

Acts

I. Introduction.

- A. Theme of Acts: The continuing work of Jesus Christ to extend His kingdom by His Spirit through His church.
- B. Introductory Notes. It is the continuing work of Christ because He began the work during His earthly ministry to save the elect by His sinless life, His sacrificial and atoning death, and His resurrection from the dead. Luke, the author of Acts, implies that it should be viewed this way when, in Acts 1:1-2, he refers to the gospel account he wrote: “The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.”

II. The Extension of the Church in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Chapters 1-12.

A. The Beginning of the Continued Work in Jerusalem. 1:1 - 4:22.

1. Preparation.

- a. Jesus prepares the apostles for the work. 1:1-11.
- b. The apostles and disciples prepare by prayer. 1:12-14.
- c. The apostles prepare by filling the empty apostleship of Judas. 1:15-26. Even in this it was Christ at work by His providence in the control of the lot.

2. Power from on High. 2:1-13.

- a. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit. 2:1-4.
- b. The gift of tongues. 2:5-13. It should be noted that this chapter reveals the Biblical definition of the extraordinary revelatory gift of tongues. The one side of the gift that the Spirit made operative was to enable His apostles to speak in a known human language in which they had not been raised or trained. The other side of the gift that

the Spirit made operative was that the hearers heard the preaching of God's word in their own native language. The event of preaching God's word in tongues was the foreshadowing of the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire and on to the uttermost ends of the earth. Notice Peter's leadership in the fulfillment of Christ's promise and instruction found in Luke 22:31-32.

3. Preaching.

- a. Peter's first sermon. 2:14-36. It resulted in Christ's gathering in of more than 3,000 by the power of the Spirit through the preaching of His servant.
- b. The church's life. 2:42. The church established its life focused and structured by the means of grace.
- c. The church's communion of the saints and fellowship. 2:43-47. The church's life focused and structured by these also. Signs accompany the apostles as revelatory attestations to the messenger and the Message, and as confirmations of Christ's divine work through His Spirit as well as of His fulfillment of His promise in Matt. 28:20.
- d. The healing of the lame man at the temple. 3:1-10.
- e. Peter's second sermon. 3:11-26. Note the connection of another spiritual gift, miracles, with revelation of the Word of God prior to its writing, and used by Christ through the Spirit to attest to the message of Christ and the gospel, and to its apostolic messenger.
- f. First persecution. 4:1-11. The arrest of Peter and John which leads to an opportunity for Peter's third sermon as witness and testimony to Christ and the gospel before the Jewish leaders. This was partial fulfillment of Matt. 10:17-20; Luke 21:12-15. Note the threats as part of the persecution.

4. The Life of the Church. Christ continues to work through it to sanctify and care for His people as well as call the elect. But the testimony given by His care and sanctification of the church is part of what He uses to draw the interest of the unbeliever to the gospel. Note the

prayer of God's people in time of trouble (4:23-31). It reflects dependence on and trust in God, acknowledging His decree regarding both Christ and themselves, the display of God's power to reassure, and their focus on the continuing work of the gospel. Note the life of care for fellow Christians (4:32-36), "as any has need." Note the perversion of the church's care by Ananias and Sapphira: their wrong, self-aggrandizing motive, their lie, and the first NT church discipline to answer it. Note also a proof of the Deity of the Holy Spirit ("lied to the Holy Spirit...lied to God"). Note also that when trouble comes into the church to disrupt its life, once the trouble is resolved and the trial is past, the church prospers (5:12-16). The people of Judah start to come into Jerusalem for the ministry of the Word and healing, transitioning slowly into the second phase of the Great Commission. When the Word is preached, persecution is plainly a part of the life of the church (5:17-42), and it is to bring us joy (5:41).

5. The Structure of the Church. 6:1-7. Christ prepared it for further organization, growth, and ministry through a trial by adding to the offices.
6. Preparing for the next stage in the extension of the church. 6:8 - 7:60.
  - a. Stephen's preaching of the gospel and apologetics.
  - b. Stephen's defense when arraigned by the Sanhedrin is another sermon of sorts. His main points to the Jews: 1). God is God over all the world, not just the promised land; 2). God is God over all people, not just Jews; 3). God does the saving and sets us on our journey to the promised land (even the eternal one); 4). God is not confined to a place because a place is holy, but a place is holy because God is manifest there; 5). Furthermore, the Jews began their disobedience and injustice long before Moses and the tabernacle or temple: they rejected Joseph, too, in a foreshadowing of what would come. They blasphemed God long before there was a temple, and Stephen did not blaspheme God by speaking truth about what would happen to the temple; 6). Further still, the Jews thought they had God locked up for themselves in the temple.

They did not understand that the gospel and their privileged status gave them the responsibility to take the gospel to all nations. Christians and the church can fall into the same trap today.

- c. The persecution of Stephen. It was not the destruction of the church, but the instrument and catalyst for scattering the disciples. By this, the church was driven by God's providence into the next stage of the Great Commission.

B. The Extension of the Church into Judea and Samaria. Chapters 8-12.

1. The apostles remained in Jerusalem during persecution.
2. Other leaders, along with the disciples, scattered, so the gospel went into the rest of Judea.
3. Samaria. Phillip, one of the seven deacons in Acts 6 (not the apostle Phillip), preached the gospel to Samaria (the former Northern Kingdom in Israel) in the city of Samaria. He filled the extraordinary office of evangelist as well as the ordinary office of deacon (Acts 21:8), as Stephen had. The conversions under Phillip's preaching were real, the Holy Spirit having regenerated hearts and instilled faith; but the Spirit was not yet given in the special, miraculous way that was associated ONLY with the apostles as a sign and revelatory gift. Peter and John came, and the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit in that way that wrought tongues and tangibly accomplished and demonstrated the unity of the church that the Spirit inhabiting His church would preserve from then on. It would not be limited to Jews, but would extend to those saved out of syncretistic religions. Simon Magus thought that Christianity and the Holy Spirit were just another form of magic; he had only professed faith to advance his professional and occult interests.
  - a. Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. A converted Jew was then truly converted to Christian faith by God's preached Word. He took Christianity back to Ethiopia, where it flourished for hundreds of years.
4. The conversion of Saul on the Damascus road. Christ saved him and commissioned him as an apostle. He didn't take up all the duties of that office immediately (see Gal. 1:15-18).

5. Peter's ministry. It extended throughout Judea.
  - a. The miracles: the healing of Aeneas; the raising of Dorcas.
  - b. The connected visions of Peter and Cornelius. They lead to Peter's preaching the gospel and conversion of Cornelius's household. The Spirit fell upon them and they spoke in tongues because this was the first inclusion of Gentiles in the NT scheme and marked their inclusion in the church and unification with it. Peter reported it to Jerusalem where the first shades of the Judaizer problem showed up.
  - c. The gospel went to Antioch, which became a center of the Gentile church and base for missionary operations to the Gentiles.
  - d. The martyrdom of James. This left an apostolic ministry open for Paul to fill, for which he had already been preparing at Antioch.
  - e. Peter's arrest and deliverance by the angel in answer to the church's prayer.
6. The death of Herod. This marked a transition in Acts to a focus on Paul's ministry in the second portion of the book.

### III. Christ's Extension of the Church to the Uttermost Ends of the Earth. Chapters 13-28.

- A. Paul's First Missionary Journey. Chapters 13 - 14:28. Christ extends the church to Cyprus and Asia Minor; i.e., the eastern church.
  1. The sending of missionaries Saul/Paul and Barnabas. 13:1-4. We can draw from this text the Biblical structure and government of a regional church by a presbytery; the "church" in Antioch was not just one huge congregation with several pastors, but several congregations in the city of Antioch as a region, each with a prophet/teacher, or at most two, pastoring it. We can also draw from this text that a call to ministry is issued by the Spirit of Christ *through the church*, and is not a valid call unless the church, through its officers, certifies the man called, and the church, through its congregation, concurs and calls the man to service.
  2. To Cyprus. Paul immediately established the pattern he would follow from then on. He preached in synagogues to Jews first, before preaching to Gentiles outside. He also went to

a leading man with influence (the proconsul). He drew opposition from the false teacher Bar-Jesus (Elymas), but God put a stop to the opposition by showing miraculously that God's Word is superior to false teaching and cannot be halted.

3. To Pisidian Antioch.
  - a. This is a different city from Syrian Antioch, from which Paul was sent. Mark left Paul and Barnabas on the way there.
  - b. The synagogue officials asking them to speak is NOT a Biblical warrant for anyone and everyone to be invited into the pulpit. Either Paul was recognized to be a rabbi, or the synagogue officials had wandered off track.
  - c. Paul's sermon. It was arranged in three central points: 1). The history of Israel that revealed God's promise of a Savior, leading up to His advent. 2). Jesus presented as the Christ whom Scripture said would fulfill the promise, especially focused on His death and resurrection, with Scripture proof that He would be raised from the dead as proof of salvation by His death. 3). The offer of salvation by faith in Jesus, and a warning against neglecting the message (cf. Heb. 2:6).
  - d. Opposition. It followed, as usual, after Paul preached the gospel. The rest of his pattern is more specifically revealed with his preaching to the Gentiles after the Jews rejected the gospel.
4. To Iconium. Paul followed the same pattern. When Christ by the Spirit converted many and established a good foundation for the church, persecution forced Paul and Barnabas on to the next location.
5. To Lystra. A miracle attended the preaching, but was misconstrued. The people tried to give pagan worship to Paul and Barnabas, but they stopped it. They also used it as an opportunity to preach the gospel from the aspect of God as Creator, using a point of contact the Christian has with all men because all are made in the image of God.
6. To Derbe and return. Few details are given about the ministry to Derbe except that the Word

was effectual unto salvation for many. Their return through previously established churches gives basic principles of Presbyterian church government (14:23) and missionary procedure (14:27, 28 - reporting to the church and furlough).

- B. Jerusalem Council. Chapter 15:1-35. Christ established the church further by the inclusion of Gentiles as Gentiles, without the need to convert to Judaism. This established the church, by God's Word, also, as trans-national and trans-cultural. Furthermore, it showed that Christ is the Head of the church and therefore established church government, providing a sound foundation for the church's continuation.
- C. Paul's Second Missionary Journey. Chapters 15:36 - 18:22. Christ Extends His Church to Europe.
  - 1. The vision of the man from Macedonia and progress to Philippi. By the leading of the Holy Spirit forbidding Paul and his companions to go north and east, the gospel transitioned from the Middle East to Europe (Greece). By God's plan and providence, the gospel went west, and the progress of Western Civilization began there. Note well: the progress of Western Civilization did not spread Christianity with it, as secular historians would like to think and have written. Rather, the gospel and Christianity progressed westward, and Western Civilization progressed in its wake. This is always the effect of the gospel on societies and civilizations due to its transformation in the hearts of God's people, and their corresponding influence on societies and civilizations.
  - 2. Different kinds of opposition to the gospel shown by this journey.
    - a. Governmental persecution (chapter 16), stirred up by disgruntled merchants. This was one of those occasions when Paul put his Roman citizenship to good use.
    - b. Persecution by envious Jews (envious church and religious leaders today). They again attempted to stir up the local government, but this was religiously driven persecution. (I suspect that if solidly Reformed churches suddenly drew large numbers away from the mainline denominations and independent mega-churches, weakening their cash flow and their influence on people's desire not to be

accountable, we would be persecuted, too.)

- c. The opposition of worldly philosophies. This is seen in Paul's time in Athens.
- d. The opposition of worldly and crass immorality (Corinth).
- e. The gospel overcame all kinds of opposition, so that Christ by His Spirit through His people called His elect and established His church.

D. Paul's Third Missionary Journey. Chapters 18:23 - 21:16.

- 1. Strengthening the disciples. 18:23. Paul revisits and encourages previously planted churches, thus providing continuing oversight.
- 2. Apollos. 18:24-28. The Lord used Priscilla and Aquila to equip him further for more effective service.
- 3. Paul at Ephesus. 19:1 - 20:1. The final outpouring of the Holy Spirit marks the gospel's progressing to the ends of the earth. Note well: in all of the outpourings of the Spirit, He was not given in this way by Christ apart from the laying on of hands by an apostle or the presence of an apostle. There are no more apostles now; therefore, there are no more Pentecostal outpourings of the Spirit. They were intended to mark Christ's sending of the gospel into each new phase of the Great Commission and the Gentile inclusion. Paul's ministry in Ephesus was longer than in most places at two years. This account shows the power of the gospel to save people out of paganism and the devil's clutches, signified by those who had practiced magic burning their books, etc. Opposition and persecution came once again, this time due to fears that Christianity would ruin trade based on pagan idolatry.
- 4. Paul in Macedonia and Greece. 20:2-16. He avoided a plot against his life. God's providence protects us as long as we are to be here to serve Him. The worship service in Troas ("to break bread" referred to the Lord's Supper, and "the message" referred to a sermon preached from God's Word) on the first day of the week shows us that the first day of the week is the Christian Sabbath.
- 5. Paul and the Ephesian elders. 20:17-38. Paul reviewed his ministry as instruction for them.

He told them of the motive, manner, and message of his ministry (three points of a good sermon I once heard on the passage). He then gave them a warning to care for the flock especially by watching against false teachers.

6. Paul's progress to Jerusalem. 21:1-16. He made visits and shared fellowship along the way. He shows his resolve to go to Jerusalem in spite of warnings from others and the certainty of trouble there.

E. Paul's Journey to Rome. 21:17 - 28:31. Christ extended His church to the seat of the Roman Empire and the heart of the worldly "Babylon."

1. There were many later advantages from this in church history. The church virtually held Europe together after Rome fell. It also continued to move the gospel westward and provided for its further spread through Europe.

2. In Paul's long and eventful journey from Jerusalem to Rome, God used every persecution, danger, and imprisonment to provide another opportunity to testify and give witness of Christ and spread the gospel among governors, Gentiles, and Jews.