



**“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.” Acts 1:8**

## Church of the Holy Spirit (Part I)

**T**he Bible is full of adventure, but the Acts of the Apostles is perhaps the most adventurous book of all. It takes us to some of the great cities of the ancient world: to holy Jerusalem, wealthy Antioch, scholarly Athens, cosmopolitan Corinth, and powerful Rome. It introduces us to all kinds of people: apostles, prophets, martyrs, philosophers, governors, kings, merchants, jailers, and sailors. It narrates for us a variety of events: dramatic spiritual experiences, missionary journeys, trials and imprisonments, powerful speeches that provoke dramatic responses, sea voyages and a shipwreck, and the clash of ancient cultures.

This work is most thrilling because here we see Christianity in its earliest youth, being lived for the first time in history. But we don't just read about these historical events as objective observers. As members of this same church, we are invited into this adventurous story because we realize in its telling that the adventure continues into the lives of all those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts is open-ended, for it continues into the life of the church and its members in every age.

The Acts of the Apostles is the second volume of a two-part work; the first volume is the Gospel according to Luke. The gospel is the account of Jesus, from his birth to his eternally glorified presence in heaven; Acts is the account of the early church, from its birth at Pentecost to its extended presence reaching out to the whole world. Yet, Jesus is the center of both works. In the first volume he is visibly present; in the second, he is the “absent” Lord who continues to work powerfully in the world through his word and his Spirit. In Acts, Jesus is not a hero from the past; he is the Lord of the present. Though established in his heavenly abode, Jesus continues to be present to his community on earth, empowering mediators to act on his behalf to continue the mission he began.

Luke must have drawn from a variety of earlier sources to write the Acts of the Apostles, just as he drew from several sources for his gospel. There were probably accounts, both oral and written, about the individual heroes of the early church—Peter, John, Stephen, Philip. There must have been collected records of local churches—Antioch, Corinth, Caesarea, Ephesus, and Jerusalem—from which Luke gathered details of events in those places. Perhaps Luke had access to travel diaries written by those who accompanied Paul. It is quite possible that Luke knew some of the influential people from the early churches—people like Barnabas, Timothy, Silas, Philip, Mark, Aquila and Priscilla, and even Paul himself—from whom he collected material for his detailed account of the apostolic church.

There was no shortage of informants and it was probably a case of too much information rather than too little. Luke had to decide what to leave out and what to put in. If we think about all that Luke could have written, we might get frustrated at how little he really tells us. There is much that we would like to know that Luke did not include. We might think that the book was misnamed: for it tells us almost nothing about most of the original twelve apostles, except for a list of their names in 1:13. We read a lot about Peter, and a little about John, James, and Judas, but that is all. Instead, we are introduced to lots of characters who are not apostles. We read about how the church expanded westward, through Greece and into Rome. But we are told nothing about the growth of the church in other directions—south into Egypt or east into Arabia. We certainly would have wanted to read a complete account of the lives of Peter and Paul. We see the deeds of Peter in the first half of Acts, but then we don’t read any more about him. The life of Paul seems complete

as we read, but the book ends with Paul as a prisoner in Rome. The book is left open-ended and seems incomplete.

Acts is the only book we have that narrates the church's earliest history. If Acts had been lost, there is no work that could have taken its place. There are a few hints of events in the early church in Paul's letters, but they do not give us the information we would long to know. What happened to the followers of Jesus? What did they do next? What did they do with the teachings of Jesus and the commission he gave them to continue his work? Without Acts there would be a gaping chasm in the New Testament, with the gospels on one side and the letters on the other. Acts is the necessary link, pulling the New Testament into a complete collection of inspired literature.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What motivates you to want to study the Acts of the Apostles?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What might be some of the reasons why Acts seems incomplete and open-ended?

### **The Holy Spirit as Guide and Inspiration for the Church**

The Acts of the Apostles might more accurately be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is this Spirit of God who is the truest apostle—"the one who is sent" by God to empower and guide the early church. In his narrative, Luke traces

the way the Spirit of God guided the community of disciples from the beginning of the church throughout the early stages of its growth. This same Holy Spirit, we may presume from Acts, continues to direct the church which had its origin at Pentecost and is now two thousand years old.

Luke's description of God's saving plan is marked out in three stages: that of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church. Both Luke's gospel and Acts begin with a transition to a new stage, and both of those transition periods are directed by the Holy Spirit. The birth and infancy narratives at the beginning of Luke's gospel mark the transition from the epoch of Israel to the new age of Jesus. And the birth and early days of the church at the beginning of Acts mark the transition to the new stage of the church.

After the age of Israel in which God's Spirit was diffuse, being bestowed periodically by God to his chosen prophets, priests, and kings, Jesus is uniquely and profusely blessed by the Spirit. This divine Spirit is the agent of God's action in Jesus throughout his life and the dynamism of his ministry. Jesus does not pass on the Spirit until his earthly mission is complete. But following his resurrection and ascension into glory, he bestows his Spirit permanently within his church. Once this community of disciples receives the Spirit, it is able to act as Jesus did. The Spirit that was his alone is now poured out upon them all. Peter proclaims: "having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out this that you both see and hear" (2:33). "Clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49), the community will now minister the presence of Jesus as Lord in the world. From the time of Pentecost, all the major characters in Acts are driven by the Spirit to act courageously and preach boldly. Clearly Luke considers the Holy Spirit to be the "life-principle" of the church.

The Holy Spirit guided the mission of the early church according to God's designs. In what has been called a "triple Pentecost," Luke narrates the gift of the Spirit first to the Jews, then to the Samaritans, and finally to the Gentiles. In the first Pentecost, many Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem accepted Peter's invitation to repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). As Luke narrates the witness of Jesus' disciples expanding to Judea and Samaria, he shows us that many Samaritans began accepting the word of God. So the apostles sent Peter and John to pray for the Spirit with the Samaritans, and they "laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit" (8:17). The final expansion of the good news to non-Jews—the Gentiles—began in

the city of Caesarea. When Peter was speaking to the crowd, he proclaimed that “God shows no partiality” (10:34)—that people from any nation can experience God’s salvation. While he was speaking, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” The Jews who had accompanied Peter were amazed that “the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:44-45). This third outpouring of God’s Spirit indicated that both Jews and Gentiles could be equally endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, thus making way for the expansion of the Christian mission to the whole world. Thus, the Holy Spirit guided the Christian mission, first in Jerusalem, then into Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (1:8). The Spirit drove the church to cross every barrier in proclaiming the gospel.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what ways does Luke show that the Holy Spirit is the life-principle of the early church?

- What does the Holy Spirit encourage the community of disciples to do? How might God’s Spirit be encouraging me as I begin this study of Acts?

### **God’s Salvation Extended to All**

The entire event of Jesus Christ, from his earthly ministry through the expansion of his ministry in his church, is framed by the theme of the salvation of

God. The life of Jesus is prefaced by the proclamation that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6), and Acts concludes with the announcement that “this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles” (Acts 28:28). Jesus was proclaimed as Savior by the angels at his birth, and both Peter and Paul announce that Jesus is Savior for Israel (Acts 5:31; 13:23). By applying this ancient title for God to Jesus himself, Luke assures us that God has brought salvation to the world in Jesus.

God’s whole plan for the world can be described as the history of salvation. This divine plan had been revealed by God in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the events recorded in Luke and Acts are the completion of God’s ancient plan. At the end of the gospel, Jesus told his disciples “that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Acts confirms that the Scriptures of Israel are fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 1:16; 3:18-25). Luke stresses the continuity of God’s plan, which was worked out through the history of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church. Jesus is the center of God’s plan; he unites the past, present, and future. He is the one who was promised in the Hebrew Scriptures and who brought salvation through his life, death, and resurrection. And it is Jesus who continues after his resurrection and ascension to offer salvation to all humanity through his representatives in the early church. Indeed, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The bestowal of the Spirit on both Jews and Gentiles demonstrates that God treats everyone the same, gives the same opportunities to all, and calls upon all people to respond to the salvation he offers through Jesus Christ.

Through the Holy Spirit, God unites Jesus and his church. Luke demonstrates this unity and continuity by showing parallels between Jesus and the apostolic community and between his gospel and Acts. The divine Spirit comes down on the assembled community at Pentecost, dwelling within the disciples and empowering the church, just as the empowering Spirit came to dwell in Jesus at his baptism. As Jesus had an introductory speech setting forth the purpose of his mission (Luke 4), so do his disciples, Peter and Paul (Acts 2:14f; 13:16f). As Jesus raised men and women from the dead (Luke 7:11-17; 8:40-56), so do Peter and Paul in the raising of Tabitha and Eutychus (Acts 9:36-43; 20:7-12). The trials of Jesus have intriguing parallels in the trial scenes of Stephen and Paul in Acts. The farewell discourse of Jesus in Luke 21

parallels the farewell discourse of Paul at Miletus in Acts 20.

These many parallels are the author's way of demonstrating that the life of Jesus continues in his church: like master, like disciple. As Jesus prayed, preached, taught, healed, reconciled, and suffered, so his followers are shown doing the same things. We are invited into this ongoing account as disciples of Jesus. We too are called to do as Jesus did, to be his living presence in the world. This open-ended history continues in the lives of all who receive the "Spirit of Jesus" (16:7), in the lives of people ready to believe, pray, teach, serve, and forgive.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What does God's salvation mean to me? What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Savior of the world?

- What are some of the ways that Luke shows the role of the church in extending God's salvation to the world?

### **The Call to Evangelize the World**

God's desire to bring salvation to the world means that God wants all people everywhere to experience the forgiveness and divine life offered through Jesus Christ. Acts presents this universal will of God by demonstrating the worldwide mission of the church. By filling his gospel with outcasts and marginal-

ized people, Luke began to teach his readers that they are to be witnesses to all people. All kinds of people are the recipients of the mission of Jesus: rich and poor, powerful and weak, men and women, sinners and saints. In Acts we see a further extension of that mission: to widows, centurions, merchants, jailers, philosophers, governors, kings, and sailors. The gospel reaches into the lives of every imaginable kind of person. Disciples of Jesus are to be witnesses to every person throughout the world.

In the programmatic verse of Acts, Jesus commissions his apostles to be witnesses, first “in Jerusalem,” then “in all Judea and Samaria,” and finally “to the ends of the earth” (1:8). This opening-out of the gospel message to a continually wider audience forms the structure of the book. The good news of forgiveness and the manifestation of God’s Spirit is offered first to the Jews in Jerusalem, but then to “all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (2:39).

Beyond Jerusalem, the good news is first spread to the Samaritans (8:4-13). Then the message of salvation is offered to an Ethiopian traveling in Judea (8:26-39). It is then brought to the coastal region, to the inhabitants of Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa (9:31-43). The outreach to the Gentiles, the clearest expression of the church’s universal mission, begins with Peter’s entering the home of Cornelius and the conversion of his household. The Gentile mission is then followed by the mission to the Greeks in Antioch, and then by the long journeys of Paul with his fellow missionaries. The journeys of Paul extend throughout Asia Minor, into Greece, and finally to the capital of the empire, the city of Rome. When Paul travels to Rome, his witness to Christ has truly become universal; the mission has extended “to all the nations.”

This extension of salvation to the Gentiles does not mean that God has taken back his promises to Israel. Luke struggles with the fact that the majority of Jews did not come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, yet he never gave up on the “hope of Israel” (28:20). Luke makes it clear that thousands of Jews in Jerusalem converted in response to the apostles’ preaching (2:41; 4:4). The Jewish-Christian community grows steadily in number as more and more Jews join the community of believers (5:14; 6:7). Before showing the mission of Paul to convert the Gentiles, Luke wants to show us that God is faithful to his own historical people. Yet, even for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, the mission to the Jews is primary. Consistently Paul goes first to the synagogue of each town and preaches to the Jews. Even when his message is rejected



there and Paul states that he is turning to the Gentiles, he never gives up on his fellow Jews. Even the final scene of Acts shows Paul preaching the message of salvation, “from the law of Moses and the prophets” (28:23), to the Jewish people of Rome. Luke reports that “some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe” (28:24).

Acts presents for us a church made up of all kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles, the alienated and outcasts, apostles and martyrs. From Jerusalem to Rome, the people of God grow in number and devotion, accepting the gift of salvation which is offered to all. The community of those “saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (15:11) is destined to spread to the ends of the earth.

### Reflection and discussion

- In what way does the programmatic verse at the beginning of Acts (1:8) outline the entire scope of the book and the church’s mission?

- How does my own life seem to fit into God’s saving plan for the world?

### Prayer

*Lord God, you raised up Luke to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ and to evangelize through his writing the Acts of the Apostles. Prepare my heart to experience the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit through the pages of this inspired work. Show me how to take these words to heart and to meditate upon them. Stir up within me a deep desire to respond to the Spirit’s promptings and guidance as I seek to follow the way of Jesus in the world. Keep me faithful these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer which your word offers to me.*