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I. Introduction to Part One of the Book of Acts

Thus far in our survey of the New Testament we have focused exclusively on the four gospels. With this lesson we are ready to proceed to the fifth book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles.

A. Authorship, Date, and Audience

We have already mentioned in previous lessons that tradition ascribes the authorship of this book to Luke, Paul's beloved physician, who also authored the first volume of this two-volume sequence—namely, the gospel of Luke. We refer our listeners and viewers to our introductory comments surrounding the gospel of Luke for a review of the details of that background. To summarize briefly, Luke is probably both the author of the gospel attributed to him and the Acts of the Apostles in approximately the year 62 A.D., right after the events with which the Acts of the Apostles ends.

He is writing as a Greek, the only non-Jewish writer of any book of the New Testament, to a primarily Greek Christian audience, with the concerns that emerged as Christianity had grown, become somewhat more urbanized, perhaps somewhat more well-to-do, and spread throughout a wide variety of places in the Roman Empire.

B. Purposes of Luke's Second Volume

The purposes of Luke's second volume, more specifically, may be summarized under three headings. Here Luke charts the progress of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, or another way of saying that is the unfolding of Christianity from what initially was an exclusively Jewish sect to that which within approximately thirty years became a major empire-

Purposes of Luke's Second Volume

1. Charting the progress of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome

Purposes of Luke's Second Volume

2. Highlighting the ministries of key figures in the early church

Purposes of Luke's Second Volume

3. Defending Christians against charges of Jewish and Roman law breaking

Two Main Sections of the Book of Acts:

Chapters 1-12	Chapters 13-28
Jewish Christian Phase	Gentile Christian Expansion

1. Witnesses in Jerusalem (1:1-8:4)
2. Witnesses in Judea and Samaria (8:5-12:25)
3. Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth (13:1-28:31)

wide religion—predominantly, within that generation more Gentile than Jewish.

Secondly, Luke highlights the ministry of key figures in the early church. Although the church came to entitle the book the Acts of the Apostles, it might better have been called the “Acts of Peter and Paul,” for these are the two central characters of the two main halves of Luke’s Acts respectively. Others have said that because Luke’s concern to show God’s sovereign guidance through the Holy Spirit of all of these initial events that an even better title still might have been the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

Thirdly, Luke consistently defends Christians against charges of lawbreaking, both the Jewish and the Roman law. He is putting forward an apologetic for legitimacy and the harmlessness of Christianity, even while it is clear that those who become Christians will have their lives radically transformed. As we mentioned, the book of Acts falls neatly into two main sections: the first twelve chapters predominantly focusing on the Jewish Christian phase of the earliest two decades of Christian existence, and from chapters 13-28, the second half focusing predominantly on the expansion of Gentile Christianity. And again the two main characters, the two most prominent Christian preachers and witnesses in these two halves or segments of the expansion of Christianity in the book of Acts, are Peter and Paul respectively.

C. Outline of Acts

Acts 1:8 has often been seen as a thumbnail outline of Luke’s understanding of his second volume, as Jesus promises and commands His followers that they shall be His witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and eventually to the outermost parts of the earth. We may make that outline perhaps a bit more precise by noticing the six times when Luke brings a section of his Acts to a close, to a temporary pause, with a summary statement—something along the lines of “the Word of God grew and spread” or “many people were added to the faith.” These summary sentences appear in 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:31. These summary statements seem to divide the book of Acts into segments of the expansion of the first Christian movement, primarily



Acts 1:11

“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.”

After the Ascension

- Wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit
- Choose a new disciple

geographically.

II. Church in Jerusalem (Ac 1:1-6:7)

We may begin, then, in our survey of the contents of the book of Acts by focusing on the first half, which will occupy the rest of this lesson. The first third of this first half, the first subsection of the section dealing with Jewish Christianity, focuses on the church as it began exclusively as an entity within the wholly Jewish city of Jerusalem.

A. Resurrection Appearances and Ascension of Jesus

The first events that are narrated recapitulate Jesus’ resurrection appearances in and around Jerusalem and then narrate Jesus’ ascension; here Jesus is returning forty days after His resurrection to His heavenly Father. The significance of the ascension is on the one hand to indicate to the disciples that the resurrection appearances in which Jesus has come and gone at will, vanishing and appearing in their midst, have ended, but more theologically to point out that Jesus is now exalted, returning to that heavenly position that had occupied his role in eternity past. As the angelic witnesses testify to the disciples in the opening verses of Acts 1, particularly verses 9-11, He will return in the same fashion as He has vanished or disappeared: coming from heaven—what Christians have subsequently believed will be a visible public, even worldwide, return of Christ at the end of the age.

B. Judas’ Successor

Following Christ’s ascension, the disciples return to Jerusalem and fulfilling Jesus’ command wait for the promise of the coming of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In that period which is described in the remaining verses of Acts 1, the major event or business item on their agenda, as it were, is to pray for and eventually cast lots to determine who will be Judas’ successor—Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus and then subsequently hanged himself. It is interesting that they feel the necessity to complete the number twelve, indicating, as we saw during the life of Christ, that it is important to symbolize the church as the new Israel, the fulfillment of the twelve tribes of Israel. It is also interesting

**Twelve apostles
symbolize twelve
tribes of Israel.**

Acts 2:2,4

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

**These tongues acted
as a confirmation of
their divine nature.**

to see how later in the book of Acts, however, when James the apostle is martyred he is not replaced, so that there does not seem to be grounds here for any doctrine of apostolic succession or for an eternal mandate to keep the number of church leaders at twelve.

C. Pentecost and the First Christian Sermon

With chapter 2 of the book of Acts comes the famous and lengthy story of Pentecost—the Jewish harvest festival which tradition said was the time of the giving of the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai. It is appropriate, then, the Holy Spirit should descend at this point and empower and fill the fledgling church and its leadership to inaugurate the new covenant just at the very time when the Jews were celebrating the inauguration of what would soon be called in Christian circles the “old covenant” or the “first testament” between God and His people. At this point the believers are filled with the Spirit and speak in tongues, the first of three such references to speaking in tongues in the book of Acts.

Although it is more debated what went on in the later occurrences of tongues, here Luke makes it clear that these were known foreign languages enabling the Jewish disciples to communicate in their native tongues with Jewish pilgrims to Pentecost, to Jerusalem, from all over the empire. It is also important to remember that all of the Jews in the first century spoke some level of Hebrew or Aramaic and probably were even more fluent in Greek, so that this was not a necessary means to communicate the Gospel. Rather it seems more that the signs acted as a confirmation of the divinely ordained nature of the events and the testimony on this occasion.

Peter uses, therefore, this miraculous sign as an opportunity to preach the first Christian sermon, in which he very clearly lays out the events that Jerusalem has recently experienced with the ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, culminating in the statement that the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus proves that God has made Him both Lord and Christ. The bystanders are cut to the quick and ask, “What shall we do?” And Peter’s climactic word in this first Christian sermon then comes in Acts 2:38, in which he itemizes four elements that with only a handful of exceptions

Acts 2:38

... Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation Package

1. Repentance
2. Baptism by water
3. Receiving forgiveness
4. Baptism of the Holy Spirit



Acts 3:19

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord . . .

remain held together throughout Acts and throughout the rest of New Testament teaching, as what we might call a “salvation package”—those events that happen more or less simultaneously, at least under ordinary circumstances, when a person comes to Christ.

These four elements are (1) repentance, a turning from sin and a turning to God in Jesus; (2) baptism by water (in this context in the name of Jesus, but in other contexts in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—showing us that this is no mechanical ritual or formula); (3) thirdly, as a result of these actions, receiving forgiveness of sins; and (4) fourthly, the empowerment, the filling, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. There are those who have tried to separate “baptism” and “filling” of the Spirit; indeed, Luke does seem to use filling repeatedly as experiences that believers can have more than once when they are empowered for bold testimony or witness in one fashion or another. The term “baptism of the Spirit” throughout the New Testament seems to be reserved, however, for the initiation experience that people have—their first experience with the Spirit at the coming of Christ. It is also interesting that the book of Acts seems, with a few possible exceptions, consistently to place baptism in water as the event which closely follows the coming to faith, the profession of faith, by someone old enough and mature enough to make that decision.

D. First Christian Healing and Second Sermon

After this first Christian sermon, Acts 3 describes another miracle, this time a healing miracle in which Peter is enabled by God to have the same power to heal a lame man as Jesus did more than once in His ministry. And again the sign in the temple precincts, visible to a large crowd, becomes the occasion that enables Peter to preach another sermon, the second existing Christian sermon. The main point of this sermon is to stress again the repentance that must follow, but the sequel shows how early Christianity is brought into conflict with the Jewish authorities, not surprisingly since many who undoubtedly heard Peter on these original occasions were among the same who had only a few weeks or months earlier called for and perhaps even been instrumental in instigating the crucifixion of Jesus.

Sequence of Events in Acts 4 and 5

1. Preaching
2. Arrest
3. Threats by Jewish authorities
4. Claim to obedience to God
5. Release

The Holy Spirit empowers and emboldens the disciples.

Christian community in Jerusalem meets needs as they arise.

Acts 2:44-45

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

The ringleaders of this Nazarene sect are arrested and are commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus. Acts 4:19-20 is an important testimony, however, to the early Christian conviction that when God's will contravenes human will, or vice versa, people must obey God rather than human leaders. Interestingly, this same sequence of events (1) preaching, (2) arrest, (3) threats on the part of the Jewish leadership, (4) a claim that we must obey God rather than humans, (5) and subsequent release—repeats itself throughout chapters 4 and 5, thus showing on the one hand both the hostility (a fulfillment of the predictions of Jesus that His disciples would be dragged before leaders and forced to testify before them) but also the empowerment of the Spirit and God's sovereignty that allows the disciples to continue to speak boldly despite this hostility. What a striking contrast from their cowardice prior to Jesus' death, and another key pointer to the reality of the supernatural resurrection of Jesus and the empowerment of the Spirit at Pentecost. It seems little else, perhaps nothing else, could have accounted for such a direct and striking about-face on the part of Jesus' followers.

E. Early Church Structure

There are two little bits that we have intentionally skipped over to deal with together at this point. The closing verses of chapter 2:42-47 and the closing verses of chapter 4, moving into chapter 5, deal with the initial organization of the fledgling Christian community in Jerusalem. Here we are introduced to a model of communal sharing of possessions. A close reading of the text allows us to avoid some misconceptions that might appear superficially. It does not say that all the believers sold everything all at once and formed what today might be called pure communism. No, while different ones gave up varying amounts of their income, sold various portions of their material possessions to meet those needs as they arose.

Some of these would have been very ad hoc needs, not least the need for some of the Jewish pilgrims who became Christians after that first Pentecost and perhaps wanted to stay in Jerusalem rather than to return home needing to have some form of livelihood and some way of being taken care of. Those who are already dependent on the various systems of Jewish welfare and caring for the poor may well have been cut off from those systems if they became Christians, and

Concern for the Poor

Generosity

Sacrificial Giving

Cultural Divisions

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Neglect of Hellenistic
Christian Widows



they too would have needed caring for. But even though the model is not replicated throughout the book of Acts or early Christianity, and therefore does not seem to be mandatory in all of its details, there is an exemplary concern for the poor and a generosity and sacrificial giving on the part of those Christians of some means which remains consistent throughout all Scripture and clearly is mandatory for Christians of all times and all places.

By the time we reach Acts 6 we see that theme of concern for the poor already beginning to take shape in a slightly different form. As this multicultural community of first Christians, albeit all Jewish, begins to grow, it is understandable that a rift took place between what Luke describes as the Hebraic Jewish Christians and the Hellenistic Jewish Christians, that is, those whose native tongue was Hebrew or Aramaic (probably predominantly those Christians from Jerusalem and its immediate environs) and those who came from the Diaspora, from other parts of the Greco-Roman Empire. Jews though they were, Greek would have been their first language, and even in their cultural practices at times there would have been differences from the local native Israelites. It is understandable when there are ethnic and cultural divisions that often tensions emerge, and in this case what we might call the first Christian conflict emerges over the neglect of the Hellenistic Christian widows.

All of the first apostles were Hebraic, and therefore it would have been easy for the Hellenistic widows to be overlooked. The apostles demonstrate great wisdom in delegating this responsibility so as not to spread themselves too thin, but also to call upon the Hellenistic Christian community to select leaders from its own midst—leaders who are called “those who serve.” The Greek word is the root (*dekoneo*) from which we get the noun “deacon” and it is this passage which perhaps inspired the later, more formal Christian office of a deacon—one who serves to meet the very practical, even material, needs of the Christian community. With Acts 6:7 we reach the first summary statement, and the first major phase of the church in Jerusalem comes to an end.

III. Church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria (Ac 6:8-9:31)

Acts 6:8-9:31 proceeds to the next subsection of this first half of

Acts 6:3-4

Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

the book of Acts, which we may label the church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Here we are introduced to three main characters about whom we are given vignettes of their ministry: Stephen and Philip, two of those initial “deacons” that the Hellenistic Jewish Christian community had just chosen, and Saul, a very zealous Jew from Tarsus, student of the rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem, who will eventually become the most famous early Christian missionary.

A. Ministry of Stephen

Acts 7, framed by the closing verses of chapter 6 and the opening verses of chapter 8, describes the ministry of Stephen, who apparently comes to an understanding of how Christianity will be freed from its attachments to the Jewish institutions of temple law and land more clearly than any Christian thus far. Therefore, in his preaching, he becomes the first Christian to be arrested, not released, but martyred. Stephen gives a long speech in his defense that occupies the majority of chapter 7, which reads like a survey of Old Testament history. But its primary purpose seems to be to point out that Christianity need not be tied to land, law, or temple, precisely because God’s people at times throughout its history, already under the old dispensation, were not tied to these institutions.

The patriarchs sojourned regularly, being forced to flee—eventually into slavery into Egypt without inheriting the promise of the land. The law given to Moses itself points ahead to another prophet who will come, greater than Moses, who will change the order and the way in which the law is applied and fulfilled. And the temple is not even God’s perfect ideal initially, but a kind of compromise to the wishes of the Israelites. This is all radical enough to get Stephen stoned to death—the first Christian martyr—and for a persecution to spread, presumably among these more Hellenistic and radical first Jewish Christians, leaving only the more Hebraic and presumably more conservative Jewish Christians, perhaps even only their leaders, the twelve apostles, in Jerusalem.

B. Ministry of Philip the Evangelist

As part of the persecution and the flight of the Hellenistic

STEPHEN’S BREAKTHROUGH
(Acts 6-7)

CHANGES rejecting God’s teaching on:	LAND	LAW	TEMPLE
DEFENSE none remains without change	Not needed by patriarchs	Points to Christ	Not even God’s ideal
IMPLICATIONS are all fulfilled in Christ	Christians inherit the earth	Ethics based on N.T.	Worship in spirit and truth

THE “DELAYED” ARRIVAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS 8

(Option 1)



THE “DELAYED” ARRIVAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS 8

(Option 4)



Philip leads the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ

leaders, nevertheless the Gospel spreads. Philip finds himself in Samaria, preaching to Samaritans there, and finds a welcome response, so striking that Peter and John are summoned from Jerusalem to confirm that the Samaritans have in fact received the Gospel. There are many theological controversies that have split the church at this point. How do you account for the apparent delay in the arrival of the Holy Spirit?

Some would see this as a precedent for confirmation separated from the Christian practice of baptism. Others have seen this as justification for a baptism of the Spirit subsequent to initial salvation. Perhaps the most common Protestant understanding of this text has been that an exceptional situation took place under exceptional conditions. So strong was the animosity between Jews and Samaritans that until the very Hebraic Jewish Christians and their leaders confirmed the reality of the Samaritans' conversions this break could not be overcome. Still others have suggested that the apparent experience of salvation by the Samaritans, particularly based on the experience of their ringleader Simon the Magician who would shortly demonstrate that his faith was not true faith at all, may have been superficial in the lives of all of the initial believers.

Whichever way you solve this problem surely the important point that Luke wants us to understand is that the Gospel is moving out and is no longer an exclusively Jewish sect. That point is reinforced by the other vignette, describing the ministry of Philip in Acts 8: his leading of the Ethiopian eunuch on the road in Gaza to Christ through his reading of Isaiah 53 and the testimony of the prophet there to the coming suffering servant, the ministry of Jesus. Whatever else we say about this passage, what is striking is that this is a foreigner, Jew though he may well have been, but one who was a eunuch, one who was physically castrated so he could take care of the royal harem with impunity, who was considered forever unclean by Jewish ritual standards. Philip does not treat him thus, but treats him as an equal partner and candidate for God's grace.

C. Conversion of Saul/Paul

The final person to whom we are introduced in this short

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

vignette is Saul of Tarsus and his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Although he has already begun to be a ringleader in seeking out Christians to try to martyr them, God in Christ dramatically turns him around—convincing him through a supernatural revelation of the risen Lord that the one whom he has been persecuting is in fact the Lord and His followers should now become his companions. After this dramatic conversion he is temporarily blinded, led by hand to meet Ananias in the city of Damascus, and is baptized there, and becomes—instead of the primary persecutor of the first Christians—their primary spokesman, immediately and surprisingly going back to his fellow Hellenistic Jewish countrymen and speaking boldly and convincingly about Jesus as the Messiah.

IV. Advances in Palestine and Syria (Ac 9:32-12:24)

The final third of this first half of the book of Acts is the shortest, and has the fewest distinct stories within it (Ac 9:32-12:24), which we may describe as advances in Palestine and Syria. The most prominent event that dominates these chapters is the long story of the conversion of Cornelius, occupying all of chapter 10 and a good part of chapter 11. Here Peter, the Jewish, the Hebraic Christian, now understands clearly through a threefold vision of unclean food descending in a blanket from heaven that God is declaring all foods clean and therefore He was declaring all people clean. There can be no obstacle to going to this Gentile centurion—a commanding officer in the foreign army forces, who himself is a God-fearer who has been worshiping and praying to the God of Israel while not being a full convert to Judaism—and accepting him on equal terms, having table fellowship with him, preaching the Gospel to him. It is interesting to see here that after Peter's lengthy sermon, indeed before Peter can wrap it up and bring it to a formal conclusion, we have the second experience of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts—again to confirm the reality of a dramatic conversion with a group of people, this time full-fledged Gentiles that might otherwise have remained somewhat suspect.

In Acts 11 and 12, this first half then draws to a close with a description of the first entirely Gentile Christian church in the Syrian city of Antioch and with the juxtaposition of the persecution, arrest, and martyrdom of James the apostle. The persecution, arrest, and miraculous release of the apostle

Acts 10:44-45

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

Acts 11 & 12

- First Gentile Church
- Persecution, Arrest, and Martyrdom of James
- Persecution, Arrest, and Miraculous Release of Peter

Peter all by Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, followed by Herod's own presumptuous and blasphemous acclamation of himself and reception of worship as a god, which leads to him being supernaturally struck dead. With these events we are now prepared for the second and even more lengthy phase of the book of Acts, the predominantly Gentile mission of early Christianity.