

**An Overview of Acts**  
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**A. Overview**

Why study Acts?

1. Provides context for understanding Paul's epistles, which are a BIG chunk of the NT.
2. Pattern for the walk, worship, and witness of believers. (Really, should be "Acts of the Believers," not just of the apostles.) Paul's letters do not give narrative descriptions of these things, only instructions for the particular situations in which the various churches found themselves.
  - a) Walk: our care for one another; what we can expect from unbelievers.
  - b) Worship: how the early church conducted itself before God. Recall Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10). God is very particular about how we worship him.
  - c) Witness: The recurring refrain of Acts is that the Word of God grew and people were saved. If we desire this kind of result today, we should study how they did it then.

**B. Review Structure of Luke**

1. Preface: 1:1-4.
2. Prologue: God reveals what will happen in the rest of the book, 1:5-2:52.
3. Power: The main character (the Lord Jesus) is empowered by the Holy Spirit, 3:1-4:13.
4. Progression geographically:
  - a) Galilee, 4:14-9:50
  - b) Journey to Jerusalem, 9:51-19:28
  - c) Events in Jerusalem, 19:29-24:53

**C. Preview of Acts**

As Rolland observes, Acts follows the same basic structure as Luke.

1. 1:1-14, Prologue
  - a) Recaps Luke 24, thus linking the two books together.
  - b) Like Luke 1:5-2:52, this section is an announcement of what is to come. v.8 outlines the general movement of the rest of the book: the gospel moves from Jerusalem, outward to the whole world.
  - c) *Application*: The history of the church is the history of its evangelical witness to unbelievers. We are nothing if we are not proclaiming the gospel.
2. 1:15-2:4, Power  
cf. Luke 3:1-4:13; filling of the key characters with the Holy Spirit (there, the Lord Jesus; here, the apostles)

*Application:* We can accomplish nothing apart from the enabling of the Holy Spirit of God. Even the Son of God required this unction for his ministry. How much more do we.

### 3. 2:5-28:31, Progression

- a) 1:8 shows the basic trend, but not as unidirectional as in Luke. There are recursions and cycles. The second section ranges from Jerusalem to Antioch--surely beyond "Judea and Samaria", while in the third Paul revisits Jerusalem and everywhere in between.

Like a stone thrown into a pond: the trajectory in is direct and monotonic, but as the ripples spread outward there continues to be activity across the entire pond.

- b) The expression "the word of {God/the Lord} grew" appears three times in the book, and appears to summarize major sections. Thus end first section at 6:7, second at 12:24, third at 19:20. This leaves a fourth section from 19:21 on.

NB: The expression "the word of {God/the Lord} is common from 4:31 through 19:20, but does not occur at all after that! Also, no major sermons after ch. 17. (Just Paul's testimony in 22, 26.)

### D. 2:5-6:7, Witness in Jerusalem

This section and the next each begin with a major speech, followed by two rounds of results of that speech.

Episodes:

1. 2:5-47, Peter's initial sermon and its reception.
2. 3:1-6:7, Results. Two panels alternating between the synagogue (ambivalent arrest) and the church (dealing with material need).
  - a) First panel:
    - 1) 3:1-4:31, Miracle, Arrest and Release: Events stemming from the healing of the lame man. Leads to prayer and witness.
    - 2) 4:32-5:16, Internal church business: Ananias and Sapphira. Deception met with discipline.
  - b) Second panel:
    - 1) 5:17-42, Arrest, Miracle, and Release, leading to rejoicing and further witness.
    - 2) 6:1-7, Internal church business: appointment of the "deacons." Complaining met with administration.
3. Note 6:7, the concluding refrain.
4. *Application:* The very first experience of the infant church recognizes the challenges of opposition without and corruption

within.

- a) They meet opposition with prayer and renewed vigor.
- b) They meet internal challenges discerningly, sometimes with discipline, sometimes with shrewd administration. Jude 22f, "And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling [them] out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh."

**E. 6:8-12:24, Witness in Judea and Samaria**

Like the previous section, this one begins with a major speech and continues with two panels of results stemming from that speech.

Episodes

1. 6:8-8:3, Stephen's sermon and reaction. Differs in two ways from the sermons in the first section, and particularly from Peter's pentecost sermon.
  - a) This one does NOT preach the gospel. Its message is not that the savior has come, but that Israel has repeatedly rejected the Lord. See this as preparation for turning to the gentiles.
  - b) Response is NOT turning to the Lord, but violent persecution. As the event that splashes believers throughout the land, this also prepares for the coming gentile emphasis.
2. 8:4-12:24, Results.

Again, two panels. Each begins with a reference to the dispersion resulting from Stephen's death. Each then alternates between the witness of other believers and the witness of Peter, as much as if to say, "Peter isn't the only one who can preach the gospel." Also emphasizes that Gentiles can be saved, in both sections.

  - a) Near results of persecution over Stephen
    - 1) 8:4-40 Philip and the eunuch (Gaza; a believer to the south)
    - 2) 9:1-31 Salvation of Saul (the church in Damascus; believers to the north)
    - 3) 9:32-11:18 Peter and Cornelius (Caesarea; first Gentile)
  - b) Farther results of persecution
    - 1) 11:19-30 Founding of church in Antioch; famine visit
    - 2) 12:1-24 Peter's imprisonment and escape; Herod's death
3. 12:24 is again the familiar refrain.
4. *Application*: Peter isn't the only one who can speak for the Lord. We start with the specially selected "deacons." But we also find Ananias, Barnabas, and Agabus. The church is NOT a few leaders and lots of followers. It's a body in which each member plays its part.

**F. 12:25-19:20, Witness to Greece**

This section clearly shows the continued outward movement of the gospel, and strengthens the position of Gentiles: they do not need

to become Jews before becoming Christians.

#### Episodes

1. 12:25-14:28, Paul's first journey (Asia Minor)
2. 15:1-35, conference in Jerusalem
3. 15:36-19:20, Paul's second and third journeys (Greece)
4. 19:20 is the familiar refrain.

#### G. 19:21-28:31, Paul's Journey to Jerusalem and Rome

1. At this point the emphasis shifts. Up until now, the point has been the preaching of the gospel in increasingly remote areas. Now that activity is almost entirely in the background, and we focus on Paul's desire to return to Jerusalem, much like the Lord's in Luke 9:51. cf. Goulder's parallels with Christ in Luke:
  - a) Journey to Jerusalem
  - b) Four trials
  - c) Death (Paul, shipwreck)
  - d) Resurrection
  - e) Ascension (Paul -> Rome); ends with Paul proclaiming the gospel in the capital of the empire.
2. *Application*: Cf. 1 Cor. 11:1. We are to imitate Paul, as he did Christ. It is enough for the servant to be like his master (Matt. 10:25).

#### Summary

1. The church expects opposition.
2. The church manages its own internal affairs.
3. The church aggressively spreads the gospel.

**Psalm:** 107, Sinners who had dared to show.