

What Kind of Church Could We Be? Teaching the Book of Acts

- Acts is the one NT book classified as “History.” May have to overcome the bad odor that history classes have left hovering around that word (names, dates, facts, tests)
- History = story; ancient histories told with purpose of teaching lessons for life. We reach the theology of Acts through the story Acts tells.
- A story involves a number of *characters* in a meaningful sequence of events, or *plot*. We get to the teaching or theology of Acts by being drawn into this story.
- Acts is the sequel to or continuation of the story begun in the Gospel according to Luke (compare Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1–2), so it’s helpful to take Luke’s first volume into account.
- Luke as “the first Restorationist” (Tony Ash). Luke writes Acts as if to say: See what God did in the first Christian generation through fallible disciples who put their trust in him and opened themselves to the power of his Spirit; see the fellowship his Spirit brought into being! If we open ourselves to the power of the risen Christ, what kind of church could God make of us, and what could he do through us to advance his redemptive mission?

Who is the main character in the Book of Acts?

- The 12? (chaps. 1–5; Jerusalem)
- The 7? (6:1–9:31; to Samaria)
- Peter? (9:32–12:24; Judea)
- Paul? (12:25–28:31; toward the ends of the earth)
- The Holy Spirit? (from chap. 2:1)
- Jesus the resurrected Lord
 - Acts 1:1 “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (RSV, NIV; untranslated NRSV)
 - Acts 2:33–34
 - cf. 3:6, 16; 4:10–12, 30; 9:5, 17; 16:7
 - Parallels between the ministry the Spirit empowers in Jesus (cf. Luke 4:1) and in Jesus’ disciples
 1. Like Jesus, Peter preaches repentance to Israel (Acts 2:14–42; 3:11–26; cf. Luke 4:14–30 etc.), heals a paralytic (Acts 9:32–35; cf. Luke 5:17–26), raises a dead girl (Acts 9:36–42; cf. Luke 8:40–56), encounters a faithful centurion (Acts, chap. 10; cf. Luke 7:1–10), defends inviting sinners/Gentiles to accept salvation (Acts 11:1–18, 15:6–11; cf. Luke, chap. 15)
 2. Like Jesus, Stephen preaches in synagogue (Acts 6:8–10; cf. Luke 4:16–30 etc.), is accused before the high priest and council (Acts 6:11–14; cf. Luke 22:66–71), defends himself by warning of coming divine judgment (6:15–7:53; cf. Luke 22:67–68) and is martyred for his testimony (Acts 7:54–58; cf. Luke 23:13–49), humbly entrusting his spirit to God and praying for his killers’ forgiveness as he died (Acts 7:59–60; cf. Luke 23:34, 46)
 3. Like Jesus, Paul expounds the Scriptures, especially the prophet Isaiah, in synagogues (Acts 9:20–22; 13:13–49, 17:1–3, etc.; cf. Luke 4:16–27) and awakens opposition (Acts 13:50–51; 17:4–9; cf. Luke 4:28–30), travels extensively preaching and teaching on a course that culminates in public preaching and arrest in Jerusalem

(Acts, chaps. 13–14, 16:1–22:29; cf. Luke 9:51–21:38, 22:47–53), and testifies to God’s salvation before the high priest and council, the ruling house of Herod, and the Roman governor (Acts 22:30–26:32; cf. Luke 22:66–23:25)

The story Acts tells

•Building blocks Luke uses

1. Episodes (e.g., 1:6–13, 15–26; 2:1–41)
2. Speeches (e.g., 1:15–25; 2:14–36; 3:12–26; 7:1–53; 10:34–43; 11:4–17; 13:16–43; 15:7–11, 13–21; 17:22–34; 20:17–38; 21:37–22:21; 26:1–23; 28:23–28)
3. Summaries (e.g., 1:14; 2:41–47; 4:32–35)

•Pentecost as the model of the Spirit’s extension of Jesus’ ministry (ch. 2)

- Gathering of steadfast disciples (2:1)
- Act of divine power (2:2–4)
- Occasion for testimony (2:5–13)
- Disciples bear witness (2:14–40)
- Response brings repentance, confession, baptism, and formation and growth of a fellowship of steadfast disciples (2:41–47) — and, later, opposition

•The advance of the saving word of God (4:31; 6:7; 8:4, 14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:49)

- Fulfillment of prophetic promises (cf. Luke 24:25–27, 32, 44–47;
 - * Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:17–21
 - * Ps 16:8–11 in Acts 2:25–31 (cf. 13:35)
 - * Ps 110:1 in Acts 2:32–36; 5:31
 - * Deut 18:15, 18–19 and Lev 23:29 in Acts 3:22–23 (cf. Acts 7:37)
 - * Gen 22:18 (cf. 12:3; 18:18) in Acts 3:25 (cf. Gen 12:1 in Acts 7:2)
 - * Ps 2:1 in Acts 4:25–26 (cf. 13:33)
 - * Isa 53:7–8 in Acts 8:32–33
 - * Isa 55:3 in Acts 13:34
 - * Hab 1:5 in Acts 13:41
 - * Isa 49:6 in Acts 13:47 (cf. Luke 2:32)
- Progress across national boundaries (Luke 24:44–49; cf. Acts 2:5–12)
- Progress across geographical boundaries (Acts 1:6–8)
- Progress in the face of obstacles from outside (e.g., 4:1ff; 5:17ff; 6:11ff; 7:54–8:3; 9:1ff; 12:1ff) and inside the fellowship (e.g., Acts 5:1ff; 6:1ff; 11:1ff; chap. 15; 21:17–25)
- Progress across social boundaries (“Here comes everybody” — men/women, rich/poor, Jews/Gentiles)

•The inspiration of a fellowship. What kind of church could we be?

- A witnessing church (even in face of rejection; cf. 7:35, 54–60; 28:23–28)
- A worshiping church (cf. 2:42, 46; 4:23–31; 13:1–3)
- A welcoming church (cf. chaps. 10–11)
- A wealth-sharing church (cf. 2:42ff; 4:32ff)
- A waiting church (cf. 1:6–11)