

## New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 5 – Acts

The book that bears Luke's name was his first letter to Theophilus recorded in Holy Scripture, and the second such letter, the book of Acts, was intended to be a continuation of the same story. Its theme is **the Church witnessing for Christ**, and it gives us a history of that movement in its very early stages. It is about the death and resurrection of Christ, His reigning power and coming kingdom, that is true, but it is also more than that. When Christ called His disciples to be His witnesses, He meant that they were to be His mouthpiece, that He would do the preaching through them. Just as He spoke through Noah in his day (1 Peter 3:19,20), and later through the prophets, so would He speak through the apostles whom He would send out to proclaim the gospel after His ascension. This is why Luke writes, Acts 1:1, "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began to do and teach ...," indicating that He was His own mouthpiece during His earthly ministry, but that others have been appointed to continue that great work now that He has been received back into heaven.

A key text to understanding the book before us is Acts 1:8, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." It would only be by the disciples of Christ receiving the Holy Spirit that they could be empowered to become the mouthpiece of the Lord Jesus Christ and effectively witness for Him. And that is precisely what happened. It was when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles at Pentecost that they became our Lord's mouthpiece and living witnesses. Acts 1:8 gives us the precise order in which that was to be carried out and, at the same time, serves as an outline of the book: (1) their witness began in Jerusalem, chapters 1-7; (2) their witness then moved out to Judea and Samaria, chapters 8-12; and (3) their witness then started its expansion to the end of the earth, chapters 13-28.

It is difficult to know where to begin in summarizing the book of Acts and selecting particular subjects in a short space for examination. For the purpose of this brief survey, however, I have chosen to address only three subjects, yet these three are deeply entrenched in the history before us, are too often neglected in the study of this book, and are all practical points for the church today.

1. Who were the real persecutors of Christians in the early church, unbelieving Jews or Rome? Beyond question, it was the unbelieving Jews. Just as they pressured Pilate to crucify Jesus, so also they did everything they could to get rid of His followers. They imprisoned Peter and John (4:1-3); they imprisoned and beat the apostles (5:17,18,40); they stoned Stephen to death (7:54-58); through Saul of Tarsus, they drove Christian Jews out of Jerusalem (8:3), and when Paul was later converted they tried to kill him (9:23); James was killed and, because Herod saw that it pleased the Jews, he imprisoned Peter (12:1-3); they drove out Paul and Barnabas from Antioch in Pisidia (13:50); they poisoned the minds of Gentiles in Iconium (14:2) and even stoned Paul in Lystra, leaving him for dead (14:19); they forced Paul out of Thessalonica and Berea (17:5-9,13); they brought charges against him before the ruling authority (18:12), and often plotted against him (20:3, 21:31, 23:12).

This is not to say that Rome did not share some of the blame for things that happened, though it is of interest to note that these civil authorities often defended Paul against the false Jewish charges laid against him (19:35-41, 26:30-32). The apostles did preach to the Jews first, and many of the earliest Christians were Jewish converts, but that changed over time. As Paul and Barnabas preached in one of their synagogues, "It was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (13:46).

Just as the Old Testament church was largely made up of Jews, so the New Testament church would therefore be largely made up of Gentiles, and one of the great lessons of Acts is to show us how that shift came about already in the first century A.D. There will be Jewish converts in the church to the end of time (see Romans 11), but where we read "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26), this is the church, which may be described as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), or even the elect within Israel, but not the unbelieving nation (Matthew 21:42-44)).

Let us not await some great prophetic fulfilment which men have vainly imagined regarding Israel as a nation. Let us rejoice, rather, with the angels of heaven over every sinner who repents, knowing that, if we are in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, for we are made one new man in Him. In Christ, we are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise and members of the household of God!

2. Acts is an inspired book of history, a history of events good and bad, a record for which we can be very thankful, but as a history it is not a theological textbook or a guide for living the Christian life. Our faith and practice should be based more on what we find in other books of the Bible because too many of the events recorded in Acts were exceptional occurrences, isolated events which were never intended to be a pattern for later generations of the church to follow or should ever expect to see repeated in their own day and age.

I say that because the first century of the New Testament church was clearly an exceptional period of history. It represented a new beginning. Like Israel entering the promised land, it was an exciting time when God was doing wonderful things for His people and showing them many amazing signs. Can you imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites when they entered into Canaan, seeing its fruitful trees and lush gardens? They no longer had to eat manna in the barren wilderness or dream about the onions back in Egypt!

In the same way, after Pentecost, these early Christians must have been overcome with joy to realize that Jesus their long-awaited Messiah had come, the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon them as promised, and so they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship! Other wonderful things happened, too. The apostles, when put into prison, were sometimes released by an angel (5:19, 12:7), and even by an earthquake (16:26).

At such a time, God was also pleased to demonstrate His uncompromising anger for sin. Just as Achan, who had stolen precious metals and fine clothing, was stoned and cremated with his family – all to remind Israel that the Lord will maintain His righteous standards in the land of promise – so, now also, Ananias and Sapphira were suddenly struck dead for their lie to the Holy Spirit, a reminder that the Lord even under the new covenant is still holy and altogether righteous. Those were special times, you see, which called for extraordinary interventions of divine providence.

In connection with Ananias and Sapphira, let it be noted also that it is not a universal principle for Christians to sell their possessions and hold all things in common as those believers did in Jerusalem (2:45). They faced an immediate need of extreme poverty at that time and place, and sometimes exceptional measures need to be taken to deal with such difficult and pressing circumstances.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit descended on people in four very unusual ways: on Jews (chapter 2), on Samaritans (chapter 8), on Gentiles (chapter 10), and on Old Testament believers (chapter 19). These occurrences, so gripping at the time and so reassuring to those who experienced them, were exceptional. They were never meant to be duplicated in those same ways for any future generations. God still pours out His Spirit on His people, but the blueprint He has appointed for doing so to one is not the same as that of another. We see no tongues of fire today. Let us be in awe of what He does for each of us, believer, however different it may be from then, and let us be thankful for the love which supplies it!

3. One more subject which stands out in Acts and distinguished the early church was the phenomenon of the extraordinary (miraculous) gifts of the Holy Spirit, the gift of speaking in tongues particularly. These are called “the signs of an apostle” (2 Corinthians 12:12). While many people think they were widespread in the day, there is no evidence that anyone actually performed them except the apostles themselves and those believers on whom the apostles laid their hands. As a result, these gifts disappeared with the apostolic age, and we ought not to look for them today.

The gift of speaking in tongues was such a blessing at Pentecost, especially, giving Jews and Jewish proselytes who had gathered in Jerusalem from all over the known world the opportunity to hear the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ in their own language (2:5-11). Even after that, speaking in tongues continued to confirm the word that was spoken (Hebrews 2:3,4).

Do you feel that you are missing out on something, dear Christian, by not being able to speak in tongues yourself? Remember, those were special times, and those extraordinary gifts served God’s sovereign purpose for the season they were given, but the ordinary (non-miraculous) gifts of the Spirit – such as teaching, ruling, hospitality and serving, accompanied with the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23) – have always been more useful in building up the saints and in their ministering to one another.

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