

Acts: A Historical-Doctrinal/Theological Narrative or What?

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Acts is a very essential book for today's church for it unveils the early church's activities or events which would have otherwise remained enshrouded and hidden behind the page of history. There would have been far much more unwarranted speculation than presently obtains. Although not all details are available to satisfy our curious enquiry or speculation, there is none the less sufficient information, structure and guidance that can be drawn from Luke's recorded historical account for frame working today's church. For instance, the appointment of Deacons would have been considered a mere church tradition arising from people's ingenuity and creative thinking rather than from Apostolic and therefore divine instruction (Acts 6; I Timothy 3; Titus 1). A cursory reading of the volume in question opens a mine of information that highlights the power, triumphs and challenges of the early church as God raised key people to champion the cause of Christ right across the Roman Empire and beyond. It was a brave day, for instance, when the apostle Paul ventured into Europe setting foot into Philippi, onward to Berea, Athens and Corinth (Acts 16 & 17). This itinerary is only possibly traced and deciphered when one interacts with the book of Acts. For one to grasp and appreciate the early church practice or indeed the epistles, they need to deeply and thoroughly internalise the gospels and Acts then things make better sense as some scholars have rightly observed (Renwick & Harman 12). In our short enquiry, we seek to establish the nature, value of the book, its purpose and whether it is a mere historical account or authoritatively doctrinal manual as well. In short, is Acts merely history or doctrinal as well? Can we draw doctrinal instruction from it for our belief and practice today? In attempting at arriving at our objective, we accordingly give what is perceived necessary back ground information before drawing a conclusion. Let us therefore pause a while and patiently scan through the book to see what gems we come up with.

Author, primary target, intent, location and time of writing

The Author of the book has generally been regarded as Luke, a Greek believed to have been from the Syrian Antioch church where Paul laboured some time in his ministry (Ryle 25; African Bible commentary 1297). He is also believed to be the writer of Luke's gospel though some recent schools of thought have

attempted to suggest otherwise pointing to Silas, Timothy, Titus or some other such person as possible authors (Berkhof 63). Both internal and external evidence appears to overwhelmingly point to Dr Luke, the beloved physician¹ that took pains to collate and compile an accurate record of the gospel. A similar effort is undertaken in relation to the book of the Acts (i.e. to compile an accurate factual historical account) because the preface or prologue addresses the same individual or group of people; Theophilus. Furthermore, the writer of this book refers to a “former book” which evidently could be the gospel in question. Thus, we can safely conclude that Dr Luke bequeathed the world a two-volume series that details the life of Jesus, Ministry and progress of the early church (African Bible Commentary 1297). Although some have attempted to dispute the authorship of Luke based on several grounds (such as language, place names, titles etc used by Luke) in preference to other possible authors or a collection of them, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the same author of Luke’s gospel indeed produced this historical ecclesiastical manual (Zondervan NIV study Bible 1681). One case in point where debate arises are the “we” sections in the Acts narrative that seems to suggest that the primary author was with the Apostles in action at some points and not at others therefore relying on second hand narrations which s/he compiled into one lengthy volume. This alone generates problems relating to inspiration, authenticity, integrity or veracity of the text. The debate rages on none the less. The themes of the book may vary² but narrate events as they actually unfolded from period to period, sometimes covering only tiny but significant aspects of a given decade. The primary target for this volume is clearly Theophilus, whom Luke styles “Most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1), probably because he was a noble man of high standing or influence in society³ (so Hale suggests 294)⁴. The secondary target readership is obviously the wider Christian or perhaps even the secular world from all rank and file of society, whether Jews, Greeks or other Gentiles across the world. The narration therefore unveils epoch making events demonstrating as to how the gospel initially commenced with the Jews later spreading to other parts of the known world, thanks to persecution and proactive ministry of the early evangelistic believers like Philip (Acts 7; 8; 11). The book of Acts is of universal application to the entire world because it is relevant whether to the Jew or Gentile alike. Evidently, each group initially grappled with unique challenges with respect to the gospel and its implications as revealed in the narrative text (e.g. Acts 11:1-3; 15:1-7). Although the title “Acts” is too general and hardly gives an accurate picture of its message, it none the less gives an idea of what transpired. The addition of the phrase “of the Apostles” after “Acts” hardly makes things better because the book does not

¹ Ryle has even preached a sermon to that effect as inscribed in his “Upper Room” volume published by the Banner of Truth Trust

² Though Louis Berkhof splits the book into two parts for convenience.

³ Others authorities like Dr Ferrell Griswold suggest that Luke uses the word “most excellent” in relation to Theophilus because he himself (i.e. Luke) was a freed slave who probably had previously served the said Theophilus and later became a physician (i.e. Luke).

⁴ Hale says the following on page 294: “After Luke had written his history, he sent both parts of it (Luke & Acts) to a Roman official whom Luke calls most excellent Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). Nothing else is known about this Theophilus.”

evenly cover the work of all the Apostles. It is selective or gives a general passing comment of this great company of pioneering saints. Largely, Peter and Paul take the centre stage while some of the other Apostles are mentioned in passing such as John. Others, however, prefer to style the book “Acts of the Holy Spirit” both to give it a divine touch as well as to escape the tag of “Apostles” as the primary architects of the phenomenal feats that took place in those early ecclesiastical days. A further concern is to give the book a more focused representative theme rather than too wide a title of “Acts of the Apostles” when in fact only a select few are mentioned in the book. Whatever position one elects to take or uphold, they cannot help notice the finger of God at work among His people and in the world at that critical formative stage of Christianity’s existence. For instance, how can one explain the sudden conversion of over 3,000 souls in one day (Acts 2:41)? What about the vision Peter saw and subsequent inclusion of the Gentiles to the fold (Acts 10)? These and many other incidences show that the target was much broader than Theophilus or the Jews themselves for it is the story of God at work in the world recorded for our learning and encouragement.

But when and from where (i.e. location) was the book written? What was the author’s intent in scribbling a detailed accurate account of events as they unfolded? The exact date and location of writing is unknown except to say that the book must have been completed before the death of Paul in AD 68 because the book ends at chapter 28 with the apostle still under house arrest pending appeal and a judgment. It is probable that Paul was briefly released but later re-arrested and condemned to death, by Nero as some suggest (e.g. Hale 294). In between the imprisonments, Paul may have undertaken another Missionary journey and written some epistles which have been left as a lasting record of activities beyond Acts 28 (Fox 4)⁵. The Spirit continued to work in the church in amazing ways, some of which are recorded in the book of Acts. George Smeaton has done an excellent job in tracing this divine work in his classic volume on the Holy Spirit (259-290). This is a very detailed treatment and certainly worth a serious perusal. Another, William Cunningham, has done an excellent work in Historical Theology which would shed more light on those early days, though admittedly, the only reliable and best historical account is the Acts text itself for it narrates things exactly as they happened, plain, simple and straight forward. From the foregoing, we can safely suggest that the book was complete before AD 68 (probably between AD 60-68 so suggests Hale 294; Zondervan NIV study Bible 1680) and the primary author is Dr Luke both from the content and writing style argument perspectives.

⁵ John Fox has left a great record in relation to the earlier apostles one of which is Paul. He gives a short but moving account stating the following about the apostle in question: “Paul, the apostle, who before was called Saul, after his great travail and unspeakable labors in promoting the Gospel of Christ, suffered also in this first persecution under Nero....This done, the soldiers came and led him out of the city to the place of execution, where he, after his prayers made, gave his neck to the sword.” Pp4

Significant figures and events in the book

The book may be divided into several parts but some like Louis Berkhof have suggested two parts, which we tend to strongly agree with. The reason is that the narrative clearly has some kind of focus parts whose resolution differs depending on the epoch and stage in church development. Naturally, one would expect an early and later narration. The said segments are roughly two unequal parts because the first nine chapters or so tend to focus on the Jewish church, Peter and early occurrences in the church. The second part still has some Jewish components but tends to transition from Palestinian domain to other parts of the Roman world in keeping with the expectations of the church as instructed by the Lord before he ascended to glory (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16; Acts 1:1-5 etc). The good news moves from Jerusalem, to Samaria and ends of the earth in that fashion just as Jesus instructed. Thus, the second part focuses on the spread of the gospel to Gentile territory and individuals. The continuation of the Church was indeed led by God as He wrought outstanding and mighty miracles through His appointed agents, the apostles among them. In the first section then, the Acts records the ascension of Christ, the upper room meetings and bold preaching of the apostles (Acts 1-5). It tells of how the church was first within the Judaistic wing, (i.e. met in the Temple or even synagogues etc) but later there was a radical separation due to conflicting values, doctrines or practices, especially that of incorporating the Gentiles (e.g. Acts 15). Peter and John emerge as prominent early leaders in those formative days with the former undertaking some evangelistic activities around the Jewish world, having been powerfully reinstated by the Lord as recorded in John 21. The Acts 2 event (i.e. Pentecost experience) emboldens the believers who not only become daring but ready to lay down their lives for the cause of Christ. Later on, James⁶, probably the brother of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:13-21; Galatians 1:19; 2:9), emerges as a towering figure that would guide the church into troubled times ahead.

In the second segment of the book, the “we” sections of Luke’s narratives become more frequent. This suggests that the Doctor travelled with the evangelistic teams that were led by Paul, who himself was drawn from the fringes by Barnabas, the son of encouragement (Acts 11:25-26; Galatians 2:1). Paul takes some missionary trips around the Roman world, blasting the gospel as he goes around, facing affliction, persecution and rejection in the process (II Corinthians 11:16-33). Paul, a mighty scholar and ready mind is uniquely fitted to take on the mission trips to the Gentile world (Galatians 2:9), able to engage and persuade them to come into the fold although he still laments about his own countrymen that sadly preferred darkness rather than light (e.g. Romans 10:1; Acts 14:19-20; Acts 17:5-7).

⁶ Note that there are different “James” mentioned in the book of Acts styled as the less and the greater. James the less who is not Jesus’ brother is mentioned in Acts 12:2 while the Lord’s brother is mentioned in Acts 15:13-21.

But there are other figures in the book, of course not as consistently prominent as Paul or Peter. We have the account of the church at Jerusalem, Ananias and his wife Saphira (Acts 5), Stephen (Acts 6 & 7), Philip (Acts 8), The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8), James the less (Acts 12), Timothy (Acts 16), Silas, Barnabas, John Mark (Acts 11; 13; 16), Simon Magus, Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16), the and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16) among other key characters. These names are so important in this great narrative enterprise that took place in those early days of the faith. There are equally important events recorded in the book for our learning, some as points of instruction while others for information only since they cannot possibly be repeated, at least not in exactly the same fashion. That gives Acts its primary historical function. Examples abound but a few should suffice for our purposes: The Pentecost event, the church life around the Temple courts, the powerful prayers shaking buildings, the miraculous escape of Peter, the raising from the dead of Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12), the Macedonian call, the miraculous escape in the ship wreck and several countless miracles dotted right across the scripture such as the serpent not harming Paul etc all point to non repeatable events but exceptionally important for establishing or confirming the gospel. The gospel of Mark alluded to some of these events as did the gospel of John focusing on the 'signs'. Then there is the evidence of differing religious, ethical or ritual practices such as around the Temple, synagogue, Greek mythology, philosophical approaches among many. The Roman law is clearly evident at several points and demonstrates that the book of Acts is broader than Palestine in its scope and design. The book may very well be dubbed the "fifth gospel" or a continuation of what Jesus begun to do through his apostles and the church at large. Dr Campbell Morgan has expressed similar sentiments (Morgan 9). By implication, this means that the book is not primarily doctrinal but a historical account from which lessons may be drawn for application in different ages. As one reads through the book, they cannot help getting the impression that the author was a clear minded and well polished writer that definitely knew what they wanted to factually communicate or report. His writing style, order and unique words that the writer employs make the book stand out from the crowd. The writer definitely appears to be very well acquainted with the Pauline writings or at least may have heavily been influenced by the great apostle to the Gentiles because both his gospel and historical narrative (i.e. Acts) seem to be most in sync with the epistles, save a few instances which seem to be at variance with the epistles. An example of such a variance are the Acts and Galatians 1 & 2 narratives which do not seem to tie in so well but a good exegesis or further research and enquiry should resolve this apparent disjoint.

As earlier alluded to, a grasp of this book will definitely open up a world of understanding for the reader as the epistles make more and more sense. The reader is therefore encouraged to take a curious inquisitive tour through the book to appreciate what is being suggested here. One thing more begs mention here. The volume, while narrating historical events also gives some sense of direction and instruction of some points. Quite right, events unfolded as they are recorded but a pattern also emerges. One of them is how the church is inaugurated right

from Acts 1. The disciples are instructed to wait for the promised Holy Spirit who comes upon the Jews in Acts 2, the semi Jews and lastly the Gentiles. Another example is the issue of church government and church offices. The Presbyterian system would argue that when all the evangelistic work was done, the missionaries were responsible to and reported back to the elders at Jerusalem. Others would argue that each church was independent with ruling elders who had a loose connection to the Jerusalem church. Still others argue that the model in Acts was not yet developed because things were in formative stage and not as complex but later, there was need to have some formal structure. As such, the Acts model cannot be used as an authoritative model. About leadership structures, the question comes, was the Acts 6 even meant to be permanent or situational? Are Deacons elders too or are they below elders? Further, does one first serve as a Deacon before they ascend to eldership? Are the church officers to be males only or was it a cultural issue at play not binding today? These and many questions arise but again, the best recourse are the scriptures themselves, whether the Acts historical account or the epistles where clear instructions are given. One point however is established, some doctrinal instruction may be derived from the book of Acts to a limited and qualified extent⁷.

Perceived problems with Acts

The book stands as a land mark write up; detailed, organised and covers a large span of nearly three decades. A write up of such a nature or complex magnitude cannot therefore fail to attract criticism, questions or scepticism. Acts mentions place names, geographical locations or offices which sometimes are difficult to prove or decipher. Thanks to the work of archaeology, some of these previously bugging questions are now continuously being resolved and put many matters to rest. Thus, the volume has been attacked on nomenclature, language and consistency with other parts of scripture, namely the epistles. For instance, the prison epistles (i.e. Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians) cannot be placed anywhere in the Acts narrative. The best explanation is that Paul probably did have another missionary trip which is not recorded in the page of Acts. The Pastoral Epistles are another set of books that have posed problems to place in the narrative. When were they written exactly and by whom? Where can they be placed in the Missionary endeavours of Paul? Furthermore, the language of Acts is so refined (i.e. the Greek in the book is of very high standard) and one wonders whether Dr Luke actually wrote the book let alone wrote it single handedly. Some argue that other people other than Luke wrote the book while still others claim that what Luke did was actually to simply collate and compile the narrative. Yet another problem area is the “we” narrative sections which may suggest that the writer travelled with the missionary parties most places they went to. A question then arises, what about the other sections not having a similar narrative form or note, was Luke absent? If so, who then recorded those

⁷ Some people however hold a different view that Acts is only historical and not doctrinal. That view is equally respected but has its own problems.

parts and how reliably authentic are they? These and other parts of the book invite questions. However, the divine stamp on the book is evident. Though Luke wrote to Theophilus (probably a noble person⁸ or a group of people that loved God), God was behind this entire enterprise, ensuring only what was relevant and important was recorded and preserved for our learning. God has worked through history to establish His church against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail.

Interpretation and approach to the book

The book under consideration must be viewed and approached as factual eye witness account right across from the first to the last chapter, although the narrative style varies across the work. The volume does not contain obscure passages or 'difficult to understand' parts of scripture. It is a plain narrative of historical occurrences as events unfolded in the early church. Thus, the book must be taken literary as an accurate narration of what actually transpired. The historical genre is at play, highlighting simple plain facts. This includes the geographical descriptions, place names, titles etc. Place names may not occur in the same sense as they did then but they are true, at times vindicated by progressive on-going excavative discoveries in the respective places where the account takes us. For instance, Ephesus was the hub of the worship of the goddess Diana (or 'Artimus') believed to have fallen from the sky (Acts 19:23-27). There are both some cultural world view aspects as well as the geographical and commercial aspects all intertwined in the narrative.

Lasting lessons from Acts

The indelible lessons and land marks planted in the book, many and near between. They are timeless and yet essential for the Christian interested in knowing about the wonders of God's grace in history. Below, we point out some salient lessons that we pick from and about the nature of the book at hand:

1. Christians need to take up the challenge of writing thereby contributing to the record of Church history. Luke wrote two lengthy and detailed narratives from which we can learn. We express ourselves differently but each contributes to narrating the wonders of God in each historical epoch. (Acts 1:1)
2. Acts is a factual historical narrative of how the church was inaugurated and progressed. It is also a resource from which we can learn some valuable doctrinal or ethical practices as they unfolded in those early years to help us in our current scenario.

⁸ Hale suggests that this was a Roman official pp 294

3. Some of the occurrences in the book are non-repeatable (and to some extent context specific) while others may be applied in any age.

4. The book mostly narrates ordinary events in ways that anyone can relate to them and yet at the same time highlights the omnipotent hand of God at work among His people across the ages and decades.

5. Acts is a very long, detailed narrative and yet very interesting and captivating. Saints must put pen to paper for future generations.

6. God wrought miraculous signs and wonders through the apostles, not they themselves being the primary source of the said supernatural activities. God can still do amazing things in our day.

7. The church needs to be bold and courageous in the face of any threat, even certain death. Only God by His Spirit can enable such daring stances. The church prayed much calling upon God to intervene and so should we. Thus, this narrative should serve both as an encouraging sign post from the past as well as evoke praise and trust in a mighty God able to preserve His own (Acts 4:23-31).

8. God can and will save/deliver anybody regardless of race, ethnic background or status. The various pictures/portraits of different individuals we encounter across the page of scripture are definitely instructive. Remember Felix, Festus or Simon Magus!

9. There will be some “false brethren” even in the holiest church. It is therefore prudent to be aware of such and not be entirely surprised when apostasy occurs amongst us, though not desirable (e.g. Acts 20: 29-31).

10. The apostles were ‘all sold out to the gospel’ and were ready even to die for the truth. So should we (Acts 20:24; 21:13, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, Philippians 1:21).

11. Not all of us will be prominent to the same degree in our service to Christ as was the case with Paul and Peter in relation to the other apostles. The case of Barnabas and Apollos (Acts 18:24-28; I Corinthians 3:1-9) make interesting reading because one wonders why these were not apostles in the same sense that the others like Peter or Paul were. Their ministry was definitely very effective, at times eclipsing even some lesser known or written about apostles of Jesus Christ. Self-consecration is the secret.

After reading through this marathon narrative, consistently and meditatively, the saint is left panting for more because God did amazing things in those distant past days. May He do so again among us in the midst of the years!

Conclusion

The book of Acts, sometimes styled “Acts of the Apostles”, is a very critical book bridging Jesus’ ministry with the first three decades of the Christian era after the Lord ascended to glory. Its scope is wide but captures critical points that would inform and instruct the present day saint. A good grasp of Acts is essential background information for understanding the epistles and their message. Although not primarily doctrinal/theological in nature, valuable lessons can be drawn from this volume, although some events are non-repeatable. Every Christian and indeed Bible scholar should and must not only peruse through but master this book that flowed from the pen of Dr Luke. We would therefore argue that the book has both historical as well as doctrinal value though the former takes the upper hand. Theological matters are best established from the Epistles rather than in this book.

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