

# THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

## Setting

The first 30 years of the Christian Church from its formation in Jerusalem to the arrival of Paul in Rome.

## Theme

The spread of Christianity from Jerusalem and Judea around the north of the Mediterranean through Samaria, Syria, Turkey and Greece to Rome, capital of the empire. Acts is not an exhaustive account of the acts of the apostles. The Greek title – *Acts of Apostles* – lacks the definite article. It ‘gives us vivid glimpses of the great moments and personalities’ of the period (Wm. Barclay).

## Author

Luke. There are only three explicit references to him in the NT: Col. 4.14; Philemon 24; and 2 Tim. 4.11. We know he was a doctor, a close friend of Paul and most probably a Gentile (from Antioch or possibly Philippi).

## Analysis

It’s possible to see the narrative as a three-part working out of the risen Lord’s commission to his apostles in 1.8: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (cf chs. 1-7), in all Judea and Samaria (cf chs. 8-9), and to the ends of the earth (cf chs. 11-28).*

This presentation adopts an alternative analysis of the narrative into two main sections: the Acts of Peter (chs. 1-12) and the Acts of Paul (chs. 13-28), each with three sub-sections ending with a ‘progress report’.

### 1. The Acts of Peter (1.1-12.24)

#### 1.1 The Church at Jerusalem and the preaching of Peter (1.1-6.7)

Summary: *And 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 (6.7)*

#### 1.2 The spread of the Church through Palestine; the martyrdom of Stephen and the preaching in Samaria (6.8-9.31)

Summary: *Then the church throughout Judea, 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 (9.31)*

#### 1.3 The conversion of Paul, the extension of the Church to Antioch, and the reception of Cornelius, the Gentile, into the Church by Peter (9.32-12.24)

Summary: *But the word of God continued to increase and spread (12.24)*

### 2. The Acts of Paul (12.25-28.31)

#### 2.1 The extension of the Church through Asia Minor; the Council of Jerusalem and the delivery of its decision by Paul and Silas to the new churches in Asia Minor (12.25-16.5)

Summary: *So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers (16.5)*

#### 2.2 The extension of the Church to Europe and the work of Paul in great Gentile cities like Corinth and Ephesus (16.6-19.20)

Summary: *In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (19.20)*

#### 2.3 Paul’s decision to visit Rome, his trip to Jerusalem and subsequent voyage to Rome (19.21-28.31).

Summary: *Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (28.31)*

## **Purpose**

As with his Gospel, Luke wrote Acts for someone called Theophilus (Lk. 1.3; Acts 1.1). Since in the Gospel he is addressed as ‘most excellent’ (‘Your Excellency’ in GNB), it is often assumed that Theophilus was a high ranking official of the Roman government (cf. Phil. 4.22), and that Luke’s primary purpose was to commend Christianity to the civil authorities. Alternatively the Greek name *Theophilus* – which means ‘friend of God’ – may be a symbol for the large body of Gentile converts who had attached themselves to the Church. On the first assumption, Acts is a PR statement; on the second, a validation of the claim of the now predominantly Gentile Christian Church to be the legitimate heir of Judaism. The contents of Acts suggest the book was designed to function as both a commendation to non-believers and a confirmation for believers!

Luke makes three main points:

- **Christianity is credible**

Rumours abounded about the new faith, occasioning widespread suspicion of Christianity and dislike of Christians. By the time Luke wrote it is possible that imperial persecution had broken out against Christians.

Luke emphasises that in the period he covers Roman officials had been well-disposed and impartial towards Christians. Roman magistrates were consistently courteous to Paul. In 13.12 Sergius Paulus, governor of Cyprus, becomes a Christian. In Corinth Gallio, Roman proconsul of Achaia (Greece), acts with absolute impartiality in the case brought against Paul (18.12). The magistrates at Philippi apologise publicly to Paul after mistreating him (16.35ff). And the officials of the province of Ephesus – who are described as Paul’s friends – expressed concern that no harm come to Paul (19.31).

Luke is also at pains to show that Christians were good and loyal citizens. In 18.14 Gallio declares that there is no question of misdemeanour or serious crime. In 19.37 the town clerk of Ephesus gives Christians a good testimonial. In 23.29 Claudius Lysias, commander of the Roman regiment in Jerusalem, indicates that no criminal charge had been laid against Paul. In 25.25 Festus, governor of Judea, declares that Paul has done nothing worthy of death, and in 26.32 Herod Agrippa II gives the opinion that Paul could have been released had he not appealed to Caesar.

Some suggest that Acts may have been written as a brief for Paul’s defence at his trial before Caesar. Luke also writes to authenticate Christianity, and the process that made it a predominantly Gentile movement, as the logical continuation of Judaism. He consistently demonstrates how God authorised each step taken by the Church, either through prophetic fulfilment or the specific guidance of the Spirit. This would confirm Gentile Christians that they did, indeed, belong to the historic people of God. In addition, it underlined that their new religion enjoyed the respectability of the ancient religions handed down from antiquity.

- **Christianity is global**

In recording its spread across ethnic and geographical barriers, Luke demonstrates that Christianity is a universal faith for all peoples and nations. This global dimension of Christianity is one of the reasons why it met such strong opposition from many Jewish leaders. They believed that their nation was the only chosen people. Luke proves that this is not so. He shows Philip preaching to Samaritans, and Stephen being martyred for saying that worship of God was no longer to be restricted to the Jerusalem temple. He shows Peter accepting Cornelius, a Roman army officer, into the Church, Christians preaching to the Gentiles at Antioch, the Jerusalem Council deciding to accept Gentiles on equal terms with Jews, and Paul travelling far and wide to win for Christ people of all kinds.

- **Christianity is dynamic**

Luke shows how Christianity expanded because the Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles and others, empowering them to fulfil the mandate to witness from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (1.8).

Repeatedly he emphasises that the apostles were able to achieve what they did because they were ‘filled with the Spirit’ (2.4; 4.8, 31; 6.3-5; 7.55; 9.17; 11.24; 13.9,52).

Acts challenges us today to witness in ways that demonstrate to our generation that Christianity is credible, global and dynamic!