

# Becoming His Church

## Acts of the Apostles

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### *Introduction/Overview*

The Holy Spirit has given us in the New Testament four accounts of Jesus' ministry but only one book on the early years of the Church. It is called Acts of the Apostles, but in fact it tells of selected things about a few of the apostles.

- What about John, who gave 5 of the New Testament books?
- What about Matthew, who wrote 1 gospel?
- What about Andrew, Thomas, Bartholomew, James the Younger, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Matthias?
- Acts is even silent on the last fifteen years or so of Peter's ministry.

Clearly, just as God has not chosen to give us a complete biography of Jesus, so He has determined not to inspire a thorough history of the church's beginnings.

### **What is Acts?**

#### Title of the Book

The earliest extant evidence for the name "Acts" is found in an anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Gospel of Luke, a work dated between A.D. 150 and 180. How or why it received this title is open to speculation.

It must be conceded that "Acts" is not an accurate title because the book by no means contains all the acts of all the apostles. Only Peter and Paul are emphasized. The great Apostle John is mentioned, but none of his words are recorded. The death of John's brother James is given in one brief sentence (Acts 12:12).

The work more accurately could be titled "Certain Acts of Certain Apostles." However, the title "The Acts of the Apostles" is so well established it identifies this work of Luke very well.

If Acts is not a complete history of the Church's first 3 decades, then what is it?

Our first clue is that it is a second of a 2 volume work.

## The Author

The author of the Acts expressly states that he wrote:

**“The first account I composed (τον πρωτον λογον [ton prō ton logon]) Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles he had chosen.” (Acts 1:1-2).**

There is no room for dispute that the reference is directly to the Gospel according to Luke as we have it now. Like the Gospel the book is dedicated to Theophilus. And, what is more important, the same style appears in both Gospel and Acts.

The tradition that Luke is the author of Luke–Acts has nothing against it and fits what little we know about Luke. The style and themes of Acts clearly reflect the same authorship as those of the Gospel of Luke do. Luke varies between Greek literary prose style and a Jewish style of Greek heavily influenced by the LXX<sup>1</sup>.

A number of terms in Luke–Acts are frequent in medical literature, although most of these terms also occur elsewhere, so this terminology alone would not prove Lukan authorship. Physicians could be lower class, even slaves, but were generally well educated; the presence of women in that field (especially midwifery) may have made some physicians more conscious of women’s concerns (which Luke–Acts is).

Luke, the beloved physician, is the author of Acts. The “former treatise” (Acts 1:1) is the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 1:1–4). Luke was a doctor (Col. 4:14) who joined Paul’s party at Troas (Acts 16:8–10; note the change from “they” to “we”) and traveled with the missionary to Philippi. Apparently he stayed in Philippi and did not join Paul until Paul’s return there on his third journey (Acts 20:6). It is generally believed that Luke was a Gentile

## Theophilus

**About Theophilus we can only speculate. His name means “Lover of God,” but it was a common Greek name and was probably not made up by Luke. In Luke’s day, people often wrote for and dedicated their work to wealthy patrons, who helped pay for publishing the books. Theophilus was probably an educated Gentile aristocrat, either a new convert or an interested pagan. Luke may have wanted to help confirm this man and others like him in the faith by showing that it rested on firm**

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<sup>1</sup> Septuagint. The Greek version of the Old Testament widely circulated in the New Testament period. (It is commonly abbreviated LXX because of the tradition that seventy scholars were responsible for it.)

historical foundations and the power of God.

### Date of the Book.

The writing of Acts must have taken place before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Certainly an event of such magnitude would not have been ignored. This is especially true in light of one of the basic themes of the book: *God's turning to the Gentiles from the Jews because of the Jews' rejection of Jesus Christ.*

Luke scarcely would have omitted an account of Paul's death, traditionally dated from A.D. 66–68, if it had occurred before he wrote Acts. Nor did Luke mention the Neronian persecutions which began after the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64.

Furthermore, a defense of Christianity before Nero by using the Book of Acts to appeal to what lower officials had ruled regarding Paul would have had little point at the time of the Neronian antagonism. At that time Nero was so intent on destroying the church, the defense set forth in Acts would have had little effect in dissuading him.

**The date usually accepted by conservative scholars for the writing of Acts is around A.D. 60–62.**

### Location of Author

Accordingly the place of writing would be Rome or possibly both Caesarea and Rome. At the time of writing Paul's release was either imminent or had just taken place.

### Sources Luke May Have Used.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Luke probably used a number of sources. **First and primary** were his own personal experiences. This is most clearly seen in the "we" sections of Acts (16:10–40; 20:5–28:31). A **second** source of information would have been Paul, with whom Luke spent much time. The apostle's conversion and his experiences in ministry undoubtedly would have been discussed by the two in their time together. A **third** source is seen in the other witnesses whom Luke contacted (cf. 20:4–5; 21:15–19). In Acts 21:18–19 James is mentioned as being one with whom Luke met. James certainly would have been able to convey information about the very first chapters in Acts! In fact, the early chapters of Acts seem to betray an Aramaic source. Furthermore, while Paul was incarcerated for two years in Caesarea (24:27), Luke would have been free to carry out thorough investigative work in Palestine (Luke 1:2–3). Having carefully researched eyewitness accounts, Luke, by the Spirit's direction, penned the Book of Acts.

## Overview

The story of Jesus is taken up after the Resurrection by Luke, whose Book of Acts gives a narrative insight into the spread of the Gospel. Acts is, in a real sense, the continuing story of Jesus who, through the Holy Spirit working in men and women of faith, actively continued Christ's own work in our world.

The first chapters of Acts deal with the church in Judea and its initial spilling over into Samaria. But then the focus shifts. Soon Luke's concern is the whole world, for while the Gospel came to the Jew first, it was also for the Gentile.

The shift is reflected particularly in a change of key characters. Peter is the leading figure at first. But soon Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, takes center stage. We can hardly grasp the importance of Acts or the New Testament epistles without paying close attention to this young Pharisee, who was transformed from an enemy of Christians to the most fervent of missionaries for Christ. Not only was Paul the most notable missionary in the history of Christianity, but as the writer of 13 of our 27 New Testament books, he continues to have the greatest impact on the church's faith and life.

In this study we'll examine the life of the Apostle Paul and see something of his significance in history and the building of Jesus' Church.

## Theme

It is vitally important that we understand the basic message of the Book of Acts, and to do this we must survey the book in a general way to grasp its message. In this book we see the kingdom message and the setting aside of Israel's status; we witness too the expansion of the church and the message of the grace of God.

In chapters 1–7, we are definitely on Jewish ground. If we keep in mind that Acts is really a continuation of Luke and reflect on Luke 24:46ff, we will see why the disciples began in Jerusalem. Christ commanded them to stay there until the Spirit should come. Their ministry was to begin in Jerusalem, "to the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16). Even when we get to 8:1, we find the apostles courageously remaining in Jerusalem while others were fleeing. They were not disobeying the Lord but following the orders He gave them.

Here are but a few of the many evidences in Acts 1–7 that the ministry of the apostles at that time was to the Jews and still was the message of the kingdom.

(1) The disciples expected the establishment of the kingdom (1:6), and Christ did not rebuke them for their request. He had promised that they would sit on twelve thrones (Matt. 19:28).

(2) It was necessary that they elect a twelfth apostle (1:22) to take Judas' place so that Christ's promise might be fulfilled. Paul was not supposed to be that new apostle, for his ministry was primarily to the Gentiles. Paul's ministry had to do with the one body, the church.

(3) Peter preached to the men of Judah, Jerusalem, and Israel in his message at Pentecost (2:14, 22). He did not address his words to Gentiles. It was primarily a Jewish message to a Jewish congregation on a Jewish religious holiday.

(4) The prophecy of Joel (2:16ff) relates primarily to Israel, not the church.

(5) Peter portrayed the cross as an instrument of crime, not as God's gracious remedy for sin (2:22–23). Compare this with Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 5.

(6) Peter's theme at Pentecost is the resurrection. Christ had promised to give Israel a sign—the sign of the prophet Jonah—which is death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 12:38ff). This was the sign Peter preached. God was now giving Israel another chance to accept the Messiah and be saved.

(7) The apostles and first converts worshiped in the temple (2:46ff; 3:1ff) and maintained contact with the temple ministry until they were thrown out.

(8) Peter said that the days of blessing that were experienced in Acts had been prophesied by the OT prophets (3:21, 24). But the church was a mystery hidden by God and was not fully made known until Paul's ministry (read Eph. 3 carefully). The prophets spoke of the Jewish kingdom, not of the church. To confuse these two creates problems.

(9) Jerusalem was the center for blessing; everyone came there (5:16). It was definitely kingdom ground; see Isaiah 66:5ff.

(10) Peter clearly told the council that the message was one of repentance for Israel (5:31).

(11) In chapter 7, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel and showed how the nation had rejected the truth down through the years.

It takes little effort to see that in the first seven chapters of Acts, we are concerned with the Jewish nation and that the message is meant primarily for the kingdom, not the church. It is important that we understand why.

There are three murders in Israel's history that mark out her rejection of God's will.

1. **John the Baptist** came preaching the kingdom (Matt. 3:1ff), and the Jews allowed him to be slain. In this way they rejected the Father who had sent him.
2. **Jesus** came preaching the same message (Matt. 4:12–17), and they crucified Him. Thus, they rejected God the Son. On the cross, Jesus prayed for the Jews, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).
3. This prayer made possible a third offer of the kingdom through the apostles, recorded in the first seven chapters of Acts. What was the result? The religious leaders murdered **Stephen!** This was the sin of resisting the Holy Ghost (Acts 7:51), the "unpardonable sin" that Christ had spoken of in Matt. 12:31–32. The death of Stephen marks the close of God's offer of the kingdom to the Jews.

In chapters 8–12, we have a transition. In chap. 8, the Gospel goes from the Jews to the Samaritans.

In chap. 9, Paul is saved in an unusual and miraculous manner, and God prepares His apostle for his ministry to the church. In chap. 10 the Gospel goes to the Gentiles, and Peter defends this new departure in chap. 11. In chap. 12, we see Peter for the last time as the leader among the believers. In chap. 13, it is Paul who takes the lead, here and through the rest of the book.

### The Holy Spirit in Acts

This book could well be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." It is important to note the progress in the believers' experience as the book moves from Jewish ground to church ground.

Acts 2:38—Peter tells the Jews to repent, believe, and be baptized to receive the Spirit.

Acts 8:14–15—Peter prays for the Samaritans to receive the Spirit, lays hands on them, and they receive the gift of the Spirit.

Acts 10:44—The Holy Spirit comes on the Gentiles when they believe, and Peter can only stand by in amazement!

Acts 10:44 is God’s pattern for today: hear the Word, believe, receive the Spirit, and then be baptized as evidence of your faith.

### **Baptism in Acts**

When Peter was offering the kingdom to the Jews, baptism was essential for their receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Baptism in the name of the rejected Messiah identified them with Him and separated them from the other Jews whom Peter termed “this perverse generation” (2:40). But the Samaritans’ baptism did not grant them the Spirit (Acts 8:12–17). They had to call on Peter and John, two Jews, who prayed for the new believers and laid hands on them; and then they received the Spirit. This was Peter’s second use of the “keys of the kingdom.” But the pattern of baptism for this age is found in Acts 10:44–48—these believers were baptized after they had already received the gift of the Spirit.

### **PAUL**

PAUL=Saul was born about the same time as our Lord. His circumcision-name was Saul, and probably the name Paul was also given to him in infancy “for use in the Gentile world,” as “Saul” would be his Hebrew home-name.

He was a native of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, a Roman province in the south-east of Asia Minor. That city stood on the banks of the river Cydnus, which was navigable thus far; hence it became a centre of extensive commercial traffic with many countries along the shores of the Mediterranean, as well as with the countries of central Asia Minor. It thus became a city distinguished for the wealth of its inhabitants.

Tarsus was also the seat of a famous university, higher in reputation even than the universities of Athens and Alexandria, the only others that then existed. Here Saul was born, and here he spent his youth, doubtless enjoying the best education his native city could afford. His father was of the strictest sect of the Jews, a Pharisee, of the tribe of Benjamin, of pure and unmixed Jewish blood (Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5). We learn nothing regarding his mother; but there is reason to conclude that she was a pious woman, and that, like-minded with her husband, she exercised all a mother influence in molding the character of her son, so that he could afterwards speak of himself as being, from his youth up, “touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6).

We read of his sister and his sister's son (Acts 23:16), and of other relatives (Rom. 16:7, 11, 12). Though a Jew, his father was a Roman citizen. How he obtained this privilege we are not informed. "It might be bought, or won by distinguished service to the state, or acquired in several other ways; at all events, his son was freeborn. It was a valuable privilege, and one that was to prove of great use to Paul, although not in the way in which his father might have been expected to desire him to make use of it." Perhaps the most natural career for the youth to follow was that of a merchant. "But it was decided that ... he should go to college and become a rabbi, that is, a minister, a teacher, and a lawyer all in one."

According to Jewish custom, however, he learned a trade before entering on the more direct preparation for the sacred profession. The trade he acquired was the making of tents from goats' hair cloth, a trade which was one of the commonest in Tarsus.

His preliminary education having been completed, Saul was sent, when about thirteen years of age probably, to the great Jewish school of sacred learning at Jerusalem as a student of the law. Here he became a pupil of the celebrated rabbi **Gamaliel**, and here he spent many years in an elaborate study of the Scriptures and of the many questions concerning them with which the rabbis exercised themselves. During these years of diligent study he lived "in all good conscience," unstained by the vices of that great city.

After the period of his student-life expired, he probably left Jerusalem for Tarsus, where he may have been engaged in connection with some synagogue for some years. But we find him back again at Jerusalem very soon after the death of our Lord. Here he now learned the particulars regarding the crucifixion, and the rise of the new sect of the "Nazarenes."

For some two years after Pentecost, Christianity was quietly spreading its influence in Jerusalem. At length Stephen, one of the seven deacons, gave forth more public and aggressive testimony that Jesus was the Messiah, and this led to much excitement among the Jews and much disputation in their synagogues. Persecution arose against Stephen and the followers of Christ generally, in which Saul of Tarsus took a prominent part. He was at this time probably a member of the great Sanhedrin, and became the active leader in the furious persecution by which the rulers then sought to exterminate Christianity.

But the object of this persecution also failed. "*They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.*" The anger of the persecutor was thereby kindled into a fiercer flame. Hearing that fugitives had taken refuge in Damascus, he obtained from the chief priest letters authorizing him to proceed thither on his persecuting career. This was a long journey of about 130 miles, which

would occupy perhaps six days, during which, with his few attendants, he steadily went onward, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter.” But the crisis of his life was at hand. He had reached the last stage of his journey, and was within sight of Damascus. As he and his companions rode on, suddenly at mid-day a brilliant light shone round them, and Saul was laid prostrate in terror on the ground, a voice sounding in his ears, “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” The risen Saviour was there, clothed in the vesture of his glorified humanity. In answer to the anxious inquiry of the stricken persecutor, “Who are you Lord?” he said, “*I am Jesus whom you persecute*” (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15).

This was the moment of his conversion, the most solemn in all his life. Blinded by the dazzling light (Acts 9:8), his companions led him into the city, where, absorbed in deep thought for three days, he neither ate nor drank (9:11). Ananias, a disciple living in Damascus, was informed by a vision of the change that had happened to Saul, and was sent to him to open his eyes and admit him by baptism into the Christian church (9:11–16). The whole purpose of his life was now permanently changed.

Immediately after his conversion he retired into the solitudes of Arabia (Gal. 1:17), perhaps of “Sinai in Arabia,” for the purpose, probably, of devout study and meditation on the marvelous revelation that had been made to him. “A veil of thick darkness hangs over this visit to Arabia. Of the scenes among which he moved, of the thoughts and occupations which engaged him while there, of all the circumstances of a crisis which must have shaped the whole tenor of his after-life, absolutely nothing is known. ‘Immediately,’ says Paul, ‘I went away into Arabia.’ The historian passes over the incident [compare Acts 9:23 and 1 Kings 11:38, 39]. It is a mysterious pause, a moment of suspense, in the apostle’s history, a breathless calm, which ushers in the tumultuous storm of his active missionary life.” Coming back, after three years, to Damascus, he began to preach the gospel “boldly in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9:27), but was soon obliged to flee (9:25; 2 Cor. 11:33) from the Jews and betake himself to Jerusalem. Here he tarried for three weeks, but was again forced to flee (Acts 9:28, 29) from persecution. He now returned to his native Tarsus (Gal. 1:21), where, for probably about three years, we lose sight of him. The time had not yet come for his entering on his great life-work of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

### Gamaliel

Jewish scholar. This man lived in the first century AD and died 18 years before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by Titus, the Roman general.

When Peter and the other apostles were brought before the enraged and threatening council in Jerusalem, Gamaliel, who was highly respected by the council, offered cautionary advice that probably saved the apostles' lives in that situation (Acts 5:27–40).

Gamaliel is also mentioned in Acts 22:3 as the rabbi with whom the apostle Paul studied as a youth in Jerusalem. During that period in Israel, a number of rabbinical schools evolved. Two of the most influential were the rival Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai. Both of those teachers had vast influence on Jewish thinking. Hillel's school emphasized tradition even above the law. Shammai's school preserved the teaching of the law over the authority of tradition. Hillel's school was the more influential, and its decisions have been held by a great number of later rabbis.

Traditionally, Gamaliel is considered to be the grandson of Hillel, and he was thoroughly schooled in the philosophy and theology of his grandfather's teaching. Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Jews in Jerusalem, and he served as president of the Sanhedrin during the reigns of the Roman emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius. Unlike other Jewish teachers, he had no antipathy toward Greek learning.

The learning of Gamaliel was so eminent and his influence so great that he is one of only seven Jewish scholars who have been honored by the title Rabban. He was called the "Beauty of the Law." The Talmud even says that "since Rabban Gamaliel died, the glory of the Law has ceased."



## HomeWork

**Read Acts 1.15, 2.41, 4.4, 5.14, 6.7, 9.31, 12.24, 16.5, 19.20, and 28.31.**

a. What do these verses have in common, and what progression do you see?

b. What does this pattern tell you about Acts?

**Read the whole book of Acts in 1 (maybe 2) sittings,**

a. Did you notice anything in your first reading that you want to remember and apply? If so, what is the truth you want to take to heart?

b. Ask God to show you how you can apply this truth; write your thoughts and plans here.