



The Acts of the Apostles

Acts 1-4: The Church Begins in Jerusalem

Of course, the Book of Acts is a history of the church and a history of the Holy Spirit, but it is also the story of two heroes – Peter and Paul. From Acts 1-12, Peter is the dominant figure, and from Acts 13 till the end of our book, the protagonist is Paul. In chapter 15, for a few verses, their stories overlap.

The prologue to Acts (1:1-5) links Acts closely with the Gospel of Luke, which begins with a similar prologue. Perhaps our author (whom we'll call "Luke") intended from the start to write a two-volume history of the church beginning with Jesus its founder and continuing through the imprisonment of Paul. Perhaps, having written the Gospel, Luke decided some time later to add a sequel. If the two volumes were planned through from the first, we can assume that the prologue to Luke (Luke 1:1-4) would provide a kind of overture to the whole two-volume work. In either case there are narrative and theological themes that characterize both the Gospel and Acts, though of course the focus of the first work is primarily on Jesus and the focus of the second work on the church that continues his ministry. We will note some of these themes as we discuss particular passages.

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus, whose Greek name can be translated "friend of God." It may well be that Luke had a particular friend or patron named Theophilus in mind when he drafted his work. Or he may be using the name as a clue to the kind of reader he hopes to attract – a reader already friendly to God though perhaps not yet fully acquainted with the ministry of Jesus or the growth of the church. Or perhaps, conveniently, the addressee can be understood both ways.

There is some discrepancy between Acts and Luke's Gospel in the description of Jesus' ascension. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus ascends immediately after the resurrection. In Acts (1:6-12) he continues to appear for forty days before his ascension. In both cases the disciples are instructed to remain in Jerusalem and promised that they will receive the Holy Spirit.

Already in the first chapters of Acts we see two themes that will be juxtaposed throughout the work – the emphasis on continuity and the emphasis on growth, change, and mission.

The theme of continuity is evident in the fact that it is Jesus who instigates and authorizes what will be the beginning of the church. The theme of change or growth is evident in the claim that the major actor in this new chapter of God's dealing with humankind will be the Holy Spirit. Continuity is there in the charge to stay in Jerusalem, where church will start; change and

growth is there in the promise and command that the gospel will need to spread to the ends of the earth (1:8). There is also the hint of change, almost a kind of divine revision, in the shift from the promise the disciples expect – that the Kingdom will be restored to Israel (1:6) – to the promise that Jesus gives – that the Holy Spirit will send them forth into the world (1:8). Richard Pervo puts it nicely: “The ends of the earth rather than the end of the world will be the subject of this book.” (Hermeneia, 41)

Continuity is especially evident in the constitution of the believing community, the church before church. The group gathered in Jerusalem to await the Spirit consists of those who have followed Jesus in his ministry. The activity they share is that religious practice that has especially marked his ministry in Luke’s Gospel – prayer (1:14).

The concern for continuity is also evident in the appointment of a successor to Judas Iscariot. The calling of the apostles was not simply the convocation of a congenial group of friends to follow Jesus; it was the appointment of pillars for the coming church – twelve of them to mirror the twelve tribes of Israel (1:15-26).

The account of the death of Judas (1:18) differs fairly markedly from the account in Matthew 27:3-8, reminding us that the gospels are in part the stuff of legend as well as the stuff of history. What Matthew and Luke agree on is that Judas was up to no good and that consequently he came to no good end. The requirements for someone to be an apostle are clear in Acts – the apostle must have been with Jesus from the baptism by John to the ascension; and the apostle must have been a witness to the resurrection. (Does this mean that the apostle must have seen the risen Lord? If so, Paul would meet the second criterion for apostleship but not the first; of course, according to his self-description he was entirely an apostle; Luke will seem not so sure.) The apostles choose their new member by lot (1:26), a matter of trusting to divine intention rather than democratic or autocratic decision making.

Acts 2 powerfully presents two major motifs of this volume. We will see further evidence of the juxtaposition of continuity and change. And we will see a device frequently used in Acts – a narrative is followed and often explicated by a speech.

Here the narrative is the narrative of what happens at Pentecost (2:1-13). The speech is Peter’s explanation and evangelical plea (2:14-36). In the narrative, continuity is evident in the fact that the gift of the Spirit is given in Jerusalem, where Luke began his gospel and where Jesus has ended his earthly ministry. The continuity is further evident in that so far the gift of the spirit and the proclamation of the gospel are given to Jews, and that it all begins in Jerusalem, Zion, King David’s royal city. (King David is a supporting player in much of Acts, in the frequent quotations from the Psalms. In our section see 2:25ff)

But there is discontinuity in this story, too – growth and change. Those believers who receive the Spirit speak in foreign tongues (2:4), and those who speak foreign tongues now hear the proclamation of God’s mighty deeds in their own language. Remarkably from day one the language of the church has been translatable language. The Hebrew bible is not Scripture only in Hebrew, and the Gospel is not contained in Aramaic, Greek or Latin.

This is not, however, as sometimes suggested, a reversal of the story of Babel in Genesis 11. It is not that now all the peoples of the world speak one language; it is that in all the languages of the world, (Jewish) people can hear the mighty acts of God. Furthermore, the point of the story is finally not that the Gospel is about diversity – though of course it has implications for diversity. The Gospel is about the mighty acts of God, and by the Spirit diverse people are able both to speak and to hear of those acts of God.

The wind and the fire and the tongues and the hubbub, apparently looking like intoxication, remind us that the Holy Spirit is not always the still small voice of calm. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is the rude interrupter, the noisy surprise.

We also note that the kind of speech that Luke associates with Pentecost is not the speech we associate with Pentecostal churches today. (This of course is not to say that ecstatic speech may not be legitimate worship; it is just not strictly speaking Pentecostal). The followers of Jesus speak intelligible words in a variety of languages, not ecstatic speech that needs an interpreter to be made intelligible. Peter, in his speech, identifies the language as prophecy. (For a distinction between ecstatic speech and prophecy, you might want to look at 1 Corinthians 14.)

Peter's great speech is an interpretation of scripture, an interpretation of the events of Pentecost, and a call to commitment on the part of the hearers. To this day one might argue that good preaching usually includes attention to a text, attention to a situation, and a call for decision.

We suggested in the introduction to this study that the speeches in Acts were probably largely written by Luke, and we have no way of knowing how far he might be drawing on traditions that were earlier than his writing. What we can see is that themes that are important to Luke often recur in the speeches he places on the lips of Peter or Stephen or Paul.

Notice that Peter interprets all that has happened in the light of Joel 2:28-32 (Joel 3:1-5 in the Greek translation of Hebrew scripture called the Septuagint). Peter and Luke add one phrase to Joel's prophecy – it is not just that all the wonders prophesied will take place "in those days" but that they will take place "in the last days" (2:17). Many scholars have thought that Luke de-emphasizes the promise of the coming Kingdom of God, and certainly his interpretation of that Kingdom is different than, say, Matthew's or Paul's. However, it might be more accurate to say that for Luke, though the last days have not reached their conclusion and though there may be a long wait ahead, on Pentecost the last days begin with the gift of the Spirit.

Peter's sermon then cites Jesus' death as a consequence of human sin and uses Psalm 16 as a text to interpret Jesus' resurrection and ascension (2:25-28). Peter preaches crucifixion and resurrection/ascension in order to bring the listeners first to repentance and then to belief (2:38). As is always the case in Acts, some believe, and others do not. But the believers, who are baptized that very day (catechesis and pre-baptismal classes were yet to come) numbered three thousand (2:41). The signs and wonders Joel predicted are being enacted in the life of the new church.

In Acts 3:1-10, Peter and John continue demonstrating the mighty acts of God and the power of the Spirit by healing the crippled man. The power of God that moved Jesus in Luke 4 now

moves his followers in Acts 3 and they perform healing miracles very much like Jesus' own. As he interpreted the events of Pentecost with a sermon, now Peter interprets the miracle that he and John have performed (3:11-26). Once again, the event points back to the even greater event of Jesus' death and resurrection. Once again, the event and the sermon that interpret it (with help from scripture) call the hearers to repentance and belief, common Lukan themes.

At the end of the speech, three of the officials of Law and order burst in to oppose our heroes and put them in custody (4:1-3). This arrest echoes the persecution of Jesus in Luke's Gospel and the persecution of Stephen and then some of the apostles in the Book of Acts. Yet even in the midst of opposition – and in part in response to opposition – the number of believers grows.

Luke – and the Holy Spirit – provide two more responses to this persecution. First there is the legal response: Peter and John defend themselves (4:8-12), as Stephen will soon do and as Paul will do repeatedly. They defend themselves on the basis of Scripture ("The stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," a favorite Christian proof text (Psalm 118:22), is cited in 4:11). They proudly identify with Jesus. And they are saved, at least for now, by the support of the people.

The second response to persecution is the response of prayer (4:23-31). We have already learned that the apostles devote themselves to prayer; we remember Jesus praying time and again in the Gospel of Luke and now they join in prayer. Like many a prayer to this day, the pious spend a fair amount of time reminding God of what God has done, leading us to suspect that Luke wants his readers to overhear the prayer and learn from it what is central to his Gospel.

At the very end of the chapter Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas, makes his first appearance (4:36). We will see much of him as Paul's companion, but now he illustrates another of Luke's great hopes for the church. The church will engage in prayer; we have just seen that. The church will engage in charity; now Barnabas acts out that gospel practice.