

No.11, The Book of Acts

In our pursuit of this study of this subject of *An Introduction to the NT* we come to the book of Acts. The book of Acts is an immensely important book. In it we are shown the establishment, evangelism, and effectiveness of the New Testament church. It is a book of history therefore and yet its history is all *doctrine*, for in it we are not only shown the progress of the early church, but the principles which lie behind that progress. Note some important features of the book.

1. THE POSITION OF THE BOOK. The book of Acts lies between the gospels and the epistles. Remember that it was placed there by the Apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; the apostles having the God-given authority to select the writings which comprise the New Testament section of the canon of Scripture. Thus it is the pivotal book of the NT recording the important historical transition from the Gospels to the Epistles. It is like the keystone in an arch - without it, much that is in the gospels and the epistles cannot be understood.

2. THE PENMAN OF THE BOOK. The writer of the Acts is undoubtedly Luke the “beloved physician” and the writer of the gospel. His identity can be established in various ways.

(a) Both books are addressed to the same person, Theophilus.

(b) Acts 1: 1 refers to the “former treatise” – most naturally understood as the gospel of Luke.

(c) There are strong similarities of style and language between Acts and Luke.

(d) There are many features common to both books; i.e. many references in each to the Temple, the Holy Spirit, prayer. In his gospel, Luke refers to Christ as a child and in Acts a number of times we read of “the Holy Child Jesus.” Note also that in Luke’s gospel there is a fuller account given of the Ascension of Christ, than in any of the other gospels. In Luke 24:50-53 and in Acts 1: 9 & 10 that same full account is given.

3. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK.

Basically its purpose is three-fold.

(a) To give further instruction to Theophilus, to supplement the information already given in the “former treatise” – i.e. the Gospel of Luke.

(b) To supply an historical narrative of the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church. The book is replete with references to the Spirit of God and His ministry and power.

(c) To give a summary of the out-working of the Saviour’s commission in Acts 1: 8.

4. THE PLAN OF THE BOOK.

The plan or outline of the book of Acts should be based on the key verse, 1: 8 which, as has been said already, contains the Lord’s commission. Chapter 1: 1-11 form the introduction to the book. Then using the key verse, the theme of which is witnessing, the plan of the book is as follows:

(a) Witnessing in Jerusalem – ch 1: 12 - ch 7: 60.

(b) Witnessing in Judaea & Samaria – chs 8-12.

(c) Witnessing to the uttermost parts of the earth – chs 13-28.

5. THE PERSONALITIES OF THE BOOK.

There are two dominant personalities in the book - the apostles Peter and Paul.

(a) Peter is the dominant figure in the first part of the book, generally speaking. In Matt 16: 19 the Lord had given Peter a promise: “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” What are keys for, but *to open doors*? Thus in the first half of this book we see this being fulfilled. It was Peter’s privilege to open the door of faith to the Jews ch. 2, to the Samaritans ch. 8 & to the Gentiles ch 10.

(b) Paul is the dominant figure in the second half of the book. He was given the task of furthering the work of the gospel among the Gentiles, Acts 9: 15 and Gal 2: 7, 8.

These aspects of this book will give you some idea of its great importance and its relevance for today. It is undoubtedly true that more than ever before we need what the early church had from the Lord. What was accomplished in those early days was entirely the work of God in the sovereign operation of His own power. That was the secret of the strength and success of the early church. That is a vital point to understand: we must recognise that in the time of the early church God was sovereignly working. Therefore:

There can be no substitute for God’s personal intervention. Many today are using human means and methods to manufacture results and with these statistics, convince themselves that they have a Pentecost-type revival. The emptiness of such claims is seen in that the nation grows more evil and wicked. The church needs a sovereign, divine intervention, if we are to see anything accomplished.

God does work through means and men. The book of Acts which shows the sovereign operation of God, also shows that He operated through the church. God’s sovereignty always encompasses the use of means and men, a truth that many find very hard to accept. But it is a truth that is vividly illustrated in this book. The story of Acts should be a great encouragement to us, that the Lord is not dead or limited and that He can use even us. Note three emphases in the early church that were blessed and used of God.

A. THERE IS AN EMPHASIS ON THEIR DOCTRINE. See ch 2: 42. The people continued in the apostle’s doctrine, first and foremost.

(1) **The character of their doctrine.** It was Scriptural seen in *their preaching*. Great sermons are recorded in the book of Acts showing the profuse use of the Word. Acts 2 – on the Day of Pentecost Peter’s sermon is literally full of Scripture, as he quotes one O.T. writer after another, vs. 16, 25. Their preaching was not a string of sentimental stories but full of the word, therefore doctrinal

(2) **The centrality of their doctrine.** It was Christ-centered doctrine. Study the book and see countless references to the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the sum and substance of all doctrine. If He is not central, preaching is just so many empty words. The ministry of the apostles magnified Christ, e.g. ch 8: 35. Thus in their preaching you will find the sufferings, the resurrection, the exaltation of the Saviour.

(3) **The confirmation of their doctrine.** As they taught and preached, the Holy Spirit was upon them and upon the message. He confirmed their doctrine by building a living, strong, lasting witness for Christ, Mark 16: 20. The reference to the Lord working with them is a reference to the Holy Spirit sent by Christ. Note the link between the Holy Spirit and doctrine – many today boast of their experience in the Spirit and yet disregard doctrine.

B. THERE IS AN EMPHASIS ON THEIR DEVOTION.

The book opens with the disciples at the feet of Christ, receiving further instruction. It proceeds to show them waiting patiently for the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. They were marked by devotion to the Lord in a very striking fashion. This devotion expressed itself in two main ways:

(1) **Great prayer meetings.** The book of Acts is the history of a people in touch with God. It is one of the most tremendous declarations of the power of prayer in all of Scripture. Thus the early church was a praying church; that is the hallmark of a true N.T. church. That is the secret of the forward movement of the early church. Let us note some of the outstanding reference to prayer in the book. See ch 1: 14; 2: 1; 3: 1; 4: 26; 6: 4,6; 7: 59, 60; 8: 15; 9: 11; 10: 9; 12: 5; 13: 1-3; 14: 23; 16: 13; 20 :36; 21: 5. Little wonder that they turned the world upside down.

(2) **Unity in their ranks.** Note the term *with one accord*, ch. 1: 14; 2: 1, 46; 4: 24; 5: 12; 8: 6; 15: 25. This unity was a unity in Christ. It was cemented, not only by love for one another, but by prayer and labour and absolute faithfulness to the Word of God.

C. THERE IS AN EMPHASIS ON THEIR DEEDS.

Acts is not a book of theory, but a book whose title denotes activity and service. But it must be noted that it was not a case of merely being active for the sake of being active. Their deeds were done as unto the Lord. Consequently their deeds, their service was marked by:

(1) **Obedience to Christ.** Many are very active it seems, but in their service they are blatantly disobedient to the Lord. Obedient in their district of service, ch 8: 5-8, 26, 27 – obediently left the scene of revival to go after one stranger. Obedient in their discharge of service, ch 13: 6-8. There was only one route for Paul to take in his dealings with this apostate - utter refutation of him because he was an enemy of the gospel as all apostates are. Did not parley with him or welcome him as an accomplice in the gospel.

(2) **Allegiance to Christ.** Those in the early church gave allegiance to none but Christ. Such was their love for Him that they were prepared to suffer for His sake. The book is replete with examples: opposition, imprisonment, violent persecution, & martyrdom. They did not cease to serve Him in spite of all this opposition, ch 4: 18-20.

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