

HOW TO READ THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Practical suggestions

Banska Bystrica, 18th January 2015

LITERATURE: WILKINSON & BOA: *Talk Thru the Bible*; MEARS, H. *What the Bible is All About*; HILL, H. *A Journey through the Bible*; PAWSON, D. *Unlocking the Bible*.

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0. INTRODUCTION: THE NEW TESTAMENT

0.1. THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

- (1) the gospels, (2) Acts - history, (3) the letters of Paul, (4) catholic/general letters (5) the Revelation

0.2. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- The Acts – a fascinating book – history(?) → explanations of events is not found in politics, economics, religion...
- The continuation of Jesus' works (through the Holy Spirit)
- the problem of *authority* – how far it is to be followed/imitated today: (1) miracles, (2) leaders, (3) lifestyle, (4) the work of the Holy Spirit...

0.2.1. THE AUTHOR

- Luke-Acts unity (**Acts 1:1** The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach; Luke is called by some “the theologian of the Holy Spirit”

Luke 1:1-4 Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.)

0.2.2. THE TITLE

- Acts of Apostles – without the definite article is supposed to be the earliest title. It accurately conveys the Subject of this Treatise, which contains a summary of the doings of the Chief among the Apostles, viz. : Peter and Paul.

0.3. THE MAIN THEME

- Jesus continuing his work (Luke’s introduction: **Acts 1:1** The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach...)
- **Acts 1:8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
- "*hominum confusione et dei providential*" – “normal” humans and the great God
- the power of the Gospel
- the “normal” life of the Church

1. POSSIBLE DIVISIONS

- the themes to follow when reading...

1.1. PETER AND PAUL

They both performed miracles.

They both saw visions.

They both suffered for their faith.

They both made long speeches.

They were both filled with the Spirit.

They both preached with boldness.

They both preached to Gentiles and Jews, though Peter primarily preached to Jews and Paul primarily to Gentiles.

They were both imprisoned and miraculously set free.

They both healed the sick.

They both healed a congenital cripple.

They both exorcised demons.

They both had extraordinary means of healing, Peter with his shadow and Paul with his handkerchief.

They both raised the dead

They both declared judgment on false teachers.

They both refused worship.¹

1.2. LUKE’S SECTIONS

The sections = sequences, always concluded by an assertion: 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:30-31 = sections of dealing with problems, always spurring the church to grow

1.2.1. ONE

- **Acts 2:1** the Day of Pentecost;
- **Acts 3:8** ...walking, leaping, and praising God... **Acts 4:1-2** the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, ² being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

¹ PAWSON, D. *Understanding the Bible*.

- **Acts 5:1** a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife...
- **Acts 6:1** there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution...

- Acts 6:7. 'So the word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.'

1.2.2. TWO

- **Acts 6:8-9** And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.⁹ Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. ...**Acts 6:13** "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;
- **Acts 8:1** Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.
- ...**Acts 8:9** a certain man called Simon...
- **Acts 9:1** Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...

- Acts 9:31. 'Then the church throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.'

1.2.3. THREE

- **Acts 9:32** Peter went through all *parts of the country*, (illustration? or introduction to what follows?)
- **Acts 10:1** a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius... → controversy
- **Acts 11:19-22** Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.²² Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.
- **Acts 12:2-3** Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.³ And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread.

- Acts 12:24. 'But the word of God continued to increase and spread.'

1.2.4. FOUR

- **Acts 13:8** Elymas the sorcerer (Cyprus)
- **Acts 13:45** when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.
- **Acts 14:4** ...the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles.
- **Acts 14:11** (Lystra) "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"
- **Acts 14:19** ...they stoned Paul and dragged *him* out of the city, supposing him to be dead.
- **Acts 15:1-2** "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."² Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

- Acts 16:5. 'So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.'

1.2.5. FIVE

- **Acts 16:7** ...they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them
- **Acts 16:23** (Philippi) And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw *them* into prison

- **Acts 17:5** (Thessalonica) But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.
 - **Acts 17:32** (Athens) ...when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked,
 - **Acts 18:13** (Corinth) This *fellow* persuades men to worship God contrary to the law."
 - **Acts 19:2** (Ephesus) Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?
- Acts 19:20. 'In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.'

1.2.6. SIX

- **Acts 19:21** When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."
- **Acts 19:34** "Great *is* Diana of the Ephesians!"
- **Acts 21:10-11** a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his *own* hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver *him* into the hands of the Gentiles.' "
- **Acts 23:14** "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul.
- **Acts 24:27** But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.
- **Acts 25:11** ...I appeal to Caesar."
- **Acts 27:10** "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives."
- **Acts 28:3** when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid *them* on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.

- **Acts 28:30-31** Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, ³¹ preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

1.3. JERUSALEM, ANTIOCH, ROME

- Jerusalem (1-12), Antioch 13-21, Roman prisoner (22-28)
- (1) the local church life, (2) the church and her mission, (3) the church and the powers (political)

2. NOTABLE THEMES

2.1. THE SUPERNATURAL

- visions, guidance, spiritual power...
- miracles (not only the Apostles – neither “all the saints”)
- miraculous deliverances
- miraculous results
- providential protection

2.2. SUCCESSFUL PREACHING

- mostly – but not absolutely always (Paul in Athens; Jewish response mixed)
- (1) Establishing contact – the context, (2) the coming judgment, (3) the salvation in Jesus (4) what to do instructions

2.3. THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

- fullness – repeated experience
- boldness, power, wisdom, results...

2.4. CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

- love, trust, sharing...
- “normal” problems (eg. ch.6 – social problems; ch.15 – workers’ relationships)

2.5. RESPONSE OF THE ENVIRONMENT (NON-CHRISTIANS)

- both *very* positive (respect) and *very* negative (persecution)

2.5.1. PEOPLE

- respect and recognition (**Acts 5:13-14** ...Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. ¹⁴ And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,)
- hatred and persecution

2.5.2. RELIGIOUS LEADERS (JUDAISM)

- mainly negative

2.5.3. POLITICAL LEADERS (ROME)

- mainly neutral or positive

3. THE THEOLOGY OF THE ACTS

3.1. READ IN THE LIGHT OF THE EPISTLES!

- dangerous speculations (Acts 8 and dispensationalism)

3.2. THE AUTHORITY IN THE APOSTLES

- they are decisive
- they are not inerrant
- inerrant inspiration is attributed to the text, not the authors of the book

3.3. THE QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

- the “twelveth” apostle:
- “Jerusalem communism”
- James’ points (ch.15)
- Paul’s speech in Athens
- Paul’s keeping of the Jewish customs

Three areas of the church life:

- local relationships (local church life)
- mission relationships (Paul’s mission journeys – mission church life)
- relationships with the politicians (defences facing different rulers)

4. PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR READING

- Read in the light of the Epistles = some things we read in the Acts are not to be applied
- Try to find out who is the source of action (God, the Apostles, believers, unbelievers, evil powers)
- Think! – how does the history of the first church apply to your situation.

5. TO REMEMBER

- The Acts is a history of how Jesus continued to work after his Ascension.
- Observe the great variety of situations and solutions and do not jump to unwarranted conclusions.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to work in the contemporary church in accordance with the current needs and problems.