves from Jews to Gentiles, law to grace, synagogues to churches, Judaism to Christianity. As Kenneth O Gangel said, Acts sets “Paul within the larger framework of ... first century Christianity” (*Acts*, p. 3). In fact, Homer Kent named his commentary on this book, “Jerusalem to Rome.” Acts is a book that will educate and edify, but it is a book that certainly evangelizes with a pure grace message.

There are several things to observe in looking through the book of Acts.

- 1) Luke defends and vindicates the apostleship of Paul in the book of Acts.
- 2) Luke traces the historical development of the Church in the book of Acts.
In many ways we get a church guide as to how to handle things until Christ returns.
Every page in Acts “abounds with sharp, precise details.” Historians love this book.
I doubt there has ever been a 30 year historical journal that is as precise as Acts.
- 3) Luke tracks historical movement of believers from the time Christ ascends into heaven.
- 4) Luke reveals the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the world.
- 5) Luke records opposition to the Gospel that could not silence nor stop the spread of the Gospel. Christianity and the grace message triumphs no matter how bitter or fierce the opposition.
- 6) Luke does not tell us how the Gospel first got to several places - Galilee, Damascus, Egypt, Rome. It is clear that people were moving to these areas and witnessing.
- 7) Luke does not give us much information about other apostles other than Peter and Paul.
The pendulum will swing from Peter to Paul, from Jew to Gentile, from law to grace.
These two great apostles show how it all happened. Peter will be freed from his Jewish scruples and Paul will take him and the rest of the world deep into grace.

QUESTION #5 – When did Luke write Acts?

From the book itself, we may observe five important time points:

- 1) Luke wrote Acts after he wrote Luke because he refers to his “first account” (Acts 1:1).
Most believe for various reasons that Luke wrote Luke in A.D. 58-60 so it was after this.
- 2) Luke wrote Acts or was writing Acts when Paul was in prison in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30).
Hiebert says a strong case may be built that Paul got out of prison in A.D. 63, which would mean Acts was written before Paul was released.
- 3) Luke wrote Acts before Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 because there is no mention of it.

- 4) Luke wrote Acts before Paul is executed in A.D. 68 because when Acts ends Paul is alive. Hiebert says Acts was written before Paul was executed, for certainly Luke would have mentioned this and mentioned his dungeon imprisonment had it already happened.
- 5) Luke wrote Acts before Nero burned Rome in A.D. 64 because there is no mention of that, nor of his intense persecution of Christians which began at that time.

Based on this data, there is a window of time between A.D. 60-63 which is very right as a time when Luke could have written Acts. **Most scholars believe Acts was written in A.D. 60-61. So the book of Acts covers a story of about 30 years – A.D. 30-60.**

Think about the fact that everything in this book took place within a 30 year span. All of the evangelism, salvations, churches, missionary trips found in this book took place in 30 years. If we can tap into the truth of this book, we can see some powerful things happen in this church in the next 20-30 years if the Lord tarries.

QUESTION #6 – Where was Luke when he wrote Acts?

More than likely the majority of it was written while Luke was with Paul in Rome. It is clear from Acts 28:30 that there was a two year gap of time in which Luke could have been working on compiling Acts.

QUESTION #7 – Who was Luke?

There are three facts we may learn about Luke:

Fact #1 - Luke was a Gentile believer. Colossians 4:11-14

According to Eusebius, Luke was originally from Antioch. This means that Luke is the only writer of a book in the Bible who is non-Jewish.

Fact #2 - Luke was a medical doctor. Colossians 4:14

This is a great story for Luke proves one may have a brilliant systematic mind like a doctor and be a highly dedicated Christian who loves serious study from God's Word. On the other hand, one may be unlearned and uneducated and have the same passion (Acts 4:13).

By profession, Luke was a medical doctor (Colossians 4:14). There were four major medical institutions when Luke lived - one in Rome, one in Tarsus, one in Athens, and one in Alexandria. Luke obviously went to one of these schools. Since he is called the "beloved physician" seems to indicate that he had the respect and love of many people, including Paul.

As we will see, Luke pays special attention to carefully describe medical cases and situations (Acts 3:1-8; 9:33; 14:8; 28:8-9). Being a medical doctor puts him in a great position to be able to testify of real healing miracles. He would be very competent, as Hackett said, "to judge the reality of such miracles" (*Commentary on Acts*, p. 15). By virtue of the fact that he was a doctor, he could have made a "considerable fortune," but he literally walked away from a lucrative medical career to follow Jesus Christ, particularly His work through Paul. Luke not only could heal bodies, but he learned the doctrine that could heal souls.

Fact #3 - Luke was a loyal friend. Acts 1:1/Luke 1:3; II Timothy 4:11

When we combine Luke and Acts, we have about 30 percent of the N.T.; and both of these massive documents were written because he cared for one man named Theophilus. Rarely will you find a person willing to tackle a major written treatise for a friend. It reminds me of John Calvin who literally wrote commentaries so friends he knew could understand the Word of God. He was a lot like Luke.

Furthermore, Luke was a loyal and faithful friend to Paul. In fact, Eusebius says he was often associated with the other apostles as well. When the whole world abandoned Paul near the end of his life, the Apostle said, "Only Luke is with me" (II Timothy 4:11). It was Luke who stayed by Paul's side until the day he died.

Luke was a true, loyal friend. He was not the kind of man who would let you down in a difficult and tough moment. Sometimes in Christianity we forget that we need good, loyal friends, and we need to be a good loyal friend. No matter how strong we may appear to be, we all need a Luke in our lives.

QUESTION #8 – What are some unique features from Acts?

There are four very unique features from Acts:

(Unique Feature #1) - Acts is a transitional book that takes us into a new dispensation. It takes us from the Law Age to the Grace Age, from the nation Israel to the individual Jew and Gentile.

Whenever God begins a new dispensation He does so in dramatic fashion. There are some things that happen in Acts that will not happen in today's local church. For example, if you lie to a local church and don't give what you should, you will probably not drop dead. You'll end up losing rewards but you won't drop dead. If you are put in jail, no angel will come and get you out. If you are bitten by a deadly snake, you will need to get to a doctor and not just shake it off and go about your business. If someone falls out of a multi-story building and dies, you will not bring them back to life. These things all happened in Acts as God began a new Grace Age.

(Unique Feature #2) - Acts focuses on two main apostles: **Acts 1-11** = Peter ;
Acts 12-28 = Paul .

These two apostles are critical because they are key to the Gospel moving from Jew to Gentile. The Apostle Peter came to recognize the importance of the Apostle Paul and all of his writings about God's grace (II Peter 3:15-16). In Acts we will come to understand the same truth.

(Unique Feature #3) - Acts features its own historical outline - Acts 1:8
A. Acts 1-7 = Jerusalem - Gospel outreach to the city - to the Jews
B. Acts 8-12 = Judea and Samaria - Gospel outreach to the states - Jews/Gentiles
C. Acts 13-28 = Uttermost part of the world - Gospel outreach to the world - Gentiles

There is much historical action in Acts. In fact, as Dr. Swindoll said, "Acts is the action book of the New Testament." By God's grace, in the next weeks its actions will change our lives.

(Unique Feature #4) - Acts begins in a very logical way but it ends in a very unusual way.

When you examine the book of Acts, there seems to be something very unsatisfying about the way the book ends. It is almost as if the story ends unfinished. Paul is in prison and when the book ends, we don't know what happened to him. There is a specific reason for this because the point is that **the Church is an unfinished story**. The story continues. God's work continues to go on in the Church Age and we are part of it. Think of this - our church is connected to Acts. We are part of the continuing story that will not end until the Rapture of the Church.

The churches in the book of Acts didn't have much money, didn't have big numbers, didn't have technological tools, didn't have big bands, overhead screens, or gimmicks; **but it had one thing most churches today do not have, the dynamic power of God**. This book will inspire us to go after that power as individuals and as a church. It will light a true flame of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our church.

Get ready for an exciting, challenging, and action-packed journey as we are going through Acts.

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