

Sept 14, 2020 Evening

## Introduction to Acts

The book of Acts could have many titles: Second Luke, Acts of the Apostles, Acts of the Holy Spirit, Early Church History. All these would be accurate. Luke, a Greek doctor (Colossians 4:14) and traveling companion of Paul (2 Timothy 4:11) wrote the Gospel of Luke and this book to Theophilus. Much of the book is personal experience. The remainder was carefully investigated to be accurate.

Acts tells the story of the early church from the ascension of Christ to the fulfillment of the great commission as given in Acts 1:8. The book begins with 120 Jews in the upper room and concludes with the gospel message being shared worldwide.

Acts shows that persecution is common in Christianity. Acts shows the church is multi-ethnic. Acts destroys the belief that Jesus is "the white man's God". Acts shows the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit. Acts shows how the church addressed challenges through flexible and wise solutions. Acts shows how God is working out his plan of salvation for lost humanity. He works through Spirit-filled believers who spread the gospel through natural interactions as well as deliberate evangelistic outreach. The gospel spread to the elites and indigent of society, businesspeople, men and woman, people from all over the known world. It utilized methods such as personal witnessing, preaching in the synagogues and marketplaces, lecturing to professionals, and taking advantage of ordinary opportunities. It continued despite threats, violence, and natural disasters.

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## ACTS 1

Acts 1:1-11 contain the last words of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will come (4). Fulfill the great commission (8). Jesus is coming back (11). The followers of Christ were at a loss. They were faced with a situation they had never been in before. The same applies today for the post-COVID church. The 120 met together (14). Are you meeting together with other believers? Today that may mean via social media or in person. It is imperative that you somehow meet together with other believers. The 120 were constantly united in prayer. We are at a turning point in the American church and maybe even throughout the world. We need to be constantly united in prayer. Are you praying privately? Corporately? The message proclaimed followed the Scripture (16). The Scriptures had to be fulfilled concerning the betrayal of Judas. Is your message based on Scripture? So much of what we hear is political but not Scriptural, opinion but not Scriptural. Scripture must be the foundation. But Peter went one step further. Scripture also says, "Let someone else take his position" (20). We need to follow all the Scripture, not just what we can rest on. We need to follow that which we act on. They moved forward and elected Matthias. In today's COVID world let us follow the example of Acts 1 by heeding the last words of Jesus in fulfilling the great commission through the power of the Holy Spirit. In today's COVID world let us follow the example of the 120 by meeting together, constantly united in prayer, resting on and acting on Scripture.

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## Acts 2

Have you first-hand seen the effects of wind? You cannot see it but almost everyone has seen the impact of wind. In Acts 2 we see the impact of the Holy Spirit that came with a sound like the roaring of a mighty windstorm. The Holy Spirit did not come secretly but openly, and with visible and audible signs to accompany His coming. The Holy Spirit gives life and power. The absence of the Holy Spirit in one's life means the absence of true life and power. Just as the Holy spirit filled these early believers and they were made bold to share the gospel message, we must be similarly empowered by the Holy Spirit daily if we are to live holy lives and be an effective witnesses of Jesus Christ.

Important ideas are better said and heard in one's heart language. When Peter preached, they all heard in their own language. When the Holy Spirit came, those that were filled were given the ability to speak other languages (2:4-8) The listeners heard in their own native languages (2:9-10). Tongues as found throughout the Bible are known languages. It is a tool used for evangelism. Many years ago, many African people were fighting colonial masters who were predominantly white and could not speak the native language. In a remote African village, the war boys came to kill a white missionary lady. When they surrounded her house and were about to torch it, she came out and addressed them in their native language. The war boys were confused. "Her skin is different, but she speaks our heart" they said. She was spared. When the gospel is presented to people in their mother tongue, it makes an impact. It does not matter how loudly you preach or teach. Your message will not have the

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same impact if it does not connect with the heart language of the people. As much as we can, we need to reach out to people in the language that they can understand best.

I was invited to preach at a church. I arrived in my suit, white shirt, tie carrying my King James Bible. The pastor gets up and introduces me as Dr. Phillip Huggins, etc., etc... When I was about to preach it was obvious the church felt that I was too high and mighty for them so they would endure it and then go home. First thing I did was lose the coat and tie. Then I interacted with them, just talked to them, learned about them. Now that they realized that we both spoke the same heart language they would listen. Hudson Taylor was not a success in China until he grew a ponytail and wore Chinese clothes. Previously he was an Englishman trying to convert Chinese to be English. Afterwards he was a Christian sharing Christ. What is there about you that tells the lost world you are speaking their heart language? Do you even know the heart language of the community around you? For people to "know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36) and for our words to pierce hearts and ask "What shall we do to be saved" (2:37) we must speak their heart language.

Peter stated God has a plan. It was part of God's plan to send the Holy Spirit. That was revealed back in Joel 2:28-32. It was part of God's prearranged plan for Jesus to be crucified (Acts 2:23). Part of that plan is the resurrection as revealed by David in Psalm 16:8-11 and 110:1. The purpose of this plan is "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God and be immersed" (Acts 2:38).

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## Acts 3

Take advantage of every opportunity. Peter and John were interrupted on their way to worship by a lame beggar. They stopped and acted with compassion. They were ready to use any opportunity to show the love of Jesus. Are you in such a hurry with life that you miss Holy Spirit-guided action in your path? Because Peter and John stopped to talk to a beggar, the worship service they were going to attend became an evangelistic service they were leading.

In Acts 3:14-15 Peter confronted the Jewish religious establishment with the truth. They had killed the Messiah and asked for a murderer to be released. But God raised Jesus from the dead, confirming his innocence and showing his power over death. This is the central message the apostles taught. It should be our message today.

The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus not only for his message but because he was a threat to their power. Politicians today, like those in Acts, will crucify anyone who is a threat to their power. Considering the upcoming election, when we see clearly a true and just leader, we must forget our personal agenda and stand up to advocate for that person. Only then will our communities and nation prosper.

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## Acts 4

"Thy Word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee" Psalm 119:11. Many have memorized this verse. Another verse that it would be good to memorize is Acts 4:12 "There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." America is religious. Ask most people on the street and they will say they are a Christian and even share what denomination they belong to and the church where they are a member or last attended. Few are true Christians, who are recipients of salvation through Christ. Salvation is found in Jesus alone. No other person, name or religion can restore our relationship with God. Jesus declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). We must get it right. We can access God only through Jesus Christ. He is the only one who came from the Father, was crucified for our sins, and rose to glory. He is the only one who has the credentials to offer us salvation. Any other offer of salvation is false.

Persecution, though difficult to endure, has the potential to transform a diverse group of believers into an unbreakable unit. The church withstands persecution because believers stick together like a rock. The glue that keeps us strongly united is the Holy Spirit. Wherever believers come together, there is strength through unity. Throughout history tyrants have tried to destroy Christianity. They have all failed because God's truth can never be eliminated. When we stand together, we can face the fiercest of persecution. When our faith is tried, we can rely on the power of our brothers and sisters. The believers love for one another comes from a genuine transformation of the heart. Our unity is only possible through the love of Christ. This

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first century church was one in heart and mind. Even in severe persecution, the church grew rapidly because outsiders saw how they loved and cared for one another in community. A community of believers genuinely transformed by the saving work of Christ will share their possessions with the needy in the church. If Christians neglect the poor and needy in their own community of believers their message of love is seen as hypocritical to those outside the church.

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## Acts 5

Every action has consequences. Motives are important. We join churches for many reasons. Sometimes the reasons we profess are not genuine. The members of the early church cared for one another out of genuine love (Acts 4:32-37). Members voluntarily sold their properties and brought the money for use by the church to care for others. But other people did not have genuine motives. Ananias and Sapphira sold some land and donated to the church. They lied, saying they gave the full amount when they had only given a portion of it. Perhaps they joined the church to enjoy its benefits and attain social standing. Whatever their reasons, they lied to the Holy Spirit. Consequently, they were both struck dead. It is a lie to exaggerate and boast about our tithe or other contributions we make to the Lord. We lie when we make a promise to give when we have no intention of giving. Every act of dishonesty brings punishment. We may not experience a sudden death, but consequences will come. We must be completely honest and not twist facts or embellish for our own benefit. Remember that the Bible says judgement must begin with God's household (1 Peter 4:17).

Acts 5:3-4 is a classic text proving the deity of the Holy Spirit. In verse three they lie to the Holy Spirit and in verse 4 they lie to God. Thus, the Holy Spirit is God.

God's successful work (12-16) will be opposed by the religious elite and the world (17-28). This was true in Acts 5 and is true today. The response is also the same. Keep on preaching and teaching as "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (29).

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## Acts 6

It would behoove every church to change the name for the office of deacon to the office of servant. That is the definition of deacon. I wonder how many would still desire the office. I wonder how many power struggles would be nonexistent. The seven men were chosen to serve (Acts 6:1-7). It is interesting that the first church fight (New Living Translation reads "rumblings of discontent") was over ethnic prejudice and social ministry. The Greeks felt their widows were not being taken care of. Two Thousand years later the church is still struggling over ethnic prejudice and social ministry. There are still many churches full of rumblings of discontent.

Spiritual leadership should spend time in teaching the word of God not running a food program (6:2). How many pastors today do not spend time in the word and prayer because they are too busy with church administration and the work of the ministry because the deacons will not serve or because the pastor will not let them serve.

Another point to consider is that the apostles made the decision, solved the problem, delegated the responsibility. The church selected the deacons. There are significant lessons on church administration regarding the role of the pastor and the deacon and the church body in these seven verses. When the church functions as it should God's message will continue to spread, the number of believers will greatly increase, and people will be converted (6:7).

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## Acts 7

When we looked at Acts 5 it was observed that God's successful work will be opposed by the religious elite and the world. Deacon Stephen was performing amazing miracles and signs among the people (6:8). They could not stand against him, so they lied about Stephen (6:10-11,13). With the deck stacked against him, "everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's (6:15). Rather than defend himself and his character Stephen began a history lesson of the rejection of God by the nation of Israel that culminated with the rejection of Christ. Following his conclusion that they were no different than ancient Israel in rejecting the prophets the Jewish leaders were infuriated and in rage. "But Stephen, full of the Holy spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand...As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' He fell to his knees, shouting, 'Lord, don't charge them with this sin!' And with that, he died." (55, 59,60). From Stephen we learn to be more concerned about the message than about defending the messenger.

Great preachers use the power of story to make a powerful point. Before the Jews stoned Stephen, they listened. This kind of impact takes a great knowledge of Scripture like Stephen had. Finally, Stephen made a radical proclamation of truth that challenged religious assumptions and powerful leaders. Our pastors should arm themselves with deep knowledge of the Bible and then be unafraid to proclaim hard truths that need to be heard, even when it will result in criticism or character assassination. As church members let us not be like the Jewish leaders when the pastor preaches Biblical truth that applies.

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## Acts 8

If Christians will not obey willingly there is a plan B. Jonah could have gone to Nineveh the easy way. Instead he chose "the belly of a large fish cruise line". The church was evangelizing and making disciples well in Jerusalem, but Acts 1:8 mentions Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth. So, the persecution of Saul helped fulfill the great commission by scattering believers through the regions of Judea and Samaria. As my mom would say, "It is easier to obey right away."

The believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went (7:4). Philip preached the Good News about Jesus in Samaria, to the Ethiopian Eunuch, in Azotus, and in every town along the way until he came to Caesarea (40). Let us follow the example of wherever we go and to whoever we meet, preach the Good News about Jesus. This chapter is an example of Luke's theme throughout Acts: Spirit-led, cross-cultural evangelism. This is also a good church evangelism strategy.

Philip had a good work going in Samaria and then Peter and John come and take it over. He had a great convert in the Ethiopian Eunuch and then the Holy Spirit takes him away to a small town. He just kept on preaching Jesus. The ministry is not about the preacher, it is about Christ being proclaimed.

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## Acts 9

Working against God leads to failure. God always has the upper hand. Christ appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus. In Damascus, Saul was baptized and began preaching about Jesus. During this time Saul traveled to Arabia and back (Galatians 1:17). After three years in Damascus, he escaped a plot against his life and went to Jerusalem, where he finally met with the apostles. There, too, he faced death threats, so after a visit of about two weeks he was taken to Caesarea and sailed to Tarsus, his hometown, where he stayed for approximately ten years (AD 37-47; Acts 11:25-26).

It took just a single moment for God to have his way with Paul. The transformation was permanent. The former persecutor became a firm believer in Jesus Christ and a fearless advocate of the gospel message. He began preaching immediately after his conversion. All who heard him were amazed at his transformation. Paul's life shows us that there is no life that Christ cannot change. Although not everyone will have a dramatic conversion experience like Paul, anyone who encounters Christ will be truly transformed.

After Paul was converted, the church had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. The church became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. This is good counsel for a strong church today. Church growth needs to be by the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. The strength of a church is not in numbers. It is in the degree to which the members honor and serve God. The task of growing the church is not accomplished by the number of people doing it but by their dedication. Dedication and commitment by a few is more powerful than the lip service of many.

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Give thanks to God today for the specific ways in which Jesus has changed your life. Be faithful in your witness to others. Even after many rejections, it only takes one success to change someone's life forever.

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## Acts 10

Do you need a God push? We struggle to understand what it was like to be a devout Jew at the time of Acts. The ceremonial laws, food laws and regulations about almost every area of life set them apart from other peoples in an overly dramatic way. It was hard for early Jewish church to understand God's plan for redeeming Gentiles in this context. God had to drastically intervene to bring the church to the realization that he wanted to redeem Gentiles and offer them salvation. He chose Peter, the great pillar of the church. Imagine the humility of Peter to go against all his upbringing to enter the house of a Gentile. But to go to the house willingly in the first place required Peter seeing a dramatic vision from God. When Cornelius believed, he and his household received the Holy Spirit as a sign to the whole church of Gods acceptance of Gentile believers (Acts 11:15-18).

Like Peter, we may need God's specific push to do something new that goes against what we would naturally do or what our culture thinks we should do. Peter had spent three years with Jesus, and he was a man who knew God's great power and provision. Yet, he still did not understand all God's amazing plans. Let us be humble and when God gives us a push to do something new and radical to build his Kingdom, we will listen and obey. God will do amazing things with this faith.