

## **Book of Acts**

**Theme:** The Acts of the Apostles is a unique and therefore crucial book of the New Testament.

It alone presents an extensive picture of early church life and history.

The title as we know it comes from the second century and only partially discloses the theme of the document.

The book focuses primarily on the acts of two apostles, Peter and Paul.

And it proposes to show the continuation “of all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (1:1).

It contains the acts Jesus carried out after His ascension, through the Holy Spirit, in establishing the church.

The author evidently follows the Great Commission in developing this theme, showing the beginning in Jerusalem, the outreach to Judea and Samaria, and the expansion to the distant city of Rome (1:8).

Verse 1 demonstrates clearly that the unnamed author of Acts is the same person as the unnamed author of the third gospel (Luke 1:3 with Acts 1:1-2).

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts form a single, two-volume work.

The author quite certainly was Luke for the following reason: First, the author was a companion of Paul. (16:10-17; 20:5 – 21:18; 27:1 – 28:16).

The author distinguishes himself from Paul’s other companions in Acts by naming them.

Of Paul’s unnamed companions only Titus and Luke could have been with Paul during each of the three “we” passages.

As the Book of Acts closes, the author places himself beside Paul at the Roman imprisonment.

Paul in his epistle states that Luke, not Titus, was with him at that time (Philemon 24).

Second, the author gives some evidence of being a physician by the attention he gives to medical detail (Luke 8:43), and the technical Greek terms he uses (3:7).

Luke was called “the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14).

Third, the early church writers attribute the third gospel and the Book of Acts to Luke.

Since Luke is an otherwise little-known figure, there is no logical reason to attribute the authorship to him, unless he is in fact the author.

**Date:** Luke nowhere mentions the date for the writing of this document, yet the manner in which he closed the book suggests a date.

Luke stops abruptly after mentioning the duration of Paul's Roman imprisonment.

He mentions neither the progress of the church nor the plans of Paul.

Therefore, it seems as if Luke stops where the history ends; he describes the events up to the current time.

If so, the date is about (A.D. 62).

**Background - Setting:** As Luke makes clear in the prologue to his gospel, he wrote to give Theophilus (and the others who would read his work), an "account of the things" (Luke 1:1), which Jesus had accomplished during His earthly ministry.

Accordingly, Luke's gospel records those momentous events "in consecutive order" (Luke 1:3).

Acts continues that record, noting what Jesus accomplished through the early church.

Beginning with Jesus' ascension, through the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost, to Paul's preaching at Rome, Acts chronicles the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church (compare 1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5; 19:20).

It also records the mounting opposition to the gospel (compare 2:13; 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 6:9 – 8:4; 12:1-5; 13:6-12, 45-50; 14:2-6, 19-20; 16:19-24; 17:5-9; 19:23-41; 21:27-36; 23:12-21; 28:24).

Theophilus, whose name means "lover of God", is unknown to history apart from his mention in Luke and Acts.

Whether he was a believer whom Luke was instructing, or a pagan whom Luke sought to convert is not known.

Luke's address of him as "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3), suggests he was a Roman official of some importance (compare 24:3; 26:25).

Luke wrote to convince Theophilus of the "certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed" (Luke 1:4).

Theophilus was probably a Gentile official who had been won to Christ, and Luke desires that he may understand more clearly the historical events that underlie his Christian faith and practice.

Second, Luke's purpose is not to write the history of the early church.

Nothing is recorded for large segments of time (e.g., A.D. 35-44).

Luke is not a chronicler seeking to record every event.

But he does write a history that shows the beginning and spread of the church.

He focuses on the important initial events and those that give meaning to the epistles of Paul by tracing Paul's ministry.

Chronologically, the book divides into three periods:

(1) Luke concentrates on the several years involved in the beginnings of the church among the Jews (chapter 2), the Samaritans (chapter 8), and the Gentiles at Caesarea (chapter 10), from (1:1 to 11:18).

(2) A period of virtual silence covering about 10 years follows. Glimpses of these times can be caught (in 9:3 and 11:19-21).

(3) The period (A.D. 44-62), focuses around the ministry of Paul, and so might be designated the Pauline period.

Third, Luke wrote to provide a unity between Christ's works in the gospels and the apostles' labors after His ascension.

That which Theophilus experienced in his church in A.D. 60 was vastly different from all he had read in Luke's gospel.

Acts explains those changes.

It shows the transition from Christ's message of a coming kingdom to the apostles' message of one new body of Jew and Gentile in Christ, called the church (Eph. 2:11 – 3:12).

Often the experiences of Acts reveal a transitional event rather than advocate a doctrinal truth.

The apostles in their epistles explain the doctrinal truths that are intended to be normative for God's people today.

Thus, Luke's purpose in Acts is more to provide a bridge for understanding these changes than to provide a basis for universal doctrinal truth.

And finally, Luke wrote to show to the Roman world that Christianity is not a subversive political movement.

Unlike some of the Jews of Judea, Christians were not seeking to overthrow Rome.

Though they spoke of another King and rejected the emperor as “lord,” they submitted to political authority.

Though the apostles were often imprisoned, they were always exonerated.

Sometimes God Himself intervened (5:18-20; 9:1-5; 12:5-10; 16:24-26; 28:3-6); other times the governmental authority did (16:35-39; 18:12-17; 19:37-41; 23:29; 26:32).

But each time they were vindicated.

Few biblical books are as misused as the Book of Acts.

Some denominations have collected their distinctive and divisive teachings from their interpretation of them, of what to do but also what not to do.

We cannot properly interpret the Book of Acts just by merely teaching the experiences the apostles had.

We must experience the things they taught.

The apostles taught out of their experiences, and we ought to do the same thing.

When the apostles experienced something early in the church age, yet later taught contrary principles, we must realize God does not desire us to practice that today.

For example, the apostles cast lots in Acts 1; we should not, for we possess the inner leading of God’s Spirit (Rom. 8:14, 26-27; Gal. 5:18).

The early church shared all things communally (chapters 2 and 4).

We are instructed to be faithful stewards who freely and cheerfully share (2 Cor. 9:6-8).

Some regard the absence of musical instruments in Acts as a mandate to exclude them from church services today.

The apostles do not so instruct us.

Some teach us to receive the Holy Spirit as (in Acts 2); others, as (in Acts 10).

The apostles teach, however, that everyone who receives Christ also receives the Spirit (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians. 1:13; 1 John 3:24; 4:13).

We must not make the tragic spiritual mistake of “teaching the experiences of the apostles,” but rather “experience the teachings of the apostles”.