

The Acts of Jesus Christ

by Coty Pinckney 9/5/08

What is the main point, the central message of the book of Acts?

This Sunday we begin a sermon series on this great book that chronicles events during the first thirty years of Christ's church. Most Bibles entitle this book "The Acts of the Apostles." That's not an accurate summary of the book, however (and that title was not assigned to the book until about 100 years after it was written). The eleven disciples who remain after the death of Judas are listed in Acts 1:13; of these, only three are mentioned again in the book: Peter, whose actions dominate most of the first twelve chapters; John, who accompanies Peter in the events recorded in chapters 3, 4, and 8; and James, whose death is recorded in chapter 12. The other eight do not appear again. The activities of Paul – the apostle "abnormally born" (1 Corinthians 15:8 NIV) – dominate chapters 13 through 28.

Given that focus primarily on only two apostles, should we entitle this book "The Acts of Peter and Paul"?

No. The main purpose of the book is not to provide us with a history of the church, much less biographical accounts of Peter and Paul.

What then is the central message of the book?

The author, Luke the physician, the traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, gives us a significant clue in his opening words:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up.

The "first book" is the Gospel of Luke. The book of Acts is the sequel to that Gospel. If the Gospel records what Jesus *began* to do and teach during the entirety of his life on earth, what is the book of Acts about? It must concern what Jesus *continued* to do after His ascension.

Thus, Luke records Jesus' ascension both at the end of his Gospel, and at the beginning of Acts. In the Gospel, Jesus rose from the dead, proving the truth of all He taught while on earth, and displaying God's acceptance of His offering for sin; in Acts, Jesus commissions His disciples, promises them power to fulfill the commission, and ascends on high – from where He continues to act in and through His church.

The book of Acts records the continuing acts of Jesus Christ, as the Holy Spirit empowers the Apostles and opens the eyes of those in Jerusalem, in Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

As Gresham Machen wrote,

The real actor in the book of The Acts is the Holy Spirit. Read the book all together, or read it in great stretches, and you obtain an irresistible impression of the Spirit's power. Jews and Gentiles, rulers and kings, the sea and its tempests – all are powerless before the march of the gospel. Joyous, abundant, irresistible power – that is the keynote of the book. The triumphant progress of the Church of God! (As quoted on p. 40 of Peter Jeffery, *Stepping Stones*, Banner of Truth, 1991.)

Consider a few incidents:

- Chapter 2: The Holy Spirit falls on the disciples, and saves 3000 people.
- Chapters 3 and 4: Peter heals a lame beggar by the power of God, leading to an opportunity to witness, an arrest, and a bold confession of Jesus before the authorities; then the Holy Spirit fills all the disciples, and they all speak with boldness, despite the threats.
- Chapter 5: The Holy Spirit frees the arrested apostles from prison.
- Chapters 6 and 7: Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, speaks persuasively about Jesus, boldly proclaims these truths to his accusers, and dies praying for them.
- Chapter 8: The Spirit directs Philip out to the desert to proclaim the Gospel to an Ethiopian, saves that man, then translates Philip immediately dozens of miles away where he preaches to others.
- Chapter 9: The Holy Spirit miraculously saves the primary persecutor of the church, who becomes the Apostle Paul.
- Chapters 10 and 11: The Holy Spirit gives visions to a Roman centurion and the Apostle Peter, then clearly and powerfully brings the centurion and his household to faith at Peter's preaching.
- Chapter 12: After the first apostle is martyred, the Holy Spirit leads Peter out of prison, and strikes down the political ruler who had James killed.
- Chapter 13: The Holy Spirit calls Barnabas and Paul to go out as missionaries.

We could continue through the entire book. God is at work. He is bringing about His purposes. No power can stand against Him. He ensures that His church grows, expands, stays pure, and spreads to every ethnic group. He is at work.

Luke records this *not* to make sure that we know the history, but to make sure that we know God, so that we know that this risen Christ is *still* at work, reaching every nation, spreading His Gospel to all peoples. He is *still* overcoming all resistance, and orchestrating all events to magnify the glory of His Name. We His people still have that commission – and He will accomplish it, through our lives and through our deaths.

The Book of Acts is the book of the Acts of Jesus Christ. And those acts continue even today. The book is not finished; however, God could complete it during our lifetimes. And this series preaching through this book – along with thousands of other pastors around the world preaching through this book – can be another occasion where God exercises His might and power, strengthens His people, emboldens His church, and thereby completes His work. May it be so. May it be so.

Join us – and, together with our brothers and sisters around the world, may we complete the Acts of Jesus Christ.