

The Book of Acts

LESSON ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF ACTS



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INTRODUCTION

The great German composer Ludwig van Beethoven is still remembered around the world for his beautiful and skillful compositions. But as wonderful as his musical scores are in themselves, his works are even more impressive when we remember that Beethoven suffered progressive hearing loss that began when he was a young man. In fact, it is astounding to realize that Beethoven wrote many of his greatest works when he was entirely deaf. Knowing the background of Beethoven's life makes his music all the more impressive.

In important ways, appreciating the Scriptures is similar to appreciating Beethoven. It isn't difficult to see the power and clarity with which the various books of the Bible proclaim God's revelation. But when we learn about the backgrounds of the writers of the Bible, their world, their lives and their purposes, our understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures become much deeper.

This is the first lesson in our series *The Book of Acts*. In this series we will explore the New Testament's fifth book, often called The Acts of the Apostles or simply Acts. We have entitled this lesson "The Background of Acts," and we will look at a number of basic issues that will help us understand and appreciate the teachings of this book more deeply and more clearly.

Our lesson will touch on three crucial aspects of the background of Acts. First, we will examine the authorship of the book. Second, we will look at its historical setting. And third, we will explore its theological background. Let's begin by looking at the authorship of Acts.

AUTHORSHIP

Like all Scripture, the book of Acts was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But its divine inspiration should not lead us to diminish our attention to its human authors. The Holy Spirit kept the original writings of Scripture free from error, but he still employed the personalities, backgrounds and intentions of its human writers.

Acts has traditionally been attributed to Luke, the author of the third gospel. But neither the third gospel nor the book of Acts specifically mentions the name of the author. So, we should look at the reasons for affirming the traditional view of Luke's authorship.

We will explore the authorship of Acts from three perspectives. First, we will compare Acts with the Gospel of Luke. Second, we will examine early church history and its witness concerning Luke's authorship. And third, we will look briefly at other aspects of the New Testament that indicate that Luke wrote these books. Let's turn first to what we can learn about the authorship of Acts from the Gospel of Luke.

GOSPEL OF LUKE

When we compare the book of Acts with the third gospel, two types of evidence emerge that strongly suggest one person wrote both books. On the one hand, there is explicit information stated directly in both books that points in this direction. On the other hand, there is also implicit evidence from the style and content of these books. Let's begin with the explicit evidence that indicates a common author for both books.

Explicit

In Acts 1:1, the prologue of the book of Acts, we read these words:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1).

Here the writer spoke of his “former book,” meaning that Acts is the second of at least two volumes. He also indicated that he wrote this book to a person named Theophilus. Now listen to the similar prologue in Luke 1:1-4:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1: 1-4).

Once again, this passage refers to someone named Theophilus. But there is no reference to an earlier book.

Both Acts and the third gospel are dedicated to Theophilus, and the book of Acts refers to a “former book.” These facts provide strong evidence that the author of these books produced at least two volumes, with the Gospel of Luke being the first volume and Acts being the second volume. In fact, the connection between these two prologues reflects an ancient literary custom when an author produced two-volume works. Josephus, for instance, wrote a two-volume work entitled *Against Apion* that has similar prefaces in both volumes.

Beyond these explicit connections, there are also implicit correlations between Acts and the third gospel that point toward common authorship. A number of New Testament scholars have pointed out similarities between the books. Time will only allow us to mention these briefly, but they provide significant implicit evidence for common authorship.

Implicit

As we have just seen, Luke 1:1-4 states that the author had investigated a variety of sources and had made an orderly account dedicated to Theophilus. It should not be surprising then that a number of scholars have noted that the accounts in Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts are ordered and shaped in similar ways. There are also several similarities in the compositional structure of the books. The books proceed in an episodic style, and both are roughly the same length, each filling a standard-sized scroll.

Beyond this, there is a similar chronological length in each book. Both Luke and Acts cover roughly the same number of years. And there are parallel themes between the books as well. As just one example, the gospel climaxes with the journey of Jesus toward his arrest, trial, suffering, death and victory in Jerusalem, the capital of Judaism and the seat of Jewish monarchical power. And corresponding to this, the book of Acts reaches its conclusion with the Apostle Paul's journey toward Rome, beginning with his arrest, trial and suffering, and concluding with his victorious proclamation of the gospel of Christ in the capital city of the world's imperial power.

In addition, there are similarities between the books because they are each part of the same story. We might think of the fact that there are expectations raised in Luke's gospel that are not fulfilled until the book of Acts. For example, in the beginning of Luke, faithful Simeon declared that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles. Listen to his words in Luke 2:30-32:

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:30-32).

Jesus' ministry in Luke's gospel explains God's salvation and the promise given to Israel. But only in Acts do we see God's salvation serving as a light of revelation to Gentiles in significant ways. These and other similarities point to a common redemptive-historical vision between the two works, and to a shared sense of purpose and belief. And these similarities also suggest that we are looking at the works of a single author.

EARLY CHURCH

Now that we have looked at some of the evidence for common authorship in Acts and the Gospel of Luke, we are ready to consider the evidence provided by early church history. From the second to the fourth century A.D., the early church testified that Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, was the author of both Acts and the Gospel of Luke. We will briefly examine this evidence in two ways. First, we will look at early written manuscripts of and about the Bible. And second, we will look at what early church leaders wrote about Luke's authorship. Let's begin with the evidence of some ancient manuscripts.

Manuscripts

One very old manuscript, referred to as Papyrus⁷⁵, was discovered in 1952 in Egypt. It was written on papyrus and includes some of our earliest New Testament manuscript evidence. It was probably copied sometime between A.D. 175 and 200, and it includes large portions of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John. Between the texts of the two gospels are written two descriptions of their content. After the conclusion of the Gospel of Luke, the manuscript contains the words “*euangelion kata Loukan*,” or “the gospel according to Luke.” And immediately following these words is the expression “*euangelion kata Ioannan*,” or “the gospel according to John.” These notices indicate that the material preceding the words “the gospel according to Luke” was identified as Luke’s gospel. This manuscript evidence indicates that from very early on, it was believed that Luke wrote the third gospel. And by extension, it points to Luke as the author of Acts as well.

Second, the Muratorian Fragment, dated around A.D. 170 to 180, is the earliest known document listing the New Testament books that the early church considered to be canonical. After affirming Luke’s authorship of the Gospel of Luke, it explicitly points to him as the author of Acts as well. In lines 34 through 36 we read these words:

Moreover, the acts of all the apostles were written in one book... Luke compiled the individual events that took place in his presence.

This statement indicates that in the second century, it was widely believed that Luke was the author of Acts and had witnessed at least some of the events described within it.

Third, the so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue, an introduction to the third gospel written around A.D. 160 to 180, describes the authorship of Luke and Acts in this way:

Luke, moved by the Holy Spirit, composed the whole of this Gospel... And afterwards the same Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles.

Beyond this early manuscript evidence, we also have the testimony of early church leaders indicating that Luke was the author of the third gospel and the book of Acts.

Early Church Leaders

The church father Irenaeus, who lived from around A.D. 130 to 202, believed that Luke was the author of the third gospel. In his work *Against Heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 1 Section 1, he wrote:

Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by him.

Here Irenaeus referred to Acts as the book that recorded the gospel preached by Paul. His words are important because good historical evidence indicates that Irenaeus had access to firsthand knowledge regarding Luke's authorship of Acts.

Clement of Alexandria, who lived from around A.D. 150 to 215, also referred to Luke as the author of Acts. In book 5, chapter 12 of his *Stromata*, or miscellaneous matters, he wrote these words:

Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates that Paul said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious."

And Tertullian, who lived from A.D. 155 to 230, wrote these words in his work *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 2:

Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us... Luke and Mark renew it afterwards.

Here, Tertullian specifically attributed the third Gospel to Luke.

Finally, the great church historian Eusebius, writing around A.D. 323, mentioned Luke as the author of Acts in book 1, chapter 5, section 3 of his *Ecclesiastical History*. Listen to what he wrote there:

Luke ... has made mention of the census in the Acts.

In addition to these kinds of affirmative statements, it is striking that there is not one indication in the literature of the early church that anyone other than Luke wrote the third gospel and Acts, even though he was never designated as an apostle. Because of clues like these, we have reason to believe that the early church did not invent the authorship of Luke, but merely passed on what it had received as the truth: that Luke wrote both these books.

NEW TESTAMENT

So far we have seen that there is good reason to affirm common authorship for Acts and the third gospel, and that the early church testified that this single author was Luke. Now let's see what inferences we can draw from other portions of the New Testament about Luke himself.

We will examine this evidence in two ways. First, we will note some clues we gain from the New Testament about our anonymous author. And second, we will compare these clues with information we have about Luke himself. Let's look first at clues about our author.

Clues

As we have already said, the author of Acts did not identify himself by name. Apparently, he felt no need to name himself for the sake of his patron Theophilus. In Luke 1:3 he simply said, “it seemed good also *to me* to write,” and in Acts 1:1 he said, “In *my* former book ... *I* wrote.” The author assumed that his patron knew who he was. And while this created no problem for Theophilus, it has created many questions for modern readers.

At the same time, there are a number of things that the New Testament does tell us about our author. First, he was not an apostle. In fact, he probably came to faith after Jesus ascended into heaven. Listen to these details from the Gospel of Luke 1:1-2

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. (Luke 1:1-2)

When the author said that the events of Jesus’ life were handed down to us, he indicated that he was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus.

Second, the style of Greek in Acts and the Gospel of Luke indicates that the author was well educated. Many of the books in the New Testament are written in a fairly common, even unsophisticated style of Greek. But the Gospel of Luke and Acts show more sophistication in their use of the language.

Third, the second half of Acts indicates that the author was one of Paul’s close traveling companions. In the early chapters of Acts, the narratives are consistently in the third person. But beginning in Acts 16, the narrative often takes on a first-person perspective, using words like “we” and “us.” We find this type of language in Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16. These passages indicate that the writer accompanied Paul during Paul’s later missionary journeys and on Paul’s trip from Caesarea to Rome.

Now that we have some clues about our author, we are in a position to see how well these details correspond to what we know about Luke.

Luke

Let’s look once more at the things we know about the author of Luke and Acts: He was not an apostle. He appears to have been well educated. And he was Paul’s traveling companion. How do these details compare to what we know about Luke? Well, first of all, Luke was not an apostle. The apostles served in a foundational role for the church, exercising unique authority on Christ’s behalf to establish the church and guard it from error and trouble. And according to Acts 1:21-22, apostles had to be trained by Jesus himself. But Luke never met Jesus in person and never claimed the type of authority that belonged to the apostles. Rather, he was simply a faithful supporting

member of Paul's missionary endeavors. He was the servant of an apostle, or as Paul described him in Philemon verse 24, a "fellow laborer" of an apostle.

Second, it is likely that Luke was well educated. We can infer this from Colossians 4:14, where Paul identified Luke as a physician. While medicine was not as formal a discipline in the days of the New Testament as it is today, it still required a person with skill and aptitude.

Third, Luke was Paul's traveling companion. The apostle Paul mentioned that Luke traveled with him in Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; and Philemon verse 24.

We can sum up the issue of authorship for Acts in this way. There is a great deal of historical evidence that points to Luke's authorship of Acts. Luke and Acts have a common author. The evidence of the early church consistently attributes authorship to Luke. And the biblical data is consistent with this idea. In light of these evidences, we have good reason to believe that Luke was the author of both the third gospel and Acts. And we should always remember that Luke had excellent access and proximity to the subject matter he described.

HISTORICAL SETTING

Now that we have looked at Luke's authorship, we are ready to turn to the historical setting of Acts. When did Luke write? And for whom did he compose his book?

As we investigate the historical setting of Acts, we will look at three topics. First, we will consider the date of composition of Acts, pursuing the question of when Luke wrote Acts. Second, we will investigate the original audience of the book. And third, we will explore the audience's social context. Looking into these matters will help us to clarify further the proximity of Luke to the narrated events. It will also help us to understand in a deeper and fuller way the impact the gospel had in the first century A.D. Let's begin with the date of the book's writing.

DATE

Although there have been many different opinions on when the book of Acts was first written, in general terms, we can divide the opinions of New Testament scholars into two basic orientations. On the one hand, some have argued that Luke wrote after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70. And on the other hand, others have argued that he wrote before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. The tragic events of A.D. 70 were critical to Jewish history, and for this reason it is helpful to think of opinions on these matters in terms of these events. We'll look at each of these outlooks, beginning with the possibility that Luke wrote after A.D. 70.

After A.D. 70

Scholars who hold that Acts was written after A.D. 70 base their views on a number of considerations. For instance, many have claimed that the optimism of the book of Acts indicates a date of A.D. 80 to 90. In this view, Acts is too positive about the early church to have been written early on. Instead, it is a nostalgic look at the early church requiring many years of separation from the events themselves. But this view overlooks the sober way that Acts deals with all kinds of problems inside and outside the church.

For the most part, those who believe that Acts was written after A.D. 70 do so because they believe that some material in the book of Acts depends on the works of the Jewish historian Josephus.

Josephus' relevant writings were composed no earlier than A.D. 79, and would not have been widely available much before A.D. 85. So, those who believe that Acts depended on the works of Josephus conclude that Acts was written no earlier than A.D. 79 and probably sometime after A.D. 85.

While advocates of this position have pointed to many connections between Acts and the works of Josephus, we will touch on just four connections they have mentioned.

First, Acts 5:36 refers to Theudas, a Jewish revolutionary who may also have been mentioned in book 20 section 97 of Josephus' *Antiquities*. Second, Acts 5:37 mentions the revolutionary Judas the Galilean, who appears in book 2, sections 117 and 118 of Josephus' *Jewish Wars*, and in book 18, sections 1 through 8 of his *Antiquities*. Third, the revolutionary called The Egyptian in Acts 21:38 may also appear in book 2, sections 261 through 263 of Josephus' *Jewish Wars*, and in book 20, section 171 of his *Antiquities*. And fourth, a number of interpreters have also argued that the description of Herod's death in Acts 12:19-23 depended on book 19, sections 343 through 352 of Josephus' *Antiquities*.

Despite the number of interpreters who follow this line of reasoning, we need to point out that the parallels between Acts and the writings of Josephus do not prove that Acts was dependent on Josephus' works. In fact, the descriptions of events in Acts differ from Josephus' descriptions. So, it seems more likely that Acts and Josephus simply recounted well-known historical events separately or depended on common sources. Since the people mentioned were relatively well-known historical figures, it should not be surprising that they are remembered in more than one historical record. And more than this, in the case of Theudas we are dealing with a very common name. It is possible that two separate individuals with the same name are in view.

Before A.D. 70

The second major view on the date of Acts has been that it was written before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. There are many evidences in favor of this earlier date, but for our purposes we will focus on what we may conclude from the last scene in the book of Acts.

Listen to the last two verses in Acts 28:30-31. There Luke wrote these words about Paul:

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).

The book of Acts closes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, boldly proclaiming the Christian gospel. This ending offers important evidence for believing that Acts was written before A.D. 70.

First, Luke's description of Paul's ministry stops short of a crucial event that took place in A.D. 64. In A.D. 64, Nero blamed Christians for the devastating fire in Rome and began to persecute Christians. It would be strange for Luke not to mention such a major turn of events if it had already occurred by the time he wrote Acts.

Second, Paul is generally thought to have been martyred during Nero's persecution of the church, probably in A.D. 65 or shortly thereafter. If Acts had been written after this, it would almost certainly have mentioned the martyrdom of Paul, one of the book's most prominent characters.

Third, when the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 it significantly impacted the relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the church. The book of Acts focuses on these relationships in many places. So, it seems quite unlikely that Acts would have omitted the destruction of the temple had it occurred.

In light of facts like these, it seems best to conclude that Luke completed Acts close to the time of Paul's imprisonment and ministry in Rome in A.D. 60 through 62, the last historical detail mentioned in the book.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

With this understanding of the early date of Acts in mind, we should turn to a second feature of the historical setting of Acts: the original audience of Luke's work. An awareness of the audience Luke sought to reach with the book of Acts is critical to understanding his work.

We will explore the original audience of Acts in two ways. First, we will look at the book's explicit dedication to Theophilus. And second, we will look at the possibility that the book was also intended for a broader audience. Let's begin with Theophilus as Luke's first reader.

Theophilus

Luke's prologues imply that Theophilus was his patron, the one who commissioned his writing. As we have seen, in Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1, Luke dedicated his works to Theophilus. Beyond this, in Luke 1:3, Luke called Theophilus most excellent Theophilus. Luke used the term "most excellent" (or *kratistos* in Greek) as an expression

of honor. This terminology has led many to believe that Theophilus was his wealthy patron.

But the relationship between Luke and Theophilus was more complex than mere patronage. By reading the books of Luke and Acts, Theophilus became Luke's student. We can see this aspect of Theophilus' relationship to Luke in the prologue to Luke's gospel.

In Luke 1:3-4 we read these words:

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

As this passage indicates, Luke's book was designed in part so that Theophilus would know the certainty of the things he had been taught. To put it simply, Luke wrote to instruct Theophilus.

Having seen that Luke explicitly cited Theophilus as his first reader, it is also helpful to think of Luke's original audience in broader terms.

Broader Audience

From what we read elsewhere in the New Testament, it is not difficult to see that the broader church in the first century struggled with a number of issues that Luke addressed in the book of Acts. Luke's history mentioned strife between Jewish and Gentile believers, and divisions based on the leadership of different apostles and teachers. His record touches on doctrinal errors introduced by false teachers. Acts also addresses strife between the church and civil governments. It focuses on issues faced by women and the poor. It records persecutions, sufferings and imprisonments. Acts touches on these kinds of doctrinal, moral and practical difficulties because the broader church struggled with these kinds of issues in its early decades.

Since Luke wrote the book of Acts to address a very broad set of issues, it seems reasonable to assume that he intended his work to be read by many different believers. He was concerned to help both Theophilus and the early church at large deal with the many challenges they faced.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Having considered the date and original audience of the book of Acts, we are ready to address a third concern: the general social context of Luke's work, the kind of world in which the book of Acts was written. The more we can understand about the social forces at work in Luke's day, the better equipped we will be to grasp many features of his book.

We will explore the social context of Acts by looking at two central features of life in the first century church: first, the rule and power of the Roman Empire; and second, the new relationship between the church and the Jews. Let's look first at the Roman Empire.

Roman Empire

By the time Luke wrote the book of Acts, the Roman Empire had conquered and controlled the entire Mediterranean world, and had extended its reach as far as present-day Britain, North Africa and parts of Asia. In the days of the early church, the empire was still growing, adding more and more peoples and territories to its domain. As it did so, the Roman Empire deeply influenced all aspects of society with its distinctively Roman values, goals and beliefs.

Without a doubt, the greatest influences Rome had on conquered territories were political and economic. One of the chief political concerns of the Roman Empire was to ensure peace and loyalty within the empire by exerting forceful control over local authorities.

Conquered nations were allowed a measure of local autonomy, but their local governments were often reconfigured and were always in subjection to the Roman hierarchy. For example, the book of Acts mentions two Roman governors of Caesarea, namely Felix and Festus, who ruled the entire land of Judea from Caesarea. In addition to overseeing taxation, they were responsible for maintaining peace and order in their part of the Roman Empire.

The empire also exercised cultural and political influence through the integration of Roman citizens into the population of conquered nations.

Often, Rome offered retiring military forces land in newly conquered territories. This practice established enclaves of loyal Roman citizens all across the entire empire, and promoted the values and commitments of Rome in both official and social settings. This is why the book of Acts mentions people from Rome from time to time. As early as Pentecost, we read in Acts 2:10-11 that there were "visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism)." Again, Cornelius, the God-fearing Roman centurion in Acts 10, plays an important role in the spread of the gospel in Acts.

Beyond this, local cultures were influenced by Rome's public works, such as roads, elaborate buildings and public meeting places. This aspect of Roman rule explains how Paul and others traveled so freely and safely in their missionary efforts. The apostles also used these public venues to proclaim the gospel as they traveled from place to place.

Perhaps the most important feature of the Roman Empire for the early church was its influence on the religions of the people it conquered.

At the time of Luke's writing, one man stood at the center of the entire Roman Empire: Caesar. The emperor or Caesar was not only seen as the lord of his people and realm, but also as the *soter* or savior of the people. According to Roman propaganda, Caesars delivered their people from chaos and darkness. And the extension of the Roman Empire was presented as an extension of his salvation, freeing people from the tyranny of their local kings and bringing everyone under Rome's benevolent rule.

In most places, conquered people were allowed to continue many of their own religious practices, but they were required to confess the superiority of the Caesar and the traditional Roman gods. Now, in many respects, most Jews and Christians in the first century were respectable subjects of Rome, but faithful Jews and Christians refused to acknowledge the supremacy of Roman religion. The Roman Empire designated the Jewish faith as a *religio licita* or “legal religion,” and it tolerated the Christian faith as much as possible — even though it still repressed both groups.

Through its control of government, population, public works and religion, Rome attempted to spread its influence everywhere it could.

Now that we have looked at the social context of Acts in terms of the influences of the Roman Empire, we are ready to examine another crucial dimension of the social situation into which Luke wrote: the relationship between Unbelieving Jews and the early Christian church.

Jews

We will consider the relationship between the Jews and the early church first by noting the deep connection between them, and second by exploring their fundamental differences. Let’s begin with the connection between these two groups.

The early church shared a common heritage with the Jewish people. As obvious as it is, in the modern world we often have to remind ourselves of the fact that Jesus was Jewish, the apostles were all Jewish, and at first, the church itself consisted almost entirely of Jewish converts. So, it should not be surprising that in the mind of the early church, loyalty to the promised Jewish Messiah implied a certain faithfulness to Judaism.

According to the book of Acts, many people in the early church attended temple worship, met in synagogues to hear the Scriptures, and maintained appreciation for many Jewish customs. For example, listen to Paul’s words in Acts 13:32-33:

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus (Acts 13:32-33).

Paul and those who traveled with him identified themselves with the Jews in the synagogue, speaking of the patriarchs as “our fathers” and of Christians as us, their children.

In addition, the early church and the Jewish community at large were both committed to the same Scriptures. In the book of Acts, Christians consistently appealed to the Scriptures when they proclaimed the gospel in Jewish contexts.

Acts 17:1-3 records how Paul turned to the Scriptures when proclaiming Christ to Jews. Listen to Luke’s words there:

They came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (Acts 17:1-3).

Beyond this, the deep connection between Christianity and Judaism resulted in significant interactions between the Jewish authorities and the early church.

According to the book of Acts, the early church's boldness in proclaiming the gospel of Christ often led to conflict with Jewish authorities. But as much as possible, the early Christians acknowledged Jewish leaders and resisted them only when they ordered them to disobey the commands of God.

Despite the deep connection between the Jewish people and the early church, they were still distinguished by fundamental differences.

First and most fundamentally, Christians and unbelieving Jews disagreed over the person and work of Jesus. The church proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah who had conquered death and was restoring all creation, beginning with his own resurrection from the dead. But the unbelieving Jews considered it impossible for a man crucified as a criminal to be the promised Messiah. This difference created a rift between Christians and non-Christian Jews that continues even to our own day.

Second, while the early church and the Jewish leaders agreed on the authority of the Hebrew Bible, they disagreed vigorously over the correct interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly with regard to Jesus. The early church believed that the hopes of the Hebrew Scriptures for the coming Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus, but unbelieving Jews denied this understanding. There were many parties within Judaism that held to a wide range of views, but most of them found it impossible to accept that Jesus fulfilled the messianic hopes of the Old Testament.

In the third place, the early church and the Jewish people of the first century differed over how they viewed Gentiles. For the most part, observant Jews did not share company with Gentiles. But on the other hand, many uncircumcised Gentiles were so attracted to the beliefs and ethical teaching of Judaism that they attached themselves to local Jewish synagogues and were known as God-fearers. The God-fearers were respected above other Gentiles, but they were not full members of the Jewish community. Gentile proselytes converted to Judaism, but this involved undergoing initiation rites, including a baptism and circumcision, and the observance of the Jewish traditions.

While the early Jewish Christians began with this same understanding of Gentiles, they gradually came to understand that Gentiles who followed Christ were to be granted full status in the Christian church. In light of new revelation from the Holy Spirit, the early church determined that faith in Christ expressed in confession and baptism was sufficient for membership in the Christian church. So, the apostles made it their practice to proclaim the gospel of Christ's universal Lordship to both Jews and Gentiles, accepting the gifts and ministry of both peoples as the church grew. They understood that God was using the Gentiles to fulfill the hope of the kingdom that he had extended to his people in the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, this led to many conflicts between unbelieving Jews and early Christians.

Knowing some of the details about the time when Luke wrote, the audience to whom he wrote, and the social context in which he wrote will help us greatly as we study the book of Acts. We will be better prepared to appreciate the problems Luke addressed, to understand his solutions, and to apply them to our own lives today.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Now that we have examined the authorship and historical setting of Acts, we are ready to explore our third main topic in this lesson, the theological background of the book of Acts.

As we study the book of Acts, many theological questions come to mind. Where did Luke learn his theological perspectives? How did he decide what to address in his book and what to omit? What overarching principles guided his writing? Well, the answers to these questions can be found in Luke's theological background.

Our discussion of the theological background of Acts will divide into three parts. First, we will explore the foundations of Luke's theology in the Old Testament. Second, we will consider how his theology was influenced by his beliefs about the Messianic kingdom of God. And third, we will see how Luke's gospel, the first volume of Luke's work, helps us understand the message of Acts. Let's begin with the Old Testament foundations to the book of Acts.

OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament influenced Luke's writing in at least two ways. In the first place, Luke was deeply influenced by the Old Testament's view of history in general. And in the second place, he was deeply impacted by its treatment of the history of Israel in particular. Let's look first at how the Old Testament's view of history in general informed Luke's theology.

History

In his great work *Pensées*, the 17th century Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal spoke of three great truths that human beings have recognized throughout history. First, he refers to the glory and beauty of creation, the wonder that permeates the universe because God made all things good. Second, he spoke of the perplexing conflict between the creation's original glory and its present misery and corruption. And third, Pascal spoke of redemption, the hope that there will be a solution to this conflict.

Pascal's reflections parallel the Old Testament's division of world history into the three main stages of creation, the fall into sin, and redemption. And in Acts, Luke wrote about the early church in ways that reflected this threefold outlook on history.

Consider the period of creation. In Genesis 1, God prepared the world to be an extension of his heavenly kingdom. He ordered the universe; formed a paradise in Eden; placed humanity, his royal image, within that paradise; and commanded humanity to multiply and to rule over the earth, beginning in Eden and stretching to the ends of the globe. In short, God set the stage for the full development of his kingdom on earth.

Luke's awareness of this important Old Testament idea is evident in many places in Acts. For instance, in 4:24-30, Peter and John spoke of creation as evidence of God's royal lordship over the earth. In 14:15-17, Paul and Barnabas spoke of creation as the

basis for God's rule over the nations. In 7:49, Stephen asserted that God had created the world to be his royal footstool. Listen to Paul's words in Athens in Acts 17:24-27:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth... From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth... God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27).

According to this passage, the backdrop to Paul's gospel ministry reached all the way to creation. God is the Lord who made the world and everything in it. He ordered the world so that men would seek him, reach out for him and find him. Paul's gospel ministry grew out of the purposes God established at creation. By including these details in his book, Luke indicated that the theme of creation was important to his own understanding of the early church.

In much the same way, Luke's awareness of humanity's fall into sin also comes to the foreground in the book of Acts. As we know, Genesis 3 teaches that after God created humanity, Adam and Eve rebelled against him. And the impact of this was tremendous. According to the Old Testament, humanity had such a central role in the world that their fall into sin brought the entire human race under the curse of death and corrupted the entire creation.

Luke wrote of the misery of sin in many places throughout Acts. We find references to the fall in Peter's sermons in 2:38 and 3:19, in the apostles' defense before the Sanhedrin in 5:29-32, in Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in 20:18-35, and in Paul's speech before King Agrippa in Acts 26:20.

The book of Acts repeatedly illustrates that everything in creation — the physical world, our economic structures, our political systems, and even the church itself — suffers because of humanity's fall into sin.

Happily, Luke's history in Acts also indicates that he not only believed in the Old Testament teaching about creation and the fall, but also embraced what the Old Testament said about the redemption. As horribly as sin had corrupted humanity and creation, Luke knew that God had not left the world without hope.

The Old Testament taught that God had been redeeming or saving people from the curse of sin since it first entered the world. But more than this, OT prophets also predicted a day when sin and its curse would be entirely eliminated from the creation. As Luke wrote the book of Acts, he frequently displayed his belief that this redemption was coming to the world through the saving work of Christ. This theme appears throughout Acts.

To name just a few, we find these themes of redemption in: Peter's sermon in 2:21-40; the apostles' defense before the Sanhedrin in 5:29-32; the angel's words to Cornelius in 11:14; Paul's speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch in 13:23; Peter's argument in the Jerusalem counsel in 15:7-11, and Paul and Silas' words to the Philippian jailor in 16:30-31.

As we approach the book of Acts, we must always remember that Luke was deeply influenced by the Old Testament view of world history as he wrote. This is why

he so often recorded moments from the first century that reflected the broad scope of world history from creation, to the fall into sin, to redemption in Christ.

Now that we have looked at the Old Testament's vision of history in general, we are ready to turn to its vision of the history of Israel in particular, and to the way Luke's record in Acts depended on the history of this special nation.

Israel

There are countless ways that Luke relied on the history of Israel as he was writing Acts. For the sake of illustration, we will limit our discussion to three events from Israel's history: God's choice of Abraham, the Exodus under Moses, and the establishment of David's dynasty. First, consider how God's choice of Abraham informed Luke's history.

Genesis 12:1-3 records God's choice of Abraham to be the father of a special nation. There we read these words:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3).

According to these verses, God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land for two main purposes.

On the one hand, Abraham would father a great nation, become famous, and receive many spiritual and material blessings. God's blessings to Abraham and his descendants after him were to be symbolic demonstrations that there is hope in God's salvation, even in this fallen world.

But on the other hand, God's call went far beyond what Abraham and his descendants would receive. Through Abraham, all peoples on earth would be blessed. Abraham and his descendants would become a conduit of divine blessings to all the families of the earth.

This twofold focus of God's choice of Abraham underlies much of Luke's thinking in Acts. On the one hand, Luke frequently reported how the blessing of salvation in Christ came to the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, fulfilling God's promises to the great patriarch.

But on the other hand, Luke also focused on how Jewish Christians brought the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. Time and again in Acts, Luke reported that Jews like Phillip, Peter, Paul and Barnabas took the gospel of salvation to the Gentile world. This too fulfilled God's promises to Abraham.

In the second place, Luke's outlook in Acts also showed his understanding of the relationship between Moses and the Christian church. As God's deliverer, Moses led Israel from slavery in Egypt, presented God's Law to the nation, and held them

accountable to the Law. And in that same Law, Moses prophesied that God would one day send another prophet like himself to redeem his people from their slavery to sin. And as Luke pointed out in Acts, this prophet like Moses turned out to be Jesus. Listen to Stephen's words that Luke recorded in Acts 7:37-39:

Moses ... told the Israelites, "God will send you a prophet like me from your own people." He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt (Acts 7:37-39).

From Stephen's point of view, Jesus was the prophet Moses had foretold. So, to reject Jesus was also to reject Moses and the Law, just as the ancient Israelites had done. To be truly committed to Moses and the Law, one must embrace Christ.

And consider how Luke summarized Paul's words to the Jewish leaders in Acts 28:23:

From morning till evening Paul explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets (Acts 28:23).

For Paul and the rest of the early church, acceptance of Moses and the Law was foundational to faith in Christ. And this belief influenced what Luke wrote in Acts.

In the third place, Luke was influenced by the Old Testament record of David's dynasty. It would be difficult to imagine any Old Testament theme that was more important to Luke than the establishment of David's house as the permanent dynasty to rule over Israel.

As Israel grew into an empire in the Old Testament, God chose the family of David as the permanent dynasty to lead his people. But the Old Testament also anticipated the day when the house of David would extend the reign of God from Israel to the ends of the earth.

As we read in Psalm 72:8, 17:

David's son will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth... All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:8, 17).

As these verses reveal, it was through his descendant David that Abraham would become a blessing to the world. But David would not accomplish this himself. Rather, one of his descendants would be the king to extend his benevolent, peaceful rule over the entire world.

In the book of Acts, Luke drew deeply from this hope in David's house. He understood that Jesus was the son of David, the royal ruler of God's kingdom who was expanding his reign from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth by means of the church.

For example, listen to James' words at the Jerusalem Council, found in Acts 15:14-18:

God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things" that have been known for ages (Acts 15:14-18).

Here James referred to Amos 9:11-12, where Amos predicted that God would restore David's dynasty and extend his reign over the Gentile nations. As he indicated here, James believed the success of the gospel among the Gentiles was the fulfillment of these Old Testament hopes.

Luke wanted his readers to understand that Jesus was the heir to Abraham's promises, the prophet like Moses, and the final Davidic king. Jesus had ascended to his throne and was conquering the world through the proclamation of the gospel and the growth of the church, extending his kingdom of salvation from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, just as the Old Testament had foretold.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Having looked at Luke's dependence on the Old Testament, we are ready to see how the messianic kingdom of God contributed to the theological background of Acts.

Our discussion of the kingdom of God will divide into three parts. First, we will consider the Jewish messianic theology that was prevalent in the first century. Second, we will focus on the theology of John the Baptist. And third, we will briefly compare these views with the Christian messianic theology that Luke endorsed. Let's begin with the perspectives of Jewish theology.

Jewish Theology

After the last books of the Old Testament were written in the fifth century B.C., Israel entered a period of spiritual darkness. For hundreds of years, the vast majority of Israelites lived outside the Promised Land, and those who remained in the Land suffered under the tyranny of Gentile rulers. At first it was the Babylonians, then the Medes and Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. As a result of this prolonged history of suffering, the hope that God would send a messianic liberator to Israel became one of the most dominant motifs of Jewish theology.

Jewish messianic hopes took many different directions. For example, the zealots believed that God wanted Israel to usher in the day of the Messiah by mounting insurrection against the Roman authorities. Various apocalyptic groups believed that God

would supernaturally intervene to destroy his enemies and to establish his people as victors. There were also nomists, such as the popular Pharisees and Sadducees, who believed that God would not intervene until Israel became obedient to the Law. At various points in the book of Acts, Luke mentioned that many Jews rejected the Christian view of the messianic kingdom.

Although the Jews had many different hopes for the Messiah, Luke saw that a significant transition in Jewish theology took place through the ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist

Both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts indicate that John the Baptist called for true repentance, and proclaimed the good news that the Messiah was about to bring the kingdom of God to earth. And more than this, John rightly identified Jesus as the Messiah. Listen to John the Baptist's words in Luke 3:16-17:

John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:16-17).

Here John rightly declared that the Messiah would bring the great blessing and purification of the Holy Spirit, including judgment. But he was under the mistaken impression that the Messiah would do this work all at once.

John did not foresee that the Messiah would bring salvation and judgment to the world in stages. Later, John became perplexed by the fact that Jesus had not yet done everything that Jewish theologians had expected the Messiah to do. John was so troubled that he sent messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah.

Listen to the way Luke described their question and Jesus' response in Luke 7:20-23:

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" ... So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Luke 7:20-23).

In his reply to John the Baptist, Jesus alluded to a number of messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah. He did this to assure John that he was in the process of fulfilling various expectations of Old Testament messianic prophecy, even though he hadn't finished them

all. Jesus also encouraged John not to fall away because of the way his messianic work was unfolding.

In short, Jesus' messianic mission looked very different from what was expected. Jewish messianic hopes looked for an immediate earthly political kingdom under the rule of the Messiah, similar to the kingdom that David had ruled centuries before. But Jesus did not attempt to establish this type of kingdom during his earthly ministry.

With this understanding of Jewish messianic theology and the outlooks of John the Baptist in mind, we are ready to turn to the early Christian theology of the Messiah and the kingdom of God.

Christian Theology

In Luke's writings, as in the rest of the New Testament, Christian messianic theology is closely connected to the Christian gospel or good news. We can summarize the New Testament gospel message in this way:

The gospel is the announcement that the kingdom of God comes to earth through the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah, and that it expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah.

You'll note that the gospel message touches on two essential ideas. On the one hand, we find what we might call the more objective side of the Christian gospel. The kingdom of God comes to earth through the person and work of Jesus. Luke believed that as the Messiah, Jesus had begun the final phase of God's kingdom on earth, and that he would one day return to finish what he started.

And on the other hand, the New Testament gospel message also had a more subjective side. It announced that the final phase of God's kingdom expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah. The rule of God over the world moves forward as the gospel touches the hearts of those who believe, and brings them into the salvation that Jesus accomplished.

In the book of Acts, Luke drew attention to both these dimensions of the gospel. On the objective side, he emphasized the realities of God's great work of salvation in Christ. He recorded the church's proclamation that Jesus had died for the sins of his people, that he had been raised from the dead, that he reigns at the right hand of God the Father, and that he will return in glory.

For example, listen to Luke's record of Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2:22-24:

Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs... You put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead (Acts 2:22-24).

Notice that Peter's gospel proclamation includes the objective facts of the Messiah's life, death and resurrection.

But Luke also drew attention to the more subjective side of the gospel. On many occasions he stressed the importance of people personally embracing the truth of Christ so that it transformed their lives.

For example, Luke's record of Peter's Pentecost speech also includes these words in Acts 2:37-38.

**When they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said ...
"Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and
be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the
forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy
Spirit." (Acts 2:37-38, ESV).**

The Christian gospel cuts to the heart of those who hear it. It is not just a bare acknowledgement of facts, but a heartfelt, life-transforming embrace of the Savior.

As we have said, first-century Jewish theology believed that the Messiah would establish a political kingdom all at once. But Jesus and his apostles taught that the Messiah's kingdom grows gradually through the expansion of the church and the personal transformation of people.

This is one reason that Luke focused so much attention on the conversion of unbelievers through the proclamation of the gospel. He knew that this was the means through which the messianic kingdom of God would expand throughout the world.

With the broad contours of the Old Testament vision in mind, we should consider a third aspect of the theological background of Acts: its foundation in Luke's gospel.

GOSPEL OF LUKE

As we read the book of Acts, we must always remember that it is the second of two volumes that Luke wrote to Theophilus. Luke always intended these books to be read together. His gospel is the first part of the story and the book of Acts is the second part of the story. So, to read the book of Acts rightly, we need to understand how it continues the story that is begun in the gospel.

There are many ways Luke's gospel prepares us to understand the message of Acts. But for our purposes we will focus on the theme of the kingdom of God that spans both volumes. In Luke's gospel, Jesus established the pattern and goal for the kingdom of God and prepared his apostles to continue his work after his ascension. In the book of Acts, Jesus ascended into heaven and left his apostles, aided by the Holy Spirit, in charge of expanding his kingdom through the gospel.

We will consider two ways that the Gospel of Luke prepares the way for the apostles' kingdom-building work in the book of Acts. First, we will look to Jesus as the one who brought the kingdom. And second, we will explore the role of the apostles in continuing to bring in the kingdom after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Let's begin with Jesus as the one who brings the kingdom of God.

Jesus

Throughout his gospel, Luke characterized Jesus as the prophet who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, and as the king who was bringing the kingdom into power by ascending to its throne. Jesus himself spoke of both these ideas in many places. But by way of illustration, we will consider just two times that he mentioned it in his public ministry.

On the one hand, in Luke 4:43, Jesus spoke these words near the beginning of his public ministry:

I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God ... because that is why I was sent (Luke 4:43).

On the other hand, at the end of his public ministry, just before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem where he was heralded as king, Jesus told the parable of the ten minas in Luke 19:12-27. In this parable, he explained how the kingdom would come slowly. Most Jews in his day hoped for a kingdom that would come immediately in all its fullness. But Jesus taught that he was bringing in the kingdom slowly and in stages. Jesus had begun the kingdom, but he was going away for a long time to be crowned king, and he would not complete his kingdom until his return.

Listen to the way the parable of the ten minas begins in Luke 19:11-12:

Jesus told them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. He said: "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return." (Luke 19:11-12).

Notice what happened here. Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem and to be proclaimed king, but he did not want the people to assume that he would install himself as an earthly ruler at this time. Instead, he would be leaving for a long time, in order to receive his kingship, and would return to rule his earthly kingdom in the future.

And this is exactly what happened. In Jerusalem, Jesus was arrested and crucified. Then he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, at which point he received his kingship from the Father. And he has yet to return to consummate his kingdom.

With this understanding of the way the Gospel of Luke established Jesus as the one who brings the kingdom, we should turn to a second matter established in the gospel: the role of the apostles in furthering the kingdom through the gospel.

Apostles

On the night before Jesus was crucified, he instructed his apostles to carry on his work of bringing in the kingdom.

Listen to his words to them in Luke 22:29-30:

I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30).

Jesus appointed his apostles as leaders and judges in his kingdom. Their job was, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, to continue where he left off, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and expanding the kingdom to fill the world.

So, we can see that Luke's Gospel establishes that inaugurating the kingdom was Jesus' primary task, and that he commissioned the apostles to carry on this work after his ascension into heaven.

And the book of Acts picks up right where the Gospel of Luke ends. It begins with Luke explaining that after Jesus rose from the dead and before he ascended into heaven, he spent time teaching the apostles.

Listen to Luke's account in Acts 1:3-8:

Jesus appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion ... he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised ... In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ... They asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:3-8).

Once again, Jesus encouraged his followers not to look for an immediate completion of the kingdom. Instead, he confirmed that the apostles would be responsible to carry on his work by proclaiming the gospel throughout the world.

And this is just what the apostles did in the book of Acts. They built up the church as the current form of the kingdom of God. And they brought the gospel of the kingdom to new lands and people, expanding the kingdom from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Listen to the way Luke concluded the book of Acts in 28:30-31:

For two whole years Paul stayed ... in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).

Notice that rather than simply saying that Paul preached the "gospel," Luke said that Paul preached the kingdom of God. The book of Acts ends just as it begins, emphasizing the apostles' role as those who expanded God's kingdom on earth, through their proclamation.

As we approach the book of Acts, we must always keep in mind that Luke wrote out of his background in the Old Testament and first century beliefs about the kingdom of

God in Christ. And we must also remember that Acts follows the Gospel of Luke by reporting how the kingdom work that began through the ministry of Christ was continued through the apostles and the early church, as they relied upon the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have examined the authorship of the book of Acts; we have described its historical setting; and we have explored its theological background. Keeping these details in mind as we study the book of Acts will help us to discover its original meaning, and to apply it properly in our own lives.

As we continue in this series, we will see how the background to Acts opens many windows into this wonderful book. We will discover how Luke's inspired record of the early church led Theophilus and the early church into faithful service to Christ. And we will see that the book of Acts offers crucial guidance for the church today as we continue to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to our own world.

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The Book of Acts

LESSON
ONE

The Background of Acts Faculty Forum



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The Book of Acts

Lesson One: The Background of Acts

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Hans F. Bayer

Students
Larry Gwaltney
Ra McLaughlin

Question 1:

Why focus on Luke as the author of Acts?

Student: Dr. Bayer, since the book of Acts was inspired by God, why do we spend so much time on a lesson talking about the human author, Luke? What is the benefit of dedicating so much time looking into him?

Dr. Bayer: Larry, that's a very good question. I would like to begin with just focusing on the fact that this is inspired by God, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and we could spend a lot of time seeing that what Luke reports particularly in the Gospel of Luke is apostolic eyewitness. And it goes back to the systematic instruction and teaching of Jesus, shaping the understanding and the memory of the disciples as they live with Jesus and learn from him, so that what we have as inspiration is also very much going back to Jesus himself. But your question particularly focuses in the human authorship, and I just want to say that the understanding of inspiration is not that the individuality and the person is sidelined, but that God speaks through his prophets in the Old Testament and here, in this case, through this eyewitness or this man who has access to eyewitness accounts, and he does not sideline the particular personality, the particular historical context, the cultural understanding, and that is a wonderful testimony to the fact that God speaks into our space and time. I think also it becomes apparent when you compare the Gospel of Luke with Matthew, Mark, or John, that there is a particular perspective, a particular point of view that does not detract from the truth, but it is a particular focus. And we know that Luke focused on the marginalized, on women, on the poor, and that is a particular testimony focus point in Luke, and we see that borne out also in the book of Acts.

Student: So you are saying that in some sense, God is using the personalities, the experiences, the language, the vocabulary, all of that, the writing style of the inspired writer in order to create the product that we have that we think of as the book of Acts, so that as we try to read and understand and interpret that, we kind of need to know where it's coming from so that we understand what he means when he uses certain words and why he is talking about certain things? Is that sort of what you are saying?

Dr. Bayer: That is exactly right, and it gives us the understanding that God speaks to the original audience and that is why we need to understand the historical setting, historical situation, to understand how that word, how that message is spoken into this particular original context. But that is a wonderful aspect to the way God makes himself known.

Student: If I'm hearing you right, then actually knowing who the human author is, is a big benefit. I mean, many books of the Bible we're not sure who wrote, and I wish we did, and we could maybe gain a lot of insight if did know who did them. But since we do know Luke is the author, I guess what you're saying is that understanding what he's saying, and from his point of view and his perspective, it really gives us a new angle on something we wouldn't have had otherwise.

Dr. Bayer: Yes, I think that is an important point. When we know the author, we know what context he had. We know about Luke that he had very close contact with Paul, but also, as he says himself in the Lukan prologue Luke 1:1-4, that he consulted with eyewitnesses who had been with Jesus, and that gives us proximity to what is being testified to. It is a further indication of truth — not the only one — but it certainly helps in our understanding of what is being given to us.

Question 2:

Why should we trust church tradition about Luke's authorship?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson says that we believe that Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts based on some inferences in Scripture and church tradition — that the Bible never actually comes out and says that Luke wrote these books. That feels a little weird to me coming from a Protestant tradition, relying so heavily on church tradition for these kinds of things. Tell me why I should be comforted in that. Give me a reason not to be so nervous.

Dr. Bayer: That is a valid question. The fact that Luke wrote the gospel and the book of Acts is not explicitly stated, as you have said. When we look at patristic information, particularly the Apostolic Fathers around 90-95 AD to about 130 AD, that is a very important phase in the history of the church where people still have access, or had access, to apostles, to people who had known apostles, and obviously this field of study is difficult. There are sometimes contradictory statements among the Apostolic Fathers and then certainly the Ante-Nicene Fathers, so we have to be careful. But in the case of Luke, it is particularly significant that there is no contradictory voice at any stage in that history from the time of the composition of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts all the way to the fourth and fifth century. So that is a significant point. One other factor that I would like to point out is that, as I mentioned in the lesson, Luke was not an apostle, and it would be very easy to discredit, to question why would he be considered to be part of the canon, his work? And so, since that is never questioned, it is a further indication to the reliability of that information.

Student: Right, because if somebody were going to fake it, if they were going to write an artificial book or put a false writing forth, they'd probably try to attribute it to an apostle as opposed to somebody else.

Dr. Bayer: Precisely. And it is very significant that the church father Irenaeus, who worked around 180 AD, most likely had access to a library in Rome during his travels, about AD 120, at which he had access to a library that had some markings for particular scrolls and writings, and there he says he found the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts attributed to Luke. Then further, there is a manuscript that probably goes back to 120 AD, a catena called, and that mentions in the so-called "we section," in one "we section" in the book of Acts, we, Luke, and the companions went somewhere. So actually, Luke is mentioned in that particular manuscript. So we have significant information that gives us a good basis to say this information is historically reliable.

Student: But getting back to the idea of tradition, isn't it true that what we consider secular history is often based on tradition, too? In other words, the Bible doesn't suffer in comparison in terms of its authority if we're looking at ancient history, because a lot of what we know from ancient Roman history is on a similar basis.

Dr. Bayer: Very true, very true. But it is a fair question that Ra asked — What do we do when there are contradictions among church fathers? —we have to be careful. But I think the heritage of critical scholarship, European critical scholarship, has been to discredit patristic information to such a high degree that it is time to give them a significant hearing, but cautious one, because we do know that there are some contradictions in patristic information.

Question 3:

Why do people question Luke's authorship?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the evidence that you gave in the lesson for Luke's authorship really seemed compelling to me, and those things you've been saying here also seem to reiterate that. What basis do people have for ever questioning Luke's authorship?

Dr. Bayer: This is a very complex question that would require a lot of different tracks to answer. One would be the philosophical one, and perhaps we're going into that at a later point. But in the particular study of critical scholarship, particularly in Europe, the Lukan prologue was not really considered to be an introduction to the book of Acts as well. And I think that is a first start of a real critical approach to the book of Acts. The book of Acts was considered for many decades to be historically unreliable, and so there were prejudices against the book of Acts in that regard. The further arguments would lead us into different directions, and I can just pick out one example. One particular argument brought against the Lukan authorship of the book of Acts is that the portrait of Paul in the book of Acts to some indicates that the author

did not know Paul. And so the argument would go that what we know of Paul in the epistles is not reflected in the book of Acts. In the book of Acts, Paul sounds a little bit more like Peter or Stephen, and in Galatians or Romans, he sounds like Paul. The problem with that is that you are mixing genres. The epistles are addressed to churches, to strengthen them and to mature them in the faith, whereas the portrait in the book of Acts of Paul is one in the market place, one who evangelizes, one who speaks in debate house of Tyrannus. And there's a significant passage in the book of Acts one time where Paul does address leaders in the church, the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, and it is significant that that passage is full of what we would call "Paulinisms" or characteristic phrases of Paul that we find in the epistles. So I think the argument can be turned against those who would discredit the author of the book of Acts knowing Paul, actually, that he is carefully representing Paul in the marketplace, but when he does speak to church leaders, it sounds very much like what we know of Paul in the epistles.

Student: I guess I just have a philosophical problem with people who don't know Paul determining that somebody else doesn't know Paul.

Dr. Bayer: Well, that is a fair point. One other thing that I could mention that has been used to discredit the book of Acts is that some scholars assumed that the early church expected a near return of Christ, within weeks, within months, at the most within years. And the book of Acts particularly seems to have an understanding of far expectation, that there may be a delay in the return of Jesus, and some argue that that was the theology of Luke, the composition here, and discrediting a particular proximity to the original setting. So that would be another big area of questioning the authenticity of the book of Acts.

Student: I wonder, as you were talking, it made me think back to some of the authorship things that we mentioned earlier. You know, we see Paul described in one way and Luke coming across another way in his letters. I wonder if maybe some of that has to do with the fact that Paul wrote his letters and Luke wrote Acts. You know, it's one thing to listen to me talking to you, it's another thing to hear somebody describe me talking to you; they're going to use different language and different words and perhaps characterize me in a different way that somebody might immediately perceive watching our conversation.

Dr. Bayer: Yes, I think that's a fair comment. That would certainly be part of the factors.

Question 4: **What if Luke didn't write Acts?**

Student: With regard to Luke's authorship of the book of Acts, we've talked a little bit about the history behind that and why we should accept that. Let's just hypothetically consider that evidence comes to light that, in fact, inclines us to think

that Luke didn't write it. What do we do with Luke at that point? Do we keep it in the Bible? Do we still receive it as authoritative Scripture? Or does the challenge to its authorship somehow undermine its authority?

Dr. Bayer: I would certainly say that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are canonical, and we have evidence that this canonical core of the Gospels and Acts and the major Pauline epistles is a historical fact that goes back about 180 AD. We can even see in Clement of Rome's work called *I Clement*, or 1 Corinthians, that he makes reference to the Gospels. So it is a historical fact and certainly a fact of the history of the church that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are part of the canon. So in a certain way, it would not affect the authority and the significance of the Gospel of Luke and of Acts were we to find out that Luke in fact did not write these two volumes. On the other hand, what we know internally and by statements in the patristics regarding Lukan authorship gives us proximity to the very events. And since Luke was a sojourner with Paul, that gives us an eyewitness perspective to the various journeys that Luke participated in. And the prologue again, to come back to Luke 1:1-4, makes the claim that this author, who was a companion of Paul, also is a very careful researcher, a very careful interrogator of eyewitnesses, etc., and knowing that this was Luke, a historical figure in the early church, places him in proximity to other apostles and other leaders including Peter, including Stephen, etc. So it gives us proximity, but it in the end would not affect its canonical authority.

Student: So in some sense, it sounds like what you're saying then is that even if Luke didn't write it, we still know that the author was a traveling companion of Paul, had proximity to the events, and is a reliable narrator and historian even if it isn't Luke? If it's somebody else?

Dr. Bayer: It is true, except some critical scholars have questioned the so-called "we sections" as a literary device rather than as a historical significance, and that would mean that an account would simply use that literary device to make it a little bit more interesting. And here, I think the significant argument can be made that in ancient documents where such a literary device is employed, it is much more conspicuous and clear, whereas in the book of Acts, it is very inconspicuous and abrupt when Luke moves from a third person description to the first person or first person plural "we traveled." So this weaving in and out appears to be much more a historical reflection of the events rather than a literary device.

Student: Well, questions of authority aside, then it just seems that Luke is such an integral part of church history, it would be really difficult to excise out of history as it is, isn't it? I mean, isn't he referred to by other people?

Dr. Bayer: He is referred to by other people, and in the New Testament itself, in Colossians. But certainly it would put a big question mark to patristic testimony because it is so unified on this point. So there would be questions that I would have to deal with personally if you came up with good evidence that would say somebody else... Barnabas, was the author of the book of Acts.

Question 5:

How do we know Luke was a Gentile?

Student: Doctor, our lesson states that Luke was a Gentile, but I've heard some people question that. Is there any way that can be determined? Or is it even significant?

Dr. Bayer: I'm going to deal with the question "determined." Can it be determined? There is good evidence in the New Testament itself, Colossians and extra-biblical information, that would indicate that Luke was indeed a Gentile. The patristic tradition locates him in Syrian Antioch as having come from there. There is some evidence that he was a physician. The point here is that a Gentile from Syrian Antioch would have had the possibility of exposure to Judaism. There was a good presence there in Syrian Antioch, a Jewish presence from Diaspora times. And so Luke as a Gentile, was he perhaps a God-fearer or perhaps even a proselyte? But a God-fearer would be my preference to assume he would have been exposed to teaching about the Old Testament. And we know particularly from those who lived a little further away from Jerusalem, they were particularly interested in the history of Israel, in the salvation history of Israel, and that seems to be a particular emphasis in Luke himself. So the focus on Old Testament focus on redemptive history actually would fit very well had Luke as a Gentile had connection and contact with Jews living in Syrian Antioch. It does make some difference in particular for our understanding of the first century history and setting, how much crossover was there between Gentiles and Jews? But I would say he was certainly very knowledgeable and exposed to the heritage and rich reservoir of Old Testament thinking and Old Testament understanding. And so I would say it would make some significant point, but that's how I would take the question.

Question 6:

How does the historical setting help us understand Acts?

Student: Dr. Bayer, as we've been thinking through the lesson in terms of historical setting and context, it makes me reflect on my own life when I'm certain that I read the book of Acts and learned from it and sat in Sunday school lessons and knew nothing about its historical setting. I'm wondering now if all of that was for naught. You know, what happens to us if we don't know the setting, and what value is it? What do we gain by knowing that historical setting?

Dr. Bayer: I would say that it is helpful and instructive to know the historical setting. I would not say that it is crucial for understanding the book of Acts. But you can see, I'll illustrate, how the understanding of the historical setting helps interpretation and also its veracity, it's truthfulness of its account. And let me just give you the example that I mentioned in the lecture that when Paul is being transported and under house arrest on the ship to Rome and they're experiencing shipwreck, that Paul actually as a

prisoner is allowed to speak, and that there was a discovery of the so-called Rhodian maritime sea law, and it provides the possibility of every member on the ship to speak, even if that person is a prisoner. So that piece of historical understanding helps us to see its veracity.

In terms of the importance of understanding the book of Acts when you study the historical context, let me give you this example. In the early speeches of Peter in the book of Acts, we actually can demonstrate that he uses the pattern of an Old Testament repentance speech. And when we're in the setting of Jerusalem, when we're in the setting of Jews listening to a man speaking prophetically who says, who follows the pattern of an Old Testament repentance speech, it puts us into that particular sphere in which the presentation of the recent events regarding Jesus are part of God's present work, ongoing work, with his people. And so it helps us to get the impact of the Petrine speech in a deeper way than we might have if we had not studied that historical context.

Student: Well, something that Ra said just reminded me of something. A lot of us, of course, read the Bible when we were younger, and my mother today when she reads it doesn't know much about the historical setting. But a lot of modern, I guess, experts or interpreters say that the historical setting really isn't relevant, that we can read it in terms of our own day and not take those into consideration. I mean, how prevalent is that? Is that a threat to accurate interpretation?

Dr. Bayer: Yah, it is a danger to deal with history as playdough and to formulate it and shape it according to our own expectations and our own perspectives and values. I think understanding the historical setting guards against this kind of arbitrary treatment of the biblical text, but I do sympathize with the modern need to have it speak to them, for it to be relevant. I would say the excursion to studying the biblical background is actually the most direct path to understanding its relevancy for today, because when you hear Peter speak in the format of a prophetic repentance speech, you do sense the impact, and so I would say they should not be played against each other. But I support and endorse the need of today's audience to understand the relevancy of the book of Acts and its message, and so I would say, do both. Understand the historical context. Do not play with history as playdough, but maintain the question as you study of what is the relevancy? What is the impact of this message on our life today?

Question 7:

From whose perspective should we read Acts?

Student: Acts is a very old book. Millions of people have read it over the centuries. It was written to Theophilus. In our lesson, it was also written to the early church. And of course, we read it even today. Now when I read the book of Acts, that's sort of a puzzle for me, because should I put myself in the place of Theophilus when I

read it, or should I read it as somebody in the early church would have read it, or should I read it as a 21st century American, for instance?

Dr. Bayer: Larry, I think the important point is initially to understand the correspondence between the purpose that Luke pursues with the book of Acts and the original audience. I think there is a close connection there as we study the original audience. We can say that the early church did experience a degree of persecution. The early church experienced a degree of discouragement. And when you see that the purpose of the book of Acts is to demonstrate the unhindered progression of the gospel of liberation in Jesus Christ that breaks through all kinds of different barriers, that kind of hope-giving triumph not of the individual people but of the mission of God himself, that is a great encouragement in the midst of suffering and defeat and difficulty and opposition. So I would say that is very important. So initially, we should put ourselves into the shoes of Theophilus, but then also of the wider audience of the early church, before we proceed and ask the question, “How does it speak to us today?” It is still God speaking. How do we transfer that message spoken originally to that audience, how do we transfer that to us as 21st century people?

Student: So we need to do both then. We need to look at Theophilus and the 1st century audience to determine original meaning. You might say we need to look at ourselves to determine modern application? How that meaning then relates to us in our circumstances?

Dr. Bayer: Yes, I would say that. There are some basic transfers, and I’m illustrating that a little bit in the lecture in terms of the continuity of the Triune God being the same. There are human circumstances and weaknesses that are the same. There is still the mission of God that is the same. There are many elements of direct and wonderful transfer for our lives as we are now called in our generation to be messengers of God, living letters for the living God.

Question 8:

How did the Roman Empire influence daily life?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson mentions that the Roman Empire is a significant part of the historical setting of the book of Acts. I’m curious as to what role the Empire played in the lives of the early church and the life of Luke as he’s writing, and the life of the leaders of the church. I understand that it’s there and it’s the context in which they live, but practically speaking, what real things did that do to their lives?

Dr. Bayer: There are many different aspects that we could go into to illustrate the interface between the grasp of the Roman Empire and this growing Messianic church of God. Let me take out one element, and that is the issue of emperor worship. The citizens and people who lived under the Roman Empire were required to give tribute to the emperor. At times, the emperor even demanded to be identified as *dios et*

dominos, as god and lord. And so when the confession in the early church is Jesus is *dios et dominos*, Jesus is God and Lord, he is the eternal Son of God, that is a point of friction and potential point of conflict of a very high mark. And so we see that the early church has to live within that context of submitting to the authority of the existing empire structure, while at the same time, really questioning the ultimate authority of the emperor. So that would be one area.

Student: How did they manage that in daily life? If I were a part of the early church and the government, the Roman Empire, imposed upon me, compelled me, to worship Caesar, and yet I know that only Jesus is God and Lord, how do I manage that in my life? What does that mean for me as a Christian? Do I have to go underground?

Dr. Bayer: I think that is one of the reasons why the church in the progression of persecution, particularly towards the end of the first century, did indeed have to go underground, and why there was rather large persecution and martyrdom of Christians who actually went all the way with that confession. So I would say there is at least initially a conflict and then a culmination in martyrdom.

Student: I think even consumers of popular culture know that the church had difficult times during the days of the Roman Empire — we've all seen the movies, Christians in the coliseum — and somebody might conclude maybe seeing that was a bad time, an inauspicious time to start a new faith. But is there any benefit that the church had from its beginnings in that time, being in that place and time?

Dr. Bayer: I would say so. There are many issues. For instance, the entire infrastructure that the Roman Empire developed throughout its conquered territories provided a means through which the gospel could be propagated and presented and taken to different lands. Another aspect that we see in the book of Acts is that Paul as a Roman citizen actually gains protection from the Roman authorities, and in the stage which I believe is the early 60s, there is still less conflict between this Christian-Messianic movement and the Roman Empire. So I would point out these two things, but there would be other elements, one being the fact that the Greek language was the *lingua franca*, the public language, the open language, general language of the Roman Empire.

Question 9:

Was the church being persecuted when the book of Acts was written?

Student: I earlier alluded to popular conceptions a lot of us have about Christians and the Roman Empire, and I referred to motion pictures and the horrible tortures and deprivations we know they went through. But was that going on in that way at the time the book of Acts was written?

Dr. Bayer: There is much historical study on that question, particularly when you look at the Roman Empire. The persecution really was more widespread and broad towards the end of the first century into the second century AD. So prior to that time, there would be local, particular persecutions. The most well-known one would be the Neronian persecution about AD 64 in Rome, but even that would be localized, so that confessing Jews who confessed Jesus were expelled from Rome at that particular point. So we can see pockets of persecution and localized difficulties, and we can also see that from the Jewish side. If you look at Acts 8:1, you see that there was a persecution of Christians in Jerusalem at that time which led to the further expansion of the gospel ministry. So I would say particular but not general at the time of the writing of the book of Acts and what it describes.

Question 10:

What do modern historians think of Luke's work?

Student: I believe earlier you had made some reference to Luke as an historian and that early on there had been some questions about the historicity of the book of Acts or the book of Luke. Nowadays, how do historians look at Luke's writings when they compare them to, let's say, the writings of Tacitus in his annals or the writings of Josephus, for instance? Does he measure up?

Dr. Bayer: Well, there are two schools on this question. There is the school that says that Luke was in a pre-critical time where historians mixed myth and legend with historical fact, and they could not really distinguish the difference between those elements. And then there is a growing school of scholars today in the last 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years who have argued that that is a false representation of ancient historiography and later stages including the time of the New Testament. So that the school that is growing at this point that I believe is most historically convincing is that there were always two schools of historians at any stage in the history of mankind: Those who were conscientious and careful, who reflected themselves whether they were given authentic testimony, authentic witness, authentic narrative, or those who were driven by a particular motive that was questionable. So the question is not, was Luke pre-critical or not? The question is what company is Luke in? You mentioned Tacitus and Josephus, and I would say both of those are in good company. They are conscientious. Now, with Josephus, we can have some questions about exaggerations of numbers, etc. Tacitus may have gone wrong here or there. But they are careful historians. The growing school today with researchers such as Colin Hemer or F.F. Bruce would indicate that Luke is in excellent company, that Luke performs very well particularly when checked with incidental references in the book of Acts, and he has exposed himself to make many incidental historical, sociological references that are, when tested with archeological inscriptional information, that he performs extremely well.

Question 11:
Did Josephus depend on Luke?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson mentions that some people believe that in writing Acts, Luke depended on some of the information that he read from Josephus, whereas in the lesson, you said, well, Luke is probably writing earlier. If Luke is writing earlier, and if some of the information in Luke's writings and in Josephus' writings are the same, is it possible that Josephus took his information from Luke?

Dr. Bayer: It is certainly possible. I would argue basically that Luke reports independently of Josephus, and Josephus reports independently of Luke. There are a good number of reports that interface between what Josephus writes and what Luke reports in the book of Acts. But when you look at these particular accounts, you see that Josephus has an idiosyncratic, a particular way of presenting these various events. And the same is true for the book of Acts. So that I would say they are independent historians referring to the same event, sometimes perhaps not even the same event. In the case of Theudas, I would argue that they are probably two individuals that are being described. But there is other events that would be the same particularly when Josephus writes about John the Baptist and Luke writes about John the Baptist. They are different vantage points that are actually dovetailing very well, very good, but independent. I would argue that that is probably the most convincing approach.

Question 12:
Was Christianity attractive to the socially disenfranchised?

Student: Doctor, years ago when I was sitting in a history class about Roman history, I remember the professor making a big point that Christianity had become very attractive to, I guess we would call them, the disenfranchised people of that era. Could you elaborate a little bit on if that's true, and if so, why?

Dr. Bayer: I would affirm that. You can look at different aspects of the book of Acts and the situation of the early Christians. You can think of the Neronian persecution that I've already referred to in AD 64, a little after the report of the book of Acts, in which Christians, the weakest member of the Roman society, was blamed for this massive fire that perhaps Nero himself instigated. So it makes a lot of sense historically to look at this growing Christian movement to be one of attraction for disenfranchised people. If you look at those who come from Greek philosophy, that was very exclusive and required a high level of education. If you look at the Roman aristocratic, higher level echelons in military and government, they were strongly influenced by Stoic philosophy, again exclusive. And then if you look at the realm of mystery religions, again it was an exclusive group of people who separated themselves from the rest of the populace. So those who were disenfranchised would not fit into the Greek, Roman or mystery religious societies, and here is a message

that breaks through the barriers and says before God you are valuable, Christ died for you. And so I would say very much so it would be very attractive. But as we see in the book of Acts, Paul also is able to speak to Stoics and Epicureans, so it reaches into other areas of society, but it would be very attractive to the disenfranchised.

Question 13:

What does creation have to do with salvation?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks about world history as part of the theological setting of the book of Acts. I'm curious, what role does creation itself play throughout world history as part of that theological setting and particularly with regard to the salvation that's being proclaimed in the book of Acts. Is creation just a backdrop to that story or is there more to it?

Dr. Bayer: I think there's more to it. We can see that creation plays a significant role. In Acts 14 and Acts 17, there is direct reference to creation and to the seasons. A certain interpretation of Acts 17 would support that. So there is an understanding of the goodness of God as Creator of this universe and then salvation is within that framework as God as redeemer, as the one who provides a means of reconciliation for mankind, and with mankind, all of creation. So I would say that is already a big factor. But one thing that comes with creation is really the development of culture and civilization. And we see in the book of Acts that the various elements of civilization and culture are not denied, are not rejected but are transformed so that the gospel breaks through ethnic divides, breaks through injustice of rich versus poor, breaks through prejudices, etc. There are many barriers that could be described, religious barriers, etc., that the gospel breaks through and really forms a humanity, a Messianic church under God, a redeemed humanity that very much then is transformative in its effect. So I would very much say there is more to that.

Student: So an approach to Acts which is very common, I guess, to just stress for instance people's salvation or individual salvation, receiving Christ, becoming Christians. That would sort of short change their understanding of the book if they make that too heavy an emphasis?

Dr. Bayer: I would so if it reduced to a very small sphere. I have made the argument that Pentacost is the writing of the law of God through the Spirit of God. That there is an echo to the giving of the Mosaic Law at Pentacost and that is indicative of the fact that salvation is transformative in the human beings. So that is why I am emphasizing that these apostles and early prophets and ministers and Christians are transformed, authentic witnesses of the reality of God in their lives. They're not just speaking; they are being transformed under God, and as such, they are salt and light then in the culture. So I would say yes, salvation in a very broad sense and redemption in that way. And we see the consequences in social behavior, the interaction between rich and poor, in living together among people who would otherwise keep distance from each other. That is the transformative power of the gospel.

Question 14:
Is the world becoming less sinful?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks about humanity's fall into sin, the fall as being the catastrophic event that Jesus came to redeem us from, but you've just sort of mentioned to us how the gospel is spreading throughout the world and transforming the world, not just individuals, but creation in some sense. So does that somehow mitigate the effects of the fall? Is the world becoming less sinful as the gospel spreads out? Or are we really still in the same place that they were back then?

Dr. Bayer: Certainly we're in the same place of the world that the people in the book of Acts were in because the reality of sin is still with us. So I would say there is a sobriety that we need to adopt in understanding the effects of the fall and the effects of sin on all kinds of areas, individually and corporately. What the book of Acts does hold out and what is relevant for us today as well is that there is a transformation happening, that there is a way of being renewed. And the message in the book of Acts does indicate that this is the mission of God. And because of this being the mission of God, there is transformation in individual people's lives, in small communities of believers then and now, and yet the battle is still on individually and in small churches and certainly in the society at large. So I think realistic, sober, but with great hope is what I would answer.

Question 15:
Why does Luke refer to Old Testament characters?

Student: Doctor, Luke often mentions many connections between Jesus and Old Testament characters. I was wondering if he was just using this as a literary device, or was he making some kind of statement about a connection to Israel when he does that?

Dr. Bayer: What is particularly significant in the Gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts, is a strong emphasis of Luke as a witness to the understanding of promise and fulfillment. The anticipation of God's work in the future among Old Testament prophets and in the Mosaic law, there is a great sensitivity in Luke to that anticipation and the fact that there is this significant and majestic fulfillment to much, not only particular prophecies, but an entire development of God bringing a people unto himself through Jesus Christ as the Messiah to Israel and to the world. So there is a very strong connection there. On a literary level, you could identify it as echoes. You could understand certain anticipations in the Old Testament being echoed in the New Testament, but it is more substantial than literary in the fact that God is in the process of bringing a people unto himself, culminating in the fact that Jesus is the one who brings together so many different strands of Old Testament anticipation, among them being the great exaltation of a Lord at the right hand of the Father in Psalm 110, and

one who is very humbled and suffers in Isaiah 53, and that he brings those two strands together. So there is a very rich content in Luke in terms of promise and fulfillment.

Student: Dr. Bayer, that makes me think in terms of...as God is gathering a people to himself in the book of Acts, he already did that before in the Old Testament. He did that with the nation of Israel. So does he now have two people? What exactly is the relationship between Israel and the church, these two peoples that he has gathered in these two different times?

Dr. Bayer: I would identify God's work with Israel as a blueprint for universal work. It is local and particular with regard to Israel, but the Old Testament anticipation of the Jews being a blessing, of Abraham's seed being a blessing to all nations, the anticipation that the light goes out to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42 and 49). This anticipation is always there so that blueprint of God's faithfulness to an unfaithful Israel is now being universalized in and through Jesus Christ. So that what is happening in the New Testament times in the book of Acts is that God is bringing a people onto himself that is composed of Jews and Gentiles who all find salvation, find purifications in and through Jesus Christ. One people.

Student: So there are no longer two people. There is not just the church which includes Israel but not all these Gentiles who we might say were grafted in or added to that people group.

Dr. Bayer: And in that larger, universal work, God keeps his covenant faithfulness to Israel in calling that remnant to that purity in himself. So that God's faithfulness to his promises are still realized in the blessing that Jews, ethnic Jews, receive now in the forgiveness in Christ.

Question 16:

What's the relationship between Israel and the church?

Student: In listening to what you've been saying about the relationship of Israel and the church, I was wondering how we should understand that in light of, for instance, Jesus' charge to the apostles in the beginning of Acts. What does that mean?

Dr. Bayer: Yes, that's a very important question. In Acts 1:6, the disciples ask Jesus, When will the kingdom be restored to Israel? And then in Acts 1:8, there is Jesus' response of waiting for the Spirit of God to come on them and for them to be witnesses. I would say it this way: The anticipation of restoration of the kingdom to Israel is a small wave of an understanding of Old Testament prophesy. What Jesus speaks of in Acts 1:8 is a big wave. It is further developed in Acts 3:17 following, when Luke speaks of the fulfillment of all that has been prophesied in the Old Testament. So I envision Acts 1:6 and Acts 1:8, Acts 3:17, as these waves, and the

small wave of anticipation is being overtaken by the bigger wave but not annulled, not rejected. So that God is showing his covenantal faithfulness to Israel, but at the same time, he is drawing the Jews who find salvation in Christ to understanding that now this people is inclusive of the Gentile world and thus there is one people under God and under his Messiah.

Question 17:

How similar were the messianic groups in Luke's day?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks a lot about, or not enough for me anyway... it talks a bit about the messianic groups that were active at the time of the first century and their expectations for who the Messiah would be, what he would accomplish. But the lesson covered that ground a little quickly. I'd like a little bit more detail on who these groups were, what they were thinking, and whether or not they were sort of all on the same game plan and just approaching it from different angles, or whether they had different ideas and different goals in mind.

Dr. Bayer: There is much discussion about the messianic expectation at the time of the New Testament and at the time of the writing of Luke, Acts. I would say, generally speaking, the popular expectation among various disparate groups within Judaism was that there would be a political Davidic Messiah who would rule in Jerusalem on the throne of David. So while you have diversity, there is this unified expectation, and the emphasis there is on popular. That would be the general expectation. And I would argue that Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God and Jesus' teaching regarding himself as Messiah is much broader. It draws in many more elements of Old Testament prophesy and anticipation to really come to the point of a modified goal of the Messiah distinct from the expectation of political Messiah. Now I want to say that suffering focuses you, and the longsuffering of the Jewish people under the pre-Maccabean time and the Maccabean uprising, etc., focused the expectation of the Jewish people to that particular political expectation, while the Old Testament presentation is much broader. So I would say, when Jesus came, he broadened the expectation to include one of suffering and great exaltation. So he in some ways deepened and heightened the understanding of the Messiah of God who would be ruler over all creation, who would be the Lord over all of his church, and who would suffer in a very profound way. So that is the dynamic that I see happening in the New Testament and particularly in the book of Acts. So both the goal and the means were in some ways modified by Jesus.

Student: I'm leading a series in my church on Matthew, and it strikes me when you talk about expectations, that everybody had expectations for Jesus and he was constantly fighting it and saying don't tell anyone or don't do this or that. I was wondering, how does this affect the mission in Acts? Do those expectations hinder the growth of the church? Was there much infighting between the groups?

Dr. Bayer: That's a very good question. In terms of the expectation, I would say, generally speaking, the amazing nature of the Messiah of God being a much more exalted being than expected and having suffered in a much deeper way, is so revolutionizing that it unifies the early Christian church and is actually the dynamic force behind the confidence to go out and to suffer and to undergo persecution. So it would be a unifying element that gives great joy to the Messianic church of God to understand that the Messiah of God is the eternal Son of God who now rules over his people.

Question 18: **Why should we focus on the kingdom of God?**

Student: Dr. Bayer, earlier I had made some reference, I think, of about how many people put the emphasis not only in the book of Acts but in the whole New Testament especially, on the salvation experience, the personal salvation experience, and that the gospel entails somebody receiving Christ as Savior. I mean, that's some of the buzzword terminology that we use in the United States. When I was a kid, that's the way, for instance, we looked at Acts. It was the beginning of the church and all these people came and they got saved, they received Christ. This lesson seems to stress something a little different. It talks about things like messianic expectations, and it talks about the kingdom of God. What are the benefits in approaching that from a slightly, or maybe a greatly different perspective than the one I was used to?

Dr. Bayer: Yes, I would say it's not a different perspective. There is no contradiction between what I say and what you have just referred to as the gospel of salvation. Gospel means good news, it is the good news about the mission of God in and through Jesus Christ to provide salvation, reconciliation, with God the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So there is a good bit of overlap. But what I would like to say is that there is a greater context within which this salvation, this redemption occurs, and it is the context of the Kingdom of God, of the rule of God, of the original creation design, of the unfolding of covenantal faithfulness of God to his people, that is, God is the King of his people. The triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Messiah then being the eternal Son of God. So that this context then of the rule of God leads us away from an individualized, personalized understanding, exclusive personalized, understanding of salvation, to the understanding of the people of God under the lordship and authority of God both individually and then corporately. And so it does not detract from personal salvation, but it gives it a context, a framework, which is much broader and which includes not only momentary salvation, but it includes an ongoing discipleship, an ongoing submission to the lordship of Christ individually and corporately. And so I think that helps us to understand the mission of God in a broader sense.

Student: That seems to have a lot more impact on me emotionally as I hear you say that, that when I think about me and Jesus, my individual salvation, that is a

wonderful thing and I would die for that. But as you describe it, it's so much bigger. It's a much broader restoration of creation and of all people into this giant salvation of which I'm a part. It makes my individual salvation feel so much more significant as I view it that way.

Dr. Bayer: It is. It is because it is your salvation; it is your transformation. But it is also breaking through cultural barriers. So it has an incredible consequence in terms of culture, in terms of the society at large, and that is part of salvation. That is part of the work of God. And so I would affirm what you're saying as a broader understanding of what God is about that includes the personal salvation. But it goes beyond. It gives us a framework and a context.

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The Book of Acts

LESSON TWO

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT



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The Book of Acts

Lesson Two

Structure and Content

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher, I sometimes have the opportunity to travel in many countries around the world. Before each trip, I always make sure I understand two important things. First, I need to know where I am going. And second, I have to know how I will get from place to place. Will I take an airplane? Catch a bus? Or use some other form of transportation? Well, something similar is true when we read the book of Acts. It helps to know where the story is going and what literary techniques or strategies Luke uses to guide us to our destination.

This is the second lesson in our series *The Book of Acts*. In this series, we are exploring the record of the early church as it continued the ministry of Jesus. We have entitled this lesson “Structure and Content” because we will be looking at the ways Luke organized his material, and at the message he intended to teach.

Our exploration of the structure and content of Acts will divide into three parts. First, we will examine the rhetorical strategy of the book, looking at how Luke’s approach to writing Acts should influence the way we interpret it. Second, we will examine the book’s content, noting the arrangement of its material, and considering how it would have been understood in the first century. And third, we will suggest a model for the modern application of the book, considering how Luke’s ancient message can speak authoritatively in our day. Let’s look first at the rhetorical strategy of the book of Acts.

RHETORICAL STRATEGY

Whenever we read a book in the Bible, it is important to become familiar with the way the author persuades his readers of his points of view. We have to ask questions like: Why did the author write this book? What authorities did he appeal to in order to establish his case? And how did he design his book to guide his readers to the proper conclusions? The answers to these questions yield so many insights that we should never ignore them.

As we approach the book of Acts, we will focus on three aspects of Luke’s rhetorical strategy. First, we will speak of his stated purpose. Second, we will mention his reliance on authority. And third, we will speak of some structural patterns he employed throughout the book. Let’s start by examining Luke’s stated purpose for writing the book of Acts.

STATED PURPOSE

When people write works of significant length and complexity, they normally have many intentions and purposes. And this was true for Luke as he wrote his two-volume work of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. He hoped that his writing would impact the lives of Theophilus and the church in many different ways. So, we have to be careful not to oversimplify his purposes. Even so, Luke explicitly stated that he had a purpose for his work.

As we will see, Luke plainly stated that he had a twofold purpose as he wrote. On the one hand, Luke declared that he had historical intentions, a desire to write a true and reliable historical account of the church in the first century. And on the other hand, he declared that he had significant theological intentions: a desire to convey and confirm the truth and significance of the gospel message. We will look at both aspects of Luke's twofold purpose, beginning with his intention to write a true historical account.

Historical Account

In the prologue to his gospel, in Luke 1:1-3, Luke indicated that he was keenly concerned with writing a true history of the early church. Listen to his words there:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account (Luke 1:1-3).

Luke's concern with true history is apparent in several ways in this passage. He referred to "the things that have been fulfilled among us," that is, historical events that had taken place. Luke also mentioned that he had consulted "eyewitnesses" and that he had "carefully investigated" the details he recorded. He also took care to write an "orderly account" so that the truth he reported would be communicated clearly and accurately.

In short, Luke intended his two-volume work of the Gospel and Acts to provide a true historical record, beginning with the life of Jesus in the Gospel, and continuing with the first-century church in the book of Acts. Luke was concerned about recording true history because he understood a basic principle repeated throughout the Bible: God reveals himself in real history, in space and time. He works through history to bring about his salvation and judgment.

Unfortunately, in recent centuries many critical scholars have argued that the concepts of "salvation" and "judgment" are mutually exclusive from real history. Generally, they have asserted that supernatural acts of God simply do not occur in history, in actual space and time. They believe instead that real history is merely natural, not supernatural. As a result, when critical theologians read about acts of God in

Scripture, they often treat these accounts as expressions of nonfactual religious sentiments, a sort of “pious fiction.”

But Luke himself made it clear that he was not trying to write pious fiction; he intended to report real history. In fact, he wrote in a way that made it easy to verify or to disprove his claims. As just one example, Luke located his accounts within well-known historical contexts. In the book of Acts, for instance, we find references to men such as Gamaliel, in 5:34, Gallio, in 18:12, Felix, in 23:26, and Festus, in 24:27, all of whom were well-known in the ancient Jewish and Roman world. By mentioning these men and other historical details, Luke made it possible for his readers to examine his research independently. They could speak with others who had knowledge of these people and events he reported, and in some cases they could read the writings of others on the same subjects. Had Luke’s reports not been true to fact, it would have been easy for skeptics to refute them.

Especially since the end of the 19th century, a number of scholars have examined the historical veracity of Acts by comparing it with many extra-biblical texts and other archeological data. Many of these studies have indicated a number of ways in which Luke was a reliable historian, but time will only permit us to mention a pair of specific examples.

First, in Acts 28:7, Luke reflected knowledge of specific historical terminology. There he referred to the leader of the Island Malta as “the first of the island.” This unusual terminology has puzzled many interpreters through the centuries, but recent archeological research has shown that this actually was the leader’s official title at that time.

Second, in Acts 27:21-26, Luke described Paul’s actions onboard ship in ways that have been confirmed by historical research. There Luke wrote that Paul spoke to the entire crew of the ship that was carrying him to Rome, advising and encouraging them during a great storm. Many critical scholars in the past argued that it would have been impossible for Paul as a prisoner to speak openly in this manner. So, they concluded that Luke had created a fictional heroic portrait of the apostle. But recent research has shown that first-century maritime law permitted anyone on board to speak and to advise the crew when ships were in serious danger.

These examples illustrate Luke’s fidelity to the facts of history. And his intention to write an account of actual historical events reminds us that God’s eternal truth is not somehow detached from the concrete realities of life. Rather, in biblical faith, salvation comes in and through real history. This is why Luke was so concerned with writing a true historical account.

Gospel Message

With Luke’s historical purpose in mind, we should mention a second dimension of Luke’s intention: the theological purpose of conveying the reality and power of the gospel message in the book of Acts. Listen once more to the words of Luke 1:3-4:

It seemed good ... to me to write an orderly account ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

As we see here, Luke wrote the history of Acts to confirm what Theophilus and others had been taught. This means that the book of Acts may rightly be characterized as a sort of catechetical or didactic history. Luke wanted Theophilus and his other readers to adopt certain points of view, certain theological convictions, certain perspectives on the theological significance of historical events he reported in the book of Acts.

As we saw in an earlier lesson, Luke viewed the world and all of history through the lens of Christ's lordship and kingdom. He saw the Old Testament hopes and promises being fulfilled through Jesus and the church. And he wanted Theophilus to view his record of events in the early church through this lens, to see how Christ, through the Spirit of God, had established and was continuing to build up the kingdom of God in Christ. So, as we read the book of Acts today, we must always keep in mind that Luke was not just recording true facts so that we would know what happened long ago. Rather, he was also drawing attention to teachings that were foundational to the church: the reliable witness to the continuing work of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

RELiance ON AUTHORITY

With Luke's twofold stated purpose in mind, we are ready to consider a second aspect of his rhetorical strategy: his reliance on authority. Luke did not assert the historical and theological truths he recorded on the basis of his own authority, but on the authority of Christ and his apostles. In this way, Luke served as a true witness of the gospel.

One thing that is striking in Acts is the amount of material devoted to the words and deeds of those who served as key witnesses to Christ. When Christ ascended to heaven, he named his apostles as his witnesses and gave them authority, in dependence upon him, to continue his kingdom work. He periodically empowered prophets and other prominent church leaders to proclaim his message as well. And as Luke sought to persuade Theophilus and the wider church of his perspectives, he turned time and again to early church leaders, especially apostles and prophets, to illustrate and to authorize his own outlooks.

To explore Luke's reliance on authority in more detail, we will focus on two matters. First, we will consider the way Luke appealed to authoritative words. And second, we will look at his references to authoritative deeds. Let's begin with Luke's emphasis on words that carried authority in the church.

Words

As we mentioned in our prior lesson, Luke was not an apostle. He probably came to faith after Christ's ascension into heaven. During his travels with and without Paul, Luke investigated the ministries of Jesus and the apostles, and recorded the testimony of the Lord's chosen eyewitnesses.

Now, in one sense, all followers of Christ are his witnesses. But, when the church was being established, Jesus commissioned the apostles to be his infallible witnesses. They were the only ones he appointed and empowered to serve as permanent, authoritative witnesses on earth in his absence. Beyond this, the Lord called prophets and other authorized church leaders, such as Luke, to testify authoritatively on an occasional basis.

The most prominent way Luke presented authoritative words was to record speeches. Rather than simply commenting on the teaching of the church, Luke regularly recorded extensive discourses, allowing the Lord's authoritative representatives to speak for themselves as active characters in his history.

In fact, about thirty percent of Acts is composed of debates, dialogues, monologues, sermons and other types of oral presentations. This is a far higher percentage of speech material than we find in other ancient narratives, probably because Luke relied on speeches as an appeal to the authority of the apostles. Altogether, there are about 24 speeches in Acts: eight from Peter, nine from Paul, one from Stephen, one from James, and a few from others. And the vast majority of these speeches are made by apostles; the rest are mostly made by prophets and prominent church leaders.

But why is this important? The speeches in Acts tell us who the early church leaders were and what they thought about many issues. They show us why the disciples were willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. They bear witness to the apostles' service to Christ and record their instructions for building his kingdom. They also authorize Luke's perspectives on the history of the early church.

Now, there have been many critical scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who do not accept that Luke provided true reports of the speeches he included in Acts. And we have to admit that there are examples in the ancient world of historical accounts in which speeches are not based on fact.

But a number of critical and evangelical scholars point out that many historians before, during and after Luke's day worked hard to ensure that the speeches in their histories were true representations of actual speeches. And in fact, as we look more closely at the speeches in Acts, we find convincing evidence that Luke was one of these reliable historians, so the speeches he included really do represent authoritative apostolic teachings.

We primarily have confidence in the records of speeches in Acts because Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write an infallible and authoritative history. Nevertheless, there are at least four other ways we can see that the speeches in Acts are accurate representations of real speeches.

First, the speeches have their own style. By comparison with other portions of Acts, they seem natural, with a simple style. Some of them employ rough, unpolished Greek. This shows that Luke was more concerned with writing down what speakers actually said than he was with refining and modifying their speeches.

Second, the speeches fit very well into their respective contexts. Each speech is tailored to the speaker and the audience. For example, in Acts 4, Peter spoke to the Jewish leaders after healing a lame man. And although his speech proclaimed salvation in Christ, which we might expect if Luke had invented it, Peter appealed directly to the healing as proof of his words. Moreover, the unbelieving Jewish leaders could not refute Peter because they themselves witnessed the healing.

In a similar way, Paul's speeches reflect their respective contexts. For instance in Acts 13, he spoke very differently to Jews and God-fearers in Pisidian Antioch than to Stoics and Epicureans in Acts 17.

Third, each speech reflects the individuality of its speaker. While common themes are to be expected, each speaker displays characteristic particularities. For example, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 has an amazing number of parallels to Paul's letters. This is just the sort of speech we would expect from the author of these letters.

Fourth, in some places, Luke explicitly stated that he had summarized or abbreviated certain speeches. For instance, in Acts 2:40, he mentioned that Peter also spoke "many other words." This should incline us to believe that Luke's goal was generally to provide a fuller representation of actual speeches in their original contexts. In these and a number of other ways, we can have assurance that Luke provided historically true speeches. He did not invent or fabricate the speeches in Acts to suit his purposes. Instead, he rested the authority of his own comments and narrative elaborations on the actual authoritative witness of the apostles.

In addition to recording authoritative words, Luke also relied on accounts of authoritative deeds performed in the early church to support the theological message he conveyed through the book of Acts.

Deeds

The Holy Spirit empowered the apostles — and sometimes prophets and other prominent leaders in the early church — in many miraculous ways that validated their gospel message. Through miracles, from dramatic spiritual gifting to healings to raising the dead, the Holy Spirit testified that the apostles were Christ's authoritative representatives.

Consider Acts 13:7-12, where Paul's ministry was validated before the proconsul of Paphos. Listen to Luke's account there:

The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Paul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer ... opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, " ... [T]he hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord (Acts 13:7-12).

As Elymas tried to hinder the gospel, the Holy Spirit empowered Paul to strike him with blindness. And Paul's teaching and actions persuaded the proconsul that his gospel was true.

Luke recorded authoritative words and deeds so that his readers would be persuaded of the truth of his accounts. He wanted his readers to see that the apostles were authorized by the Lord Jesus, and that the church in all places and generations was obligated to follow their witness as they continued to build the kingdom of God in dependence upon Christ.

Now that we have looked at Luke's stated purpose and reliance on authority, we are ready to turn to a third dimension of Luke's rhetorical strategy: the structural pattern that Luke employed throughout the book of Acts.

STRUCTURAL PATTERN

The book of Acts displays many structural patterns, but for the sake of time we will focus on two facets of the structure of Acts. First, we will explore the prominent pattern of repeated summary statements. Second, we will look into the pattern of church growth that appears in Acts. Let's begin with the way Luke used summary statements.

Summary Statements

Biblical writers make their presence known in narratives on many different levels. Sometimes, for all practical purposes, they hide themselves behind the action of a story. At other times, they step forward to make explicit comments on what takes place in their accounts. We speak of this latter technique as authorial comments. Luke made many authorial comments throughout Acts. He gave background information, revealed the intentions of characters' hearts, described settings and so on. He did this to ensure that his message was presented clearly and faithfully. One of the ways he often commented on events in his book was through summary statements.

Many readers have noticed that the book of Acts describes the gospel's progression from Jerusalem outward. And at a number of steps along the way, Luke paused to summarize events up to that point. We will explore how Luke used summary statements for six periods of time in his history: the success of the gospel in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria; from Samaria to Syrian Antioch; in Cyprus, Phrygia and Galatia; in Asia, Macedonia and Achaia; and from Jerusalem to Rome.

Take for example, Acts 5:42 where Luke summarized the church's success and activity with these words:

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 5:42).

This is the type of summary statement that Luke regularly provided throughout the book of Acts to highlight the successful stages of the success of the gospel and the growth of the church. Listen to his comment in Acts 28:30-31:

[Paul] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered (Acts 28:30-31, NASB).

Now that we have seen that Luke drew attention to certain features of his history through summary statements, we should look at the pattern of church growth that emerges between these summary statements.

Church Growth

When Luke described the growth of the church, he regularly mentioned two pairs of dynamic forces. On the one side, he wrote about internal growth and tension within the church. And on the other side, he wrote about external growth and opposition from outside the church. We will illustrate this pattern later in this lesson, so for now we will simply describe what we mean.

By the term “internal growth,” we are referring to the positive effects of the gospel within the Christian community. We might say that this was a form of qualitative growth, furthering the spiritual maturity of individuals and of the church as a whole. And by the term “tension,” we have in mind the problems, questions, controversies and struggles that occurred within the church. In the book of Acts, Luke regularly demonstrated that there was a reciprocal relationship between internal growth and tension. Internal growth led to tension, and tension led to internal growth.

The second pair of elements in Luke’s structural pattern of church growth is external growth and opposition. By “external growth,” we have in mind that the church increased numerically by adding new members. This form of growth was quantitative. And by the term “opposition,” we are referring to the fact that conflict frequently arose between the church and the unbelieving world as unbelievers reacted negatively to the gospel. Once again, there is a reciprocal relationship between these two ideas in Acts. External growth sometimes led to opposition, and opposition led to the external growth at times as well.

Moreover, Luke often demonstrated that there is a reciprocal relationship between both of these pairs of elements, between internal growth and tension on the one side, and external growth and opposition on the other side. In other words, Luke regularly pointed out that internal growth and tension yield external growth and opposition, and that external growth and opposition cause internal growth and tension. As we will see later in this lesson, this pattern for church growth appears so frequently in Acts that it forms a kind of conceptual framework or skeleton for the book.

The summaries Luke made throughout his book explain that every major section of the book of Acts depicts the growth of the gospel as it spread through the witness of the early church. And just imagine the effect these comments should have had on Theophilus and others who read Luke’s book. They would have encouraged believers everywhere that no matter how great the tension or how terrible the opposition, God is always working through the gospel for the internal and external growth of his church.

They would have inclined the early Christians to read all of history from this perspective. And they would have assured them that if they remained faithful witnesses to their Lord and Savior, they would see the growth of the gospel in their day too, despite their internal and external problems.

CONTENT

With some of the central dimensions of Luke's rhetorical strategy in mind, we now turn to our second topic: the content of the book of Acts. While there are many ways to summarize the content of this book, we will focus on the way Luke described the development of the church as the partial realization of God's kingdom on earth.

Luke's two-volume work of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts explains how Jesus brought and began to build God's earthly kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel. In his Gospel, Luke described the foundation that Jesus laid for the kingdom during his earthly ministry. And in the book of Acts, Luke described how Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit to empower the apostles and the church to continue his kingdom-building work. In this way, God's kingdom is the overarching story of both volumes of Luke's work. So, as we explore the content of Acts, we will pay special attention to the way the kingdom continued to expand under the leadership of the apostles.

When Jesus commissioned the apostles in Acts 1:8, he instructed them to serve as witnesses, proclaiming the gospel first in Jerusalem, and then spreading out to the rest of the world. Listen once more to Jesus' words to the apostles in Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Here Jesus laid out a geographical strategy for the gospel witness of the church. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the apostles were to begin witnessing in Jerusalem, then carry the gospel to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth, expanding the kingdom everywhere they went.

Many scholars have observed that Luke organized the book of Acts around Jesus' call for geographical witness expansion. And we will follow this same pattern as we survey his work. We will look first at the way that Luke described the growth of the gospel in Jerusalem in Acts 1:1–8:4. Second, we will turn to the growth of the kingdom in Judea and Samaria in 8:5–9:31. And third, we will focus on the way the church carried the gospel to the ends of the earth in 9:32–28:31. Because this third section is so long, we will pay special attention to it, focusing on four stages of growth suggested by Luke's summary statements that we have already noted: first, in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch in 9:32–12:25; second, in Cyprus, Phrygia and Galatia in 13:1–15:35; third, in Asia, Macedonia and Achaia in 15:36–21:16; and fourth, all the way to Rome in 21:17–28:31.

We will look at each of these sections in more detail, focusing on the patterns of internal growth and tension and external growth and opposition that we described earlier. Let's begin with the way the kingdom in Jerusalem was established through the gospel witness of the apostles in Acts 1:1–8:4.

JERUSALEM

Jerusalem was the capital city of ancient Israel, God's special nation in the Old Testament. Jerusalem was the starting point of Luke's account because of the central role it had played in God's kingdom throughout the Old Testament, and also in Jesus' ministry. Moreover, Luke wrote about events in Jerusalem at a number of other places in the book of Acts, regularly showing that the apostles' work in spreading the gospel to new lands was still rooted in this special city.

Luke reported the growth of the kingdom through the gospel in Jerusalem in four major batches of narratives: first, the anticipation and outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 1–2; second, Peter's temple sermon and the persecution that followed in Acts 3–4; third, the story of Ananias and Sapphira and the persecution that followed in Acts 5; and fourth, the selection of deacons and the persecution that followed in Acts 6:1–8:4.

By way of illustration, internal growth appears in a number of well-known events that took place in Jerusalem, such as:

- The apostles' commission in Acts 1
- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost in Acts 2
- The experience of miracles in Jerusalem, especially by Peter, in Acts 3, 4 and 5

At the same time, we also see tensions within the Christian community in a number of ways, including:

- The question of who would become the twelfth apostle in Acts 1
- Ananias and Sapphira's lie about the money they had donated in Acts 5; and
- Discrimination against Hellenistic widows in Acts 6

Beyond this, Luke's record of the gospel witness in Jerusalem also follows the pattern of external growth and opposition. For example:

- On the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people were added to the church in Acts 2
- Membership in the church grew to around 5,000 when John and Peter were jailed in Acts 4, and
- Many Jewish priests were added to the church in Acts 6

Even so, as we have already suggested, this outward growth was often set alongside strong opposition from the unbelieving world, such as:

- The arrest and beating of Peter and John in Acts 5
- The martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7; and
- The church's scattering by persecution from Jerusalem in Acts 8

We might have expected internal tension and outward opposition to discourage the fledgling church in Jerusalem. But under the power of the Holy Spirit, the reality was just the opposite. The gospel witness continued to go forth with great strength, ultimately unhindered in its progress.

JUDEA AND SAMARIA

The second major division of Acts focuses on the gospel witness of the church in Judea and Samaria in Acts 8:5–9:31. The regions of Judea and Samaria were roughly equivalent to the southern and northern regions of the Promised Land given to Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus himself had ministered in these regions before his ascension. Luke's focus on Judea and Samaria can be divided into two main batches of stories: the ministry of Philip in Acts 8:5-40 and the conversion of Paul in Acts 9:1-31.

These stories draw attention to the internal growth of the church. For instance, internal growth continued as new believers continued to be filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 8, and Saul was made an apostle after his conversion in Acts 9.

Hand-in-hand with these events, however, tension also built within the church. For example, questions were raised in Acts 8 because some believers had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Simon the magician tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from the apostles in Acts 8.

On the other hand, the pattern of outward growth and opposition also continued. For instance, the church continued to grow numerically in Judea and Samaria through events such as the many converts made through Philip's evangelistic ministry in Acts 8, and the conversion of Paul in Acts 9.

Even so, this growth did not occur without opposition from unbelievers. For example, Saul persecuted believers before his conversion in Acts 9, and some Jews attempted to assassinate Saul after his conversion in Acts 9.

Once again, internal tension and outward opposition ultimately failed to hinder the church. Instead, the Holy Spirit used these challenges to bring further maturity and numerical growth to the church.

ENDS OF THE EARTH

The third major section of Acts describes how the gospel expanded beyond the borders of the Promised Land, to the ends of the earth, as it was known in that day. As we mentioned, we will look at this section in greater detail, beginning with the advance of the gospel in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch in 9:32–12:25.

Phoenicia, Cyprus & Antioch

This section concerns the first significant spread of the gospel beyond Judea and Samaria as it extended into the nearby Gentile lands of Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch in Syria. In this portion of Acts, we read of Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa in Acts

9:32-43, Peter's ministry in Caesarea to the Gentile Cornelius in 10:1–11:18, the expansion of the gospel to Syrian Antioch in 11:19-30, and Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison in Jerusalem in 12:1-25.

Not surprisingly, the pattern of internal growth and tension continued here as well. Luke recorded several examples of internal growth. For instance, Gentiles were brought into the church in Acts 10 and the church was encouraged by Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison in Acts 12.

And of course, there were related tensions as well. For example, Many Jews hesitated to receive Gentiles into full fellowship in the church in Acts 11, and many resisted loosening Old Testament dietary restrictions in Acts 11.

In this section also, Luke emphasized the pattern of outward growth and opposition. For instance, he wrote of external growth through the conversion of Cornelius and many other Gentiles in Acts 10, and the successful evangelistic ministry of Barnabas and others in Antioch in Acts 11.

But this growth was not without opposition. This persecution included the death of James in Acts 12 and the imprisonment of Peter in Acts 12.

But despite the tension and opposition, the gospel witness was not ultimately hindered. The Holy Spirit continued to bless the church's evangelism and discipleship. He overcame racial divisions and persecution, even freeing Peter from prison in a miraculous way. No matter what hindrances were thrown in its path, the gospel continued to go forward.

Cyprus, Phrygia and Galatia

In Acts 13:1–15:35, Luke turned to his fourth major section: the spread of the gospel in Cyprus, Phrygia and Galatia. In this section, the gospel moved further from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, stretching into the eastern portions of Asia Minor. This section of Acts divides into two main parts: Paul's first missionary journey itself in Acts 13:1–14:28, and the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15:1-35.

In keeping with his strategy, Luke reflected the pattern of internal growth and tension in this section as well. He pointed to internal growth through things such as Paul's strengthening of the churches in Galatia in Acts 14, and the Jerusalem council's decision not to demand circumcision of Gentile converts to Christ in Acts 15.

Luke also mentioned internal tension in this section, especially as he wrote about the practical difficulties related to Gentile converts. Tension arose between Jewish and Gentile believers over the issues of circumcision and the rigors of the traditional Jewish diet in Acts 15.

With regard to external growth and opposition, Luke mentioned many matters, such as the numerical growth generated by Paul's first missionary journey, as reported in Acts 14. But as before, this growth was accompanied by strong opposition. For example, Paul and Barnabas were repeatedly rejected by Jewish unbelievers, especially in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, in Acts 14. Even so, the Holy Spirit continued to move the church forward and to overcome every obstacle in the path of his people. The unstoppable gospel continued to accomplish God's purposes.

Asia, Macedonia and Achaia

The fifth major section of Acts runs from 15:36–21:16, where the gospel witness was extended to the Roman provinces of Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. This portion of Acts focuses on Paul's second and third missionary journeys, during which time Paul traveled through eastern Asia Minor, as he had before, but then pressed on to the province of Asia in western Asia Minor, and across the Aegean Sea to many cities in Macedonia and Achaia in modern-day Greece.

Paul's second missionary journey is recorded in Acts 15:36–18:22, and his third missionary journey in 18:23–21:16. In the pattern that should be quite familiar by now, these chapters emphasize the relationship between internal growth and tension. We find many examples of internal growth here, such as the instruction of Apollos by Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18 and Paul's extended teaching in the synagogues of Ephesus and the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Acts 19.

And of course, much tension accompanied this internal growth. For instance, Paul and Barnabas argued over Mark and parted company in Acts 15, and Paul warned the church to guard against church leaders who have evil motives in Acts 20.

We also read of external growth and opposition. For example, we see external growth in the many converts Paul gained and in the churches he planted during his second and third missionary journeys in Acts 15–21. But we also see opposition, such as the angry mobs that tried to kill Paul, and the Jewish zealots who pursued Paul from city to city in Acts 17 and 20. Once again, Luke showed that the gospel spread effectively throughout the world. Internal tensions and external opposition were constant difficulties, but they could not stop the progress of the gospel witness empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Rome

Finally, the last major portion of Luke's narrative concentrates on gospel witness in Rome in Acts 21:17–28:31. This section focuses on Paul's journey from Jerusalem, and then on his subsequent arrest, imprisonment and transfer to Rome. These materials roughly divide into four large sections: Paul's final witness in Jerusalem in Acts 21:17–23:11, Paul's imprisonment in 23:12–26:32, his difficult journey to Rome in 27:1–28:14, and finally, his witness in Rome in 28:15–31.

As we have come to expect, these chapters include the familiar pattern of internal growth and tension. We see several evidences of internal growth, including things like the joy Jewish believers in Jerusalem felt when they heard that many Gentiles were coming to the faith in Acts 21, and the willingness of Paul and others to suffer and even to die to spread the gospel in Acts 22.

But we also see that this internal growth was accompanied by tension, such as the rumor that Paul was teaching Jewish believers to abandon their traditions in Acts 21 and the consequent tension his presence caused in the church in Jerusalem in Acts 21.

We also find the pattern of external growth and opposition. Luke recorded that the church made great strides in external growth during this period. For example, Paul was

able to present the gospel to many high-ranking officials in Acts 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, and he preached without hindrance in Rome in Acts 28. But Luke also pointed out that strong opposition accompanied this growth, including Paul's arrest and four-year imprisonment by the Roman government in Acts 24 and Paul's imprisonment in Rome in Acts 28.

Each major section of Acts proves that the faithful witnesses of the gospel had not failed. The Holy Spirit empowered the church to take the gospel from Jerusalem to the very capital of the Roman Empire. Despite the internal and external troubles that the church endured, the unhindered gospel brought the church to spiritual maturity and numerical expansion as it spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

MODERN APPLICATION

Now that we have explored the rhetorical strategy and content of Acts, let's turn to our third topic: steps toward modern application. What are some of the main issues to consider as we apply the truths of Acts in our own day? To explore this topic, we will first focus on the literary character of Acts, noting some of its main characteristics. Second, we will speak about some discontinuities between the first century and our day that impact our modern application of his book. And third, we will affirm some important continuities between the first century and the modern day that help us relate the original meaning of Acts to our own lives. Let's begin by looking at the literary character of Acts.

LITERARY CHARACTER

Different kinds of literature communicate their ideas in different ways. For instance, we find many types of literature in the Bible. There are historical narratives, poems, speeches, parables, proverbs, law, and so on. And each of these types of literature communicates in different ways. If we hope to understand the book of Acts in a responsible way, we must take into account the kind of literature it is and the ways this kind of literature communicates its ideas.

There are many things we might say about Acts from a literary point of view, but time will only permit us to highlight three of its more prominent characteristics. First, Luke was selective in what he reported. Second, he designed Acts to be episodic. And third, he communicated many of his teachings in implicit ways. Let's look first at the selective nature of the material in Acts.

Selective

Every historian has to be selective. There are simply too many facts, people and events in the world for any human being to provide a comprehensive report of them. The events in Acts span the years from the ascension of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome, a period of three or four decades. An astounding number of significant events took

place in the church during this time — far too many to count. Yet, Luke only wrote 28 fairly short chapters. So, we know that he reported only a tiny fraction of what could have been said. But how did he determine what events to include? How did he decide what to omit? Luke was led by the Holy Spirit to select those bits of history that were critical to understanding Jesus' work through the apostles, and that would persuade his readers to embrace some of the central teachings of the apostles.

So, as we attempt to find ways to apply the book of Acts in the modern world, we need to do two things. On the one hand, we need to avoid the error of thinking that Luke recorded everything we might ever want to know about this period of church history. There are many questions he left unanswered, so we need to avoid looking for every answer to our modern problems in the book of Acts.

On the other hand, we need to remember that each account in the book of Acts is there to help Luke accomplish his twofold purpose. So, we need to read everything in the book in light of how it helps Luke further this goal. We should constantly be asking questions like: What does this teach me about the early church? And what doctrines does it encourage me to adopt?

Episodic

Besides being selective, the literature of Acts is also episodic. That is to say, Acts is a successive collection of smaller stories and accounts. As we read the book of Acts, it is important to note that each of its individual narratives is part of Luke's overall strategy and message. Each one contributes in some way to his overall mission of teaching Theophilus about the gospel of the kingdom of God in Christ. So, this big picture should serve as the backdrop and context to each episode we read in Acts.

But each episode is also distinct. Each one has its own smaller points to make, its own details to teach about the way the church is to continue building God's kingdom in Christ through the gospel. And this means that as we read Acts, we should not allow our attention to Luke's overarching purpose to overshadow the individual points he was making. We must pay attention to both the big and the small picture, understanding how each episode contributes to the greater goal, but also how each episode helps define the details of that goal.

In addition to being selective and episodic, the narrative format of Acts is also implicit in the way that its genre communicates much of its teaching.

Implicit

Broadly speaking, there are two main types of literature in the New Testament: narrative discourse and argumentative discourse. Argumentative discourse is literature that represents a sort of conversation, such as when a character in a book is talking, or when an author speaks directly to his audience. For example, the New Testament epistles consist primarily of argumentative discourse in which an author like Paul is speaking directly to the recipients of his letter. Of course, some epistles include snippets of

narrative, and we even find the occasional song or proverb. But they are mostly composed of argumentative discourse. And the main point we want to make about argumentative discourse here is that it communicates most of its teachings directly and explicitly. When Paul wrote a letter telling his readers to think or to do something, he told them directly what he wanted.

On the other hand, narrative discourse is the dominant type of literature in the four Gospels, and more importantly for these lessons, in the book of Acts. Narrative discourse is literature that tells a story and provides teaching in a less direct way. To be sure, argumentative discourse appears in these books too, primarily in the speeches of certain characters, but the dominant literature of the gospels and Acts is narrative. And unlike argumentative discourse, which tends to teach things explicitly, narrative discourse tends to teach things implicitly, allowing the reader to infer its lessons. Narratives influence readers not through direct instructions, but in more subtle ways. They are designed so that readers will draw lessons from the attitudes, actions and words of the characters, learning to adopt those that are pleasing to God and shun those that are contrary to God's will.

Think about it this way. For the most part, narratives like Acts appear merely to state facts. This happened, that happened, then something else happened. On the surface, it would appear simply to be a report of events. As we have seen, occasionally Luke commented explicitly on the significance of elements of his stories. But for the most part, he described events or facts with little or no comment. Even so, the reality is that his narratives were not written simply to report events. He had didactic motives as well, and used his narratives to communicate these ideas implicitly.

Let me illustrate this idea with a story from my own life. When my daughter was very young, she had been told not to eat chocolate before dinner. But one evening she came to the table with chocolate on her lips. I asked her if she had eaten chocolate and she replied with a big-eyed denial: "I did not have any chocolate, Daddy."

As a parent, I had two ways to deal with the situation. I could have addressed the matter directly and explicitly through an argumentative discourse. I might have said, "You are not telling the truth. I can see the chocolate on your face! You are in trouble." But I also had a narrative option, one that was more indirect and implicit. I might have taken my little daughter on my lap and said to her, "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a little girl who had been told not to play in her best dress. But she played in her dress anyway and got it very dirty. What do you think about the little girl's actions?"

A narrative rhetorical strategy like this works primarily on implicit levels. It invites the child to wonder, "Wasn't it bad that the little girl did not obey?" The beauty and power of narrative is that it communicates these kinds of ideas implicitly. If it is subtle enough, narrative involves the listener in the circumstances of the story. He or she becomes involved personally in ways that help the listener not to be defensive. It allows the listener to be much more teachable.

About 70% of the book of Acts is presented in narrative. For the majority of the book, Luke was essentially saying to his readers, "Let me tell you a story about God's work in the early church." Of course, the story he told them was absolutely true. He invited them to enter the world of factual history. But he presented this history in the form of a story because he wanted his readers to infer conclusions from the facts he

recorded. So, as we read the book of Acts, it is important for us to search for these implicit teachings.

Of course, one of the chief ways to evaluate and apply any biblical narrative to our lives is to see how God reacts to actions that take place. Above all others, his words and actions are perfectly infallible. As a result, we should always take note of the things in the book of Acts that God approves and blesses, as well as the things that he disapproves or curses. Whatever God blesses must be good, and whatever he disapproves or curses must be evil. As we read the book of Acts, we should seek to emulate the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are pleasing to God, and to avoid those that oppose him.

In addition to this, because Luke so heavily relied on the outlooks of prominent early church leaders, another reliable way for us to see Luke's implicit teaching is to observe examples Luke provided for us. When trustworthy people such as apostles, prophets and other respected church leaders did or said something, we can usually infer that we are called upon to be sympathetic toward them. Their actions were appropriate, and their witness is true. Consequently, our response should be to respond in our hearts to this call, and to model our own behavior and thoughts after theirs.

And the reverse is also true. When characters in the book of Acts are condemned by the apostles or the church, we can infer that their actions were evil, and that we should not follow their examples. Now, these are by no means the only types of implications Luke made in Acts. But they do provide a relatively solid foothold for modern readers to begin learning how to make correct inferences from biblical narratives.

With this understanding of the literary character of Acts in mind, we should turn to the discontinuities between the first century and the modern world that impact the way we apply the book of Acts.

DISCONTINUITIES

We must always remember that although the Bible was written for us, it is not written directly to us. We know explicitly that the original recipients were Theophilus and people in the first century A.D. So, in some sense, we are reading over their shoulder as we read Luke's book. We aren't so much hearing what Luke said to us as we are overhearing what he said to them. So, we should expect to find that at least some of the teachings in Acts apply differently to us than they did to Theophilus and Luke's other original readers. If we simply repeat what we see in Scripture, without taking these differences into account, we will frequently misapply God's Word in harmful ways.

We will summarize these discontinuities between Luke's world and ours in two ways. First, we live in a different time than they did. And second, the world has changed quite a bit since the first century, so that we have different circumstances, different situations from those to whom Luke first wrote this book. We'll look first at the fact that we live in a different time from those who first received the book of Acts.

Different Time

It is very important, for instance, to remember that the book of Acts focuses on the apostles, the authoritative witnesses of Christ in the first century. Many of God's activities through the apostles were specific to that time and place in redemptive history; they were groundbreaking, foundational accomplishments that are never to be repeated. As just one example, the mere existence of apostles was unique. As we will see in a later lesson, there can never be another apostle. For one thing, to qualify for the office of apostle, a man had to have seen the resurrected Lord. For another, he had to be appointed to the office of apostle directly by God himself. So, while it is reasonable to say that Acts teaches us to respect and submit to our own church leaders, we do not have living apostles with us today. The best we can do is to submit to their written testimony in the New Testament.

Unfortunately, many Christian groups have looked to Acts for a model of Christian living that should be precisely followed in every age. For instance, Acts 2:1-4 teaches that the Holy Spirit was poured out in dramatic, miraculous ways on the day of Pentecost, and that those who received him began to proclaim the gospel in various languages and dialects. This was a special event that occurred at the initial outpouring of the Spirit in order to empower the apostles and other early believers for service to Christ. Similar events occasionally occurred in Acts, but only as a direct result of the work of the apostles. What is constant in Acts is the fact that every believer receives the Holy Spirit in order to be transformed in his character and to be a witness. What is not constant in Acts is the presence or absence of particular manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, some branches of the church insist that even today a separate filling of the Holy Spirit must always be manifested by proclaiming the gospel in different languages or tongues. When well-meaning Christians fail to account for the discontinuities between the first century and our day, they often try to apply the teachings of Acts in inappropriate ways.

Different Circumstances

And besides living in a different time than the original audience of Acts, we also have different circumstances, such as different cultures and personal situations. All the events in Acts took place in the historical circumstances of the first century, and many aspects of Luke's accounts are conditioned upon these historical and cultural circumstances.

Unfortunately, in an effort to be true to the teachings of Acts, many Christian groups through the centuries have tried to return to the cultural practices of the first-century church. For instance, in Acts 5:42 we read that the church met in private homes. On this basis some Christians have insisted that the church today must meet in homes and not in church buildings. And in Acts 6:1 we find that the church in Jerusalem was providing food for widows. As a result, some Christians today insist that every church must have a food service for widows as part of its ministry. Now of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with the church today meeting in homes or serving food to widows. But we must recognize that these practices were conditioned upon the

circumstances of the first-century church. For example, persecution necessitated their meeting in homes. But in parts of the world where there is little or no persecution, the church does not need to meet in homes. Insofar as our circumstances resemble theirs, these may be legitimate applications of biblical principles. But insofar as our circumstances are different, we may be obligated to apply these same biblical principles in different ways.

In fact, we often find different applications of the same principle even in the book of Acts itself. For example, in Acts 2:44-45, Luke described the members of the church in Jerusalem as owning their resources in common. Yet, within the book of Acts itself we find that many of the churches established by the Apostle Paul met in the homes of wealthy citizens or city leaders, with no mention of communal living, and no criticism of either practice. From the very beginning, the church has recognized that the same biblical principle must be applied in ways that are appropriate to the current circumstances. We must never settle for mere imitation as a substitute for responsible application.

Having described the literary character of Acts, and broadly outlined the discontinuities between Luke's day and ours, we should turn to some significant continuities between the first century and the modern world.

CONTINUITIES

We may summarize the continuities between Christians in both time periods by saying that we have the same Triune God, who exists in the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the same goal, which is to build the kingdom of God in Christ; and the [same gospel, the same message of salvation and redemption that requires us to respond in faith, repentance and obedience. Let's look first at the fact that we have the same God as the Christians in the first century.

Same God

Luke's record of salvation history reminds us that we serve and testify to the same Lord Jesus Christ that the apostles and early church served. Each Christian is empowered by the same Holy Spirit who was present in the first century. And we do all for the glory and honor of the same Father. Our Triune God has not changed.

God worked through the gospel in magnificent ways in the first century, and he continues to do so today. If God seems far removed from your personal life, or from the life of your church or denomination, then things are not as they ought to be. If we do not see God at work, bringing salvation to the lost and building his church, then we must turn to God in repentance and faith, asking him to continue his gracious work of salvation history in our lives and churches.

Besides having the same God, Christians today have the same goal that the church had in the book of Acts.

Same Goal

In the book of Acts, God's purpose was to build his kingdom in Christ through the apostles. They worked toward this goal by nurturing the church and increasing the size of the church through the gospel. But they also knew that expanding the kingdom of God to fill the whole earth would take more than a dozen men working for a few years, so they prepared the church to labor alongside them and to continue after their deaths. We might say that just as Jesus assigned the apostles the task of building his kingdom, the apostles assigned this task to the church.

Of course, this task of kingdom-building will not be finished until Christ returns in glory. So, the goal of the modern church is still to conform to God's mission of building his kingdom in Christ, to bring the whole world and all of life under his Lordship. And one of the primary ways we do this is by relying on the apostles' teachings about salvation, ethics, godly character, relationships, evangelism and every other matter in life. After all, if we are to honor and obey Christ, the church must submit to the authoritative witness of his apostles.

For example, Luke was careful to record the different ways the apostles expanded the kingdom across many cultures and situations. And following their example, we can use similar means to further the goal of the kingdom in our own day. Yes, we need to make adjustments in light of the discontinuities between the modern and the ancient world. But since we seek to submit to God's stated mission rather than to pursue our own agenda, the goal and the principles behind it remain the same in every generation.

Finally, in addition to having the same God and the same goal, modern Christians are called upon to proclaim the same gospel as the church in the first century.

Same Gospel

No matter how much the world changes, one thing remains constant: human beings are fallen in sinful rebellion against God and alienated from him, desperately in need of redemption. We all need the same salvation. And that salvation is available in Christ, as he forgives our sin and brings us into his kingdom. This is the gospel message the apostles taught in the first century. It is the gospel message Luke proclaimed in Acts. And it is the gospel we must embrace and submit to today.

And the message is a simple one. As Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31:

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved — you and your household (Acts 16:31).

This simple message has profound implications. It encompasses all aspects of our individual and corporate lives, challenging us to be transformed, to become gospel witnesses to the world.

This gospel remains the same for all people in all places and all times. All people are called to repent of their sinful rebellion and to trust in Christ. All people are to submit

to his lordship and to build his kingdom. This call must go out to every person in our day, just as it has been proclaimed throughout the world since the days of the apostles. The summons to obedience is for Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, male and female, respected and despised. It overcomes all types of resistance and barriers, for it is the word of the reigning Christ, empowered by his Holy Spirit, for the glory of his Father. As the book of Acts teaches, no trial, no tension, no opposition is sufficiently powerful to oppose the growth and spread of redemption. This is why modern Christians must be authentic and bold in proclaiming and affirming the gospel of the apostles, calling everyone to repentance and faith in Christ, and joining them as loyal citizens of the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at the rhetorical strategies Luke used in the book of Acts, the content of his work, and the appropriate first steps to take toward the modern application of his teachings. Our exploration of these issues should provide us with a way to understand, appreciate, and live by his authoritative teachings in our own day.

In many ways, the book of Acts serves as the doorway between the time of Christ and the time of the modern church. It explains how Christ's person, work and teachings were understood and applied in the early church, and it lays the foundation for the ways modern Christians are to understand and apply those same ideas in our own lives. So, the more we are able to recognize Luke's purposes and methods in Acts, the better equipped we will be to live in ways that honor and serve our risen King.

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The Book of Acts

LESSON
TWO

Structure and Content Faculty Forum



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The Book of Acts

Lesson Two: Structure and Content

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Hans F. Bayer

Students
Larry Gwaltney
Ra McLaughlin

Question 1:

Can supernatural events happen in real history?

Student: Dr. Bayer, is there anything intrinsic to the idea of history that by necessity precludes the supernatural? If you admit one, are you discounting the other?

Dr. Bayer: That's an important question to understand history as a very important access to truth. The understanding since the Enlightenment is that history and the miraculous are mutually exclusive. There is a postulate in the light of the autonomy of reason that history must always reason function within an eminent cause and effect continuum. And so if there is some claim of a transcendent activity or causation, it must be discarded as not historical. But what that actually shows is that that is a particular philosophy of history that contradicts the philosophy of history that we derive from Scripture which says that this universe is broader than a rationalistic framework in which the causation can very much lie with God who has the authority and ability to intrude, if you want to see it that way, or reach into our time-space continuum. And if you have that kind of a philosophy of history, the miraculous as the cause, or the effect of some phenomenon that we can analyze and demonstrate or perceive with our senses is well within the confines of that understanding of history, and that is why Scripture speaks of salvation history or implies the understanding of salvation in history and through history.

Student: Dr. Bayer, if I could interject, as you're talking about miracles and their historical reality, it makes me wonder how somebody standing outside the Christian faith might view our understanding of miracles. I think in terms of the way that we think about other religions or ancient mythology like Greco-Roman mythology, or we think about the claims of religions that we have considered to be false religions, and rightly so, I think. We look at the supernatural claims of those religions and we discount them in the same way that unbelievers look at the supernatural claims of our religion and discount our claims. How do we as Christians process all that in our minds and respond appropriately to it?

Dr. Bayer: I would say an important question is in what context are the miracles seen? When you look at accounts of miracles in the Greco-Roman world, it is normally a spectacular, amazing thing that somebody did. Whereas, in the Gospels

and in the book of Acts, you see that there is a context embeddedness of the miraculous. It has a purpose. The Gospel of John speaks of miracles as signs that point to something, so they are story embedded, they are message embedded. They are not just single, amazing events, but they actually authenticate and verify what is being said elsewhere. So they have a context, a milieu, a situational particularity. And that sets the miracles in the Gospels and the book of Acts apart as significant, as sign posts. Although I would say that Jesus says, do not focus on the miraculous. Focus on the call of God to repentance. But the miraculous does authenticate. It does strengthen that claim that the early apostles had regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Question 2:

Are there dangers in interpreting and applying narratives?

Student 1: Dr. Bayer, once we have understood that Acts is largely narrative, and once we've figured out how it is we're going to get meaning out of that narrative, are there any dangers or problems that could crop up as we do that? What should we watch out for as we're interpreting and applying narrative?

Dr. Bayer: Ra, I mentioned in the lecture that the character of narrative text is an indirect approach to what the message actually is, at times at least, and so I would say there is a danger in understanding narrative texts by relativizing its authority. You read the text and you say it's narrative, so the danger would be to say I cannot take its authority as directly as a letter of Paul. So I would say that's a danger, but I have pointed out in the lectures that you can move with the narrative, the unfolding of the narrative, particularly repetitions and markers that guide you along so that you can emphasize what the account itself emphasizes, and be guided in that way to not under or over read the text and really follow its authority, because as it develops the story, it has authority to challenge us.

Student 2: Okay, to kind of follow up something that Ra has been asking — and correct me if I'm wrong, Ra — are you asking, for instance, is it possible in using the narrative strategy for instance, that it could clash with say a systematic theology? Let's take the filling of the Holy Spirit for instance. We've got a story there, and yet we've got this theology, this systematic theology, that tells us what it means, and it's possible that the two could clash?

Student 1: Yeah, I'm feeling that tension, and I'm also feeling the tension of when a text is communicating to me implicitly, I'm worried that I might infer the wrong thing from it. So I'm looking for some sort of grounding, and systematic theology would be a place that I would naturally turn for grounding, but what happens when those are in tension? Those are the types of things that I'm thinking of.

Student 2: So what I would as the doctor here is how do I know if I've crossed a line? Because if narrative strategy is supposed to help inform our theology among other things, it's possible I could go too far and ignore the warning signs.

Dr. Bayer: Yes, I think there is a danger, but in my own experience, it has been a wonderful discovery to see that systematic and explicit statements dovetail very well with narrative texts such as the book of Acts. Take the issue of the work of the Holy Spirit. When we look at the narrative, we see that there are constant factors. In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I have mentioned in the lecture that every person that comes into contact with the gospel that believes the message is filled with the Holy Spirit. But when you look at the narrative unfolding, there is variation in the phenomena, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but the reality is always affirmed, and that would be corroborated by what we read in Paul and other parts of the New Testament that affirms the same thing: “He who does not have the Spirit of Christ is not of him.” So I would say this is a process. This is a challenge and a study, but in the end, we can be confident that there will be a unity and that we will be confirmed in the way we read narrative texts so that in the work of the Holy Spirit we see that what Peter says in Acts 2:38 is very much verified by the unfolding of the text in the book of Acts.

Question 3:

What strategies did ancient writers use to communicate?

Student: Doctor, our lesson in Acts deals with understanding, the strategies, and methods that Luke used to communicate his views in his writings. Now, as modern readers, we are sort of used to, in modern readings, used to strategies and modern authors, for instance, using communication strategies and structures to do that. Very often, though, we don’t associate those kinds of things with ancient writers. And what I’d like to know is if ancient writers had these things in mind as well as contemporary writers did.

Dr. Bayer: Very much so. The art of persuasion is noticeable throughout history. And ancient rhetoric, which is a very large field of study that does not only speak of oratory but of the entire process of communication, has very much the element of persuasion. So again, just like what I said regarding the company that Luke keeps with regard to his historical veracity, it again is the question of the motive of persuasion; do you seek to persuade from and unclear, from a questionable motive, or do you seek to persuade because you are inspired by the work of God among his people. And the latter would be correct for the book of Acts that uses devices of persuasion, repetition, etc., that is based on this reality and this truth.

Student: If I could, I’m thinking in terms of a lot of modern objections to the types of persuasions that are used in different contexts. You know, people think of some types of persuasion as being manipulative or might think of subliminal things that are done where people don’t know that they’re being persuaded, that they’re not aware of them. And I think in terms of contrasting that with Paul’s strategy, say in 1 Corinthians 2 where he says, I could have come to you using all sorts of rhetoric, but

I didn't, I held back so that it would be shown that any work that happened in you was the work of the Holy Spirit. How do we reconcile those types of ideas? You're not saying, I take it, that the persuasion that's going on in Scripture is like the subliminal messages that we get now or the manipulation. But how do we reconcile that persuasive strategy and rhetoric with say, Paul's strategy of wanting to see the Holy Spirit working?

Dr. Bayer: That's very good. What Paul refers to is rhetoric that is simply seeking to be persuasive without the substance of the content. That was a very big issue at the time of Paul. The particular form of persuasion that I see in the book of Acts, for instance, in the early speeches in the book of Acts, is appeal to God's revealed word, appeal to God's work already among his people, appeal to God's work in and through Christ. So it is, look what God has done, therefore, repent and turn to God and be reconciled with him. So there is a form of persuasion, but it is not manipulation. It is appeal based on revealed truth, it is appeal based on creation, it is appeal based on general knowledge, very much focused on the love gift of God in and through Christ so that there is persuasion, but there is not manipulation, and the persuasion is not merely rhetorical. It has the foundation of the work of God among his people.

Question 4:

Why is Christianity so interested in history?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson emphasizes that Christianity has really focused on history, on real events and real people. But it seems pretty clear looking around that not all religions share this interest in history. Why is Christianity in particular so interested in preserving historical record and proving its claims from history?

Dr. Bayer: I think that's very significant because the instrument God has chosen to reveal himself as we see it in the Old and the New Testament is in and through history. My wife calls that the watermark of God's self-revelation, that there is a particular combination between God speaking in and through history. It is not an oracle of Delphi. It is even to be distinguished from the understanding of revelation in Qur'an. So it doesn't come down. It is much more prophetic speech, prophetic speech, prophetic speech, promise and fulfillment continuum. And so in Hebrews 1:1, the author can say that God has spoken in manifold ways, in different times through his prophets, and now in the end times, he has spoken through his son. So this is a form of self-revelation that is unique to Christianity that God speaks in and through history but in a trajectory of redemptive history. So I would say it is a characteristic trademark of how God speaks to mankind.

Student: Do you think it would fair to say that Christianity is historical, but it's far more than that? For instance, there are many things that we can't yet prove historically about Christianity. They're not demonstrable, and in fact, many historical events aren't in that scientific sense. What is the space for faith, I guess, when we're talking about history, Christianity and faith?

Dr. Bayer: That is significant because certainly Christianity is not mere history. We would be reducing the totality of what is coming towards us. So it is what I would call, salvation history, redemption history. It is God's presence, God's word, God's self-revelation in and through the means of history, and so there are certainly many aspects that are hard to demonstrate. But let me give you an example. In the early part of the book of Acts, Peter says, "This one whom you crucified" — a reference to historical event — "has been enthroned as Lord and Savior." So there is a very close and intimate connection between the historical reference and the theological reality and truth. So it is true that many issues that are affirmed are beyond historical verification or falsification, but they are always associated with that.

Student: But isn't it also true, though, that that theological reality is historical. It's just not verifiable. I mean, he really is enthroned. There really is a heaven and he really is there.

Dr. Bayer: That is correct, because the affirmation of the apostolic witness is, the one we ate with, the one we learned from, the one who was crucified, the one who was buried, appeared to us alive and ascended to heaven with our eyes fixed upon him. So very much so a continuity, and you would say in some ways the revelation of God moves in and through history and goes beyond it to show the total glory and reality of God working among his people.

Question 5:

Why were the apostles' words so important?

Student: Dr. Bayer, our lesson really stresses the emphasis Luke had on the actions and the words of the apostles and early church leaders. What I was wondering is, why would this have been important to Theophilus? And as we read it, what is the difference, and why should it really be important to us today? What's the difference between, for instance, the words of Peter and maybe a Christian who lived next door to Peter?

Dr. Bayer: Yes, I have tried to emphasize that a little bit in the lecture, but I did not have enough time to develop that, namely that the disciples lived with Jesus for an extended period of time, and as I'm convinced from studying the pedagogical approach of Jesus, he trained his apostles systematically by repetition, by various means, so that they were actually entrusted with what Jesus wanted to give them by his speaking and by his teaching and also by his actions. So the apostolic witness is not one of innate authority but is derivative authority, that they are called to testify to what Jesus taught, what he gave to them, how he shaped them really as people, including the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a total process of transformation. And so, that apostolic witness is significant for Theophilus and for the early church. That is why in Acts, the new converts devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. It

was not that they were new great teachers of their own wisdom, but they had been appointed to give to the new converts what they themselves had received and to give that in an authoritative way.

Student: I've sometimes heard that the Holy Spirit rested differently on the apostles than on the rest of the early church, not in the sense of filling them and saving them, but in the sense of gifting them and superintending them in a way that would make them infallible as opposed to other witnesses in the first century who may even have known Jesus but who nevertheless did not rise to that level of infallibility in their teaching. Does that have anything to do with the authority that we give to the apostles, or does that really rest more in their appointment?

Dr. Bayer: I would focus on the appointment. When you look at the call of the disciples, a larger group than followers of Jesus, Jesus appoints the twelve to a particular witness ministry. So there is a particular call, a particular selection, of the twelve disciples to testify to what I have just described. So I would say that is where the authority lies, that Jesus in a particular way had the foresight that they would, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, at the beginning of the messianic church in the book of Acts, that they would then be reliable witnesses to that. Certainly there is a prophetic enabling. Peter, for instance, arises as a prophetic preacher. But I would focus mostly on the calling aspect.

Question 6:

Why are the summary statements in Acts so important?

Student: Dr. Bayer, in the lesson you talk about summary statements, a special kind of authorial comment that Luke makes throughout the book of Acts, and you mention that the literary structure of Acts in many ways revolves around these summary statements. I'm sort of fascinated by that. I haven't heard that idea before. Can you explain that a little bit more to me and tell me why it's significant and why Luke might have used the strategy and what it means for me today?

Dr. Bayer: We have mentioned before that narrative has more of an indirect approach to communication and to the actual message that is embedded in the narrative. And as we take notice of these repeated summary statements, we see that there is a certain natural emphasis. As an author repeats a certain statement, you are drawn to notice that as an emphasis. So that would be a guidepost that gives you and me a certain objectivity, so I do not say you have to understand the book of Acts as I do, or I have to understand it as you do, but we look together at the text, and it has this innate emphasis, and so we can agree to follow how the author guides us in interpreting particular elements. The same would hold true for the work of the Holy Spirit. We would see that there is variation in detail, so you and I should not focus on particular details in some sections and elevate that to a standard of normativity, when in fact, the variation relativizes some of these aspects, but the continuation that the

Holy Spirit falls on every single person that comes close to the gospel would be something that you and I could uphold as being continuous and emphasized in the book of Acts.

Question 7:
How did internal growth and tension interact?

Student: Dr. Bayer, I'd like to turn to questions of what the lesson termed as dimensions of growth, and I believe you used the terminology of "internal growth tension." Could you reassert what that means, and what challenges specifically did the early church have in the area of internal growth tension?

Dr. Bayer: Well, as the church grew and broke through different barriers — language barriers, culture barriers, religious barriers, many different types of barriers — people from these various groups and areas came together under the same Lord, and that created internal tensions. There were differences, there were preferences, there were prejudices, there were ballast thoughts and beliefs that were brought into the church. And so it created internal tension that had to be overcome, and the wonderful thing is as we look at Acts 6 and Acts 15, we have examples of how these internal tensions that came about with this growth of the church were handled and resolved, and so I would say the book of Acts shows us how despite internal tensions, the treatment of Greek-speaking widows in Acts 6, or the treatment of uncircumcised Gentiles in Acts 15, how these problems were resolved for the growth and the maturing of the Christian church. So internal growth, internal maturing despite these oppositions that necessarily came about with the growth of the church.

Student: In the lesson, you also mentioned sort of a corresponding pair of elements related to that, the external growth and opposition. It seems fairly clear to me how a church that has the Holy Spirit and submits to Jesus can grow despite the tensions they feel on the inside. It seems to me to be a little bit different dynamic when you start looking at external growth and opposition. How does the opposition by the unbelieving world somehow lead to, or despite those things, how does the church keep growing externally? How do you get more and more people when what you're offering people is, join us and be opposed?

Dr. Bayer: Yes, that's a phenomenon. It's amazing to see that dynamic in the book of Acts, and it defies plausibility in some ways. But that's exactly what happens, that as there is numeric growth, as the gospel goes beyond these traditional cultural barriers and creates rather heterogeneous bodies of believers, that with the increase of opposition, there is actually further growth. And perhaps the best example is Acts 8:1 where the Jews, or believers in Jerusalem, are being persecuted, and with the exception of the apostles, these messianic Jews are expelled. And that persecution is the very cradle of further expansion. So at the very point where you have opposition, you actually see that God triumphs and these believers are spread all across what we

would identify as Palestine, and are used as witnesses elsewhere. So we can see that dynamic that what we would perhaps consider as a catastrophe being the very cradle of God's further expansion. So we see then that in the book of Acts, external growth despite external opposition, internal growth despite internal opposition is truly the fact. And then one other thing is the spiritual warfare aspect, that there are possessed people. There is a satanic world that the early Christians have to face, and that would also be part of the external opposition. So it would not only be political and cultural and economic powers that oppose the spread of the gospel, but it would also be the satanic world. And so we have a triumph in the midst of suffering, not with the exclusion of suffering that we see because it is the mission of God that the early Christians are caught up in and that we are called to continue.

Question 8:

What are some practical strategies for interpreting Acts?

Student: Dr. Bayer, you've talked about how Acts is the second of a two volume work with Luke. We've talked about how there's a very complex strategy within the book of Acts itself in different ways, the different types of text communicated within it. It all seems in some ways very complicated. Can you offer some practical suggestions on how, when we read the book, we can make use of our knowledge of these different strategies and yet not get lost? It seems so complex that it would be easy just to follow one thing or the other, or even just be overwhelmed with it and not know what to do.

Dr. Bayer: I would say it is a matter of attentive reading. I've mentioned that Luke is very aware of the promise and fulfillment dynamic, Old Testament to the ministry of Jesus, Old Testament to the Gospel of Luke and to the book of Acts, but there is even promise and fulfillment within the Gospel of Luke and Acts. The Holy Spirit is promised by John the Baptist: "I baptize with water, but he who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." That is echoed in Acts 1. So it is attentive reading to be aware of these echoes of these correspondences. And one suggestion I would have is to read Luke 1-3 and then to read Acts 1-3, and there are many echoes, many parallels. Another example would be to read the narrative of the passion of Jesus towards the end of Luke's gospel, and then to pay attention to how Stephen is persecuted and martyred for his preaching. There are echoes, there are similarities, and when we move from these literary echoes to life, we will discover that what happened to our Master in terms of his suffering and his rejection, there is in a certain way, an echo to the suffering and to the rejection of Stephen, so that we are to expect that as our Master was rejected, our message might be rejected, we might be persecuted for what we speak about. Certainly there is uniqueness to the suffering of Christ that is unparalleled and that will never be repeated, but there is also a certain pattern analogy to that.

Student: I wonder sometimes if an analogy of everyday life, many things we become more adept at through practice and rehearsal. And you say, for instance, read these other things and become familiar with them. I know Ra has had this experience when he learned to ride a motorcycle and there are a lot of variables involved in that. Both hands are working, both feet are working, and it doesn't seem intuitive when you first get on it and you're constantly on edge — what am I doing, what am I doing. But I think we read the Bible, read these other things and learn to look for them, after a while they just seem to emerge almost like a second nature. Do you think that's a helpful way of looking at it?

Dr. Bayer: Very much so. Take for instance as another example, Acts 7. Here in Stephen's speech, there are many echoes, many references to Old Testament figures that prefigure and that anticipate what happens to Jesus. So as we begin to be looking for these echoes and these repetitions or these connections, we will very easily discover them and see them.

Student: So what I hear you saying then is that, yes, it's a complex process; no, there aren't any shortcuts, but there are some good places to start getting a handle on this, but really, you need to work through all of the details and pay attention to all of them and find a way to manage them in the long run.

Dr. Bayer: Yes, and then they have a very spiritual ramification that we are brought into this story of promise and fulfillment. We are participating among the people of God, in what God is doing, leading us, protecting us, but certainly in and through suffering as well. So we do learn through our study of Scripture to align ourselves to how God works among his people.

Question 9: **Is the book of Acts a success story?**

Student: Dr., Acts 1:8 contains a charge from Christ to the apostles to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, and yet the book of Acts seems to end on a perfunctory note. It ends with Paul in Rome. Does Acts leave unfinished business, or did the church succeed? Is Acts a success story? Exactly what is it?

Dr. Bayer: That's very interesting. If we look at maps of the ancient world, they certainly did not only show the Mediterranean Sea and a few countries around it. It was a much larger awareness even in the ancient world of what the ends of the earth would be. It was not a globe. It was not the entire world as we know it now, but a rather extensive area. So your question is very justified. I would argue that the book of Acts describes a paradigm, and that is, we reached the center of the known world of that time, and with the center we can reach the rest of the world. We know from Paul that he had intentions to travel to Spain using Rome as a stopover, so to speak, and so we should not understand that the mission is accomplished and finished with

Acts. But on the other hand, we should not think that it was not accomplished. So the commission that Jesus gives to the disciples in a paradigmatic way was reached with reaching Rome, while the commission to evangelize all the world — Go into all the world, the Great Commission in Matthew — is still with us to this very.

Question 10:

How can Acts encourage Christians who suffer?

Student: Dr. Bayer, in both lessons we've seen so far, we've seen this wonderful pattern of the way that the gospel was unhindered in going forth despite the tremendous opposition that it faced. But I can't help but feel for the Christians who suffered under that opposition, under that persecution. I guess I'm really looking for a word of encouragement for believers today who suffer, who are martyred, as they try to hold fast to their witness and try to bring that witness to those around them. How can we turn to the book of Acts to gain reassurance and confidence and a strategy for persevering in a proclamation of the gospel, seeing it go forth unhindered despite the tremendous persecution that many parts of the world face today?

Dr. Bayer: Yah, that's a very serious and important question. Sometimes I ask my Greek students to tell me what the last word in the book of Acts is, and obviously it is "unhindered." So the book of Acts ends on *akolutos*, not hindered. The message was proclaimed even when Paul was under house arrest in Rome unhindered. So there is this sense of triumph because it is the mission of God, not because the individual people like Paul or Peter or Stephen were successful, but because it is God's mission. So we have this encouragement, but you're quite right that God did not protect Stephen from martyrdom. Imagine that. He is spirit-filled man, a young man, a promising man with a great future to proclaim the gospel, and God allows this man to be martyred. And there are many other stories of persecution, of suffering, of difficulty, internal tension, external opposition, as I have mentioned, that the Christians had to endure. And I think we are being sensitized to the work of God, and that is that despite death, that despite persecution, God's message of reconciliation with himself in and through Christ is going out. And so we can take comfort in this protection of God's mission, while we need to encourage ourselves and especially those in different parts of the world who are right now experiencing persecution, that they're not outside of the mission of God, outside of the purview of God's protection. But we must pray for them that they would persevere, and that we would persevere, in serving God in such an abandoned way that the contingencies of our lives and the suffering that we encounter would not obstruct but actually be an instrument even towards the propagation of the gospel in the world.

Question 11:
What is the significance of Stephen's speech?

Student: It's interesting. You had mentioned Stephen. He is featured very prominently in Luke's work. There's an extended sequence where he recounts the history of Israel, and it is not well received, obviously. People are furious, and I find it sort of curious in that recitation of something that they all shared in common infuriated them so much. What was it that he said exactly that angered them so? And the fact that that recitation is in there, what does that mean as we read? How are we to understand that?

Dr. Bayer: That is a significant speech in Acts 7 that Stephen recounts, and you know, he doesn't give one history and one description. There are actually two. There is a history of those who resist the call of God, who resist the mercy of God and the pursuit of God in their lives, and then there is a history of people who respond to the call of God throughout the history. So there is actually a history of salvation and a history of rejection and resistance. And the offence that Stephen brings to his audience is that he brings them dangerously close to the history of those who resist it, the call of God. That is part of the rejection. It is significant to know that Stephen is a member of the diaspora Jewish community, and as all those who live away from home remember and know, you love your roots being away. And so this is an extensive description of the redemptive work of God among the people, the Jewish people, that Stephen as a diaspora Jew would particularly feature. But his call is which group do you belong to? Which group do you associate yourself with, those who respond or those who reject the call of God? And to that they resist and respond with anger.

Student: It sounds like a message that you could easily apply to churches today as well. You know, you think about the church at large, and while thankfully much of the church is evangelical and embraces the gospel of Jesus Christ that we see throughout the book of Acts, there are many churches that have abandoned that gospel and probably could do with hearing a speech like Stephen's. They may be in our history and our tradition, but they have come very close or perhaps even crossed the line into those who resist and reject God's will. I wonder how we might be able to use the teachings of the book of Acts to minister to them and perhaps try to recover them into the evangelical community?

Dr. Bayer: I would be personally hesitant to say what Stephen says at the very end of his speech in Acts 7, but I certainly would agree with saying that there are two groups of people in the history of mankind, and that the call of the gospel is one of call to reconciliation with our creator and redeemer. And so we can learn a lot from this speech, and also we can see that God has been faithfully pursuing his people throughout the ages.

Question 12:
How far should we go in pursuing reconciliation?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the picture we get of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts is one of an apostle who is willing to go to many different lengths to accommodate his message and his behavior to those around him. You see him doing even extreme things, having Timothy circumcised — of course I would see that more as Timothy going to an extreme means — but even so, there are many great sacrifices made on behalf of reconciling Jew and Gentile together in the church. This seems to be a big and important idea, and I'm wondering in our own reading of Acts and our own application of Acts to our lives, how far do we go in pursuing reconciliation, whether it's between Jew and Gentiles or between other groups that we're involved in.

Dr. Bayer: I did not mention that when we were talking about the question whether Luke wrote the book of Acts, but some critical scholars have said, because Paul has Timothy circumcised, because Paul goes to Jerusalem and participates in some Jewish rites there, the author of Acts cannot have known the true Paul who would not have done that. So it is a very good question for us to see that there is a certain tension, principled in essentials, very conciliatory and open and collaborative, cooperative in nonessentials. That's how I would summarize what Paul does. You may remember in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says that he is seeking to be all things to all people, a Jew to the Jews, a Gentile to the Gentiles. That would not pertain to essentials, but that would pertain to nonessentials. And the issues that you have mentioned in the book of Acts, Paul would identify as means towards reconciliation and towards bridging gaps. You may mention the circumcision of Titus which Paul resists in Galatians, while he accepts the circumcision of Timothy for the very reason that the circumcision of Titus was an issue of belief. Does he need to be circumcised in order to be saved? Whereas, in the case of the Timothy, it was not a salvation issue. It was a "do we cause hindrance to our Jewish brethren if he is not circumcised" issue. So even there we can see that Paul was principled and very committed to the essentials while very much willing to bridge on nonessentials. And I would say for us today, that is the course that we need to discern: Where are we called to confess our Lord and our Savior? Where are we committed to non-negotiables? And in which areas for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of living out unity and reconciliation, must we be very tolerant and flexible? And I think Paul gives us some indication to that end as we compare the book of Acts and Galatians particularly.

Student: That resonates with me a lot when I sit on the session of my church and we are confronted with decisions. The fact is, our body is not exactly where we are as individuals sitting as elders. We often have different views on some things, and yet I can recall many times that we made conciliatory gestures toward people who might be concerned about certain things. I can see this every day. And I don't think it's just for elders, of course... I mean, everybody on down. And when I read things like this, I realize the lengths that Paul was willing to do to bridge those gaps. And it's not a question of how free I am at every moment; it's also the consideration of other people.

Dr. Bayer: And I think it is driven by love. When you read Romans 11, you see how deeply Paul loved his Jewish compatriots. And because of that love, he was willing to be flexible, but also because of that love to the Lord, he was willing to be very principled and clear.

Question 13:

How important is it to understand Luke's context?

Student: Our lesson mentions that Luke communicated many things in his writings implicitly. Now, talking between contemporaries, for instance, when I talk to Ra, I can often make implicit statements and we have a common frame of reference and he picks up what I'm saying, and it doesn't have to be explicitly stated. But we're talking about somebody who wrote a couple of millennia ago, and I'm not always sure that we can understand, for instance, some of his implicit statements. It seems to me that there is a risk in looking for that unless I share his common frame of reference. How do we overcome an obstacle like that?

Dr. Bayer: Well, I would say that as we read the book of Acts, even if we are ignorant of the historical background and the historical context, we should be able to get a rough understanding of what Luke is seeking to communicate. We have made mention of the summary statements and the echoes. So there are many markers within the text itself that help us to follow his flow, and in the end, to understand what God seeks to communicate to us. But as I have mentioned, it certainly helps and assists in our focus and understanding as we get a feel for the original audience, as we hear with the ears of those who heard the book of Acts, who read the book of Acts. And so I would argue that the understanding of the context helps bridge the gap. The understanding of the background helps bridge the gap between then and now. And then to be able to say, as I understand what this message meant to the original hearers, I can make reasonable and responsible transfers to my own time, our own time. And I've already referred to the factors of continuity. It is the same God, it is the same world in many ways, it is the same human condition that we are still dealing with today that the book of Acts speaks of. We've spoken about suffering; we've spoken about God's mission. There are so many constant factors in that transfer. So I believe as we continue to study the whole literary structure and its historical background, we aid ourselves and those that we communicate the gospel to in making that responsible transfer and understanding what the intended meaning is.

Student: And is it also not true that while much of the teaching and narrative is implicit, it's not necessarily subtle or hidden, that you can make something very plain through implication, and that probably the big points, the big major points rather than finer points, but the big ideas that we need to get a hold of and apply in our own lives, it seems to me, as I've read Acts, that at least those, while they may be implicit are also in many ways obvious.

Dr. Bayer: Yes, very much so. And I've mentioned in the lesson, the beauty of a story is that it draws in the whole person. It is not only appeal to your understanding, but your whole person, your feelings. Your responses are drawn in, and God speaks to the whole person, not just to the intellect. And so as you read the story or the gospel narrative in Luke's gospel or in Mark's gospel, you're drawn in, and so your heart is being confronted with this message, not only your understanding. I believe that God holistically addresses us as whole people with his message, and the device of narrative is a wonderful one to appeal to the heart as well.

Question 14:

Do our circumstances reflect God's approval or disapproval?

Student: Dr. Bayer, one of the things that you talk about in the lesson is that we can see God's approval or disapproval of people and actions by the way that he responds to them, whether he might bless them and show his approval, or he might curse them and show his disapproval. I'm wondering how that principle can be applied to our own lives in the modern world. Is it true that I can look at how I'm being blessed or not blessed and use that to judge how closely I'm aligned to the will of God, or do I have to make adjustments?

Dr. Bayer: Well, certainly we receive guidelines in the book of Acts of how God responds and works with various circumstances and people. Take the example of Ananias and Sapphira. This is a very shocking and a very conspicuous example. They were not punished for not giving. They were punished for pretending to be doing something that they were actually not doing. And so we do see that there is a continuity and a demonstration of moral absolutes regarding dishonesty. There is other moral issues that are described in the book of Acts. There is a continuity of who God is. There is a continuity of who human beings are in their need for repentance, in their need for salvation. So in the total flow of the book of Acts, we see many signposts that support or question that bless or curse from the sight of God regarding the action of human beings. And so I would say there is a transfer to our own day because God has not changed. The moral absolutes have not changed. Our human condition has not changed. So while we need to be careful in cultural particularities, we can learn much in the book of Acts, especially if we read the book of Acts in the context of the rest of the scriptures, and I have already made reference to the promise and fulfillment, the echo to the Old Testament. And so as we do that, we will be guided in a very strong way to understand who God is and what he has saved us towards in terms of our moral conduct individually and corporately.

Student: Is there some way that we can use that paradigm to explain things like suffering in the modern world? I would hate to think that the Christians who are suffering for the name of Christ are somehow being cursed by God for their sin. It strikes me as completely the opposite of what's happening; that they're being oppressed by the world because of their faithfulness. How do we use that paradigm in those other circumstances like modern persecution and suffering?

Dr. Bayer: I think that's very important. We have made mention of Stephen, and there's only blessing of God for Stephen, and yet he is martyred. So your point is well taken. We have to be very careful as we look at suffering, human suffering, and we will see both in the Old Testament, but then particularly in the New Testament that there is a place for suffering that is very much in the context of God's work and God's will, God's blessing. It is a challenge that even in the Old Testament Psalms is taken up in the suffering of the righteous. Why does God allow? Why does he permit such a contrast? If he's a good God, why would he expose to such suffering? And so we have to understand that God is a God who has his hidden purposes, who has his unsearchable purposes, and we can latch onto what is clear in the book of Acts, we can endorse and embrace the reality of suffering, and we must not draw the wrong conclusion that where there is suffering there is sin.

Question 15:

Why can't we just do what the Bible says?

Student: In hearing you two talk about application, I recall our lesson saying that the book of Acts wasn't written directly to us, that we're essentially overhearing conversation to somebody else, Theophilus and the original audience, and that we could conceivably make a mistake in just reading Acts, simply doing as it says, but isn't the Word of God just directly truthful and applicable? Why can't we just simply do what it says?

Dr. Bayer: Well, my appeal in the lesson is that we need to begin with the focus of Luke himself in the book of Acts, that we need to come together on its own emphasis. And that's why I'm emphasizing the summary statements. That is why I'm drawing attention to the issue of external and internal growth despite external and internal opposition. That's the common ground that we can begin and agree on. I think there is a danger if we apply one-to-one the message of the book of Acts to our lives, because as I have mentioned in the lecture, there are some unique events. The most simple one is the death and resurrection and ascension that is mentioned in the book of Acts of Jesus Christ himself. These are not repeated actions. But I've also made mention of issues that occur perhaps as a model, perhaps as a possibility, but not as a norm. And I would draw attention to fact of sharing possessions. It would be wrong to look at the book of Acts and say the book of Acts teaches that we must share possessions. But it would also be wrong to say the book of Acts does not speak about sharing possessions. It is a possibility. But Mary, the mother of John Mark, did not sell her apartment in Jerusalem. In fact, that became a basis for missionary work in Jerusalem. She maintained and retained her possession, and there is no condemnation of that. And then there are things that are repeated that I would say are presented in a normative way in the book of Acts, and I would say those are the repeated issues. And I've mentioned the fact that everyone who comes to Christ receives the Holy Spirit. That is something that is generally emphasized. So I would suggest meeting on

the main emphases, on the common points that are conspicuous, and then carefully applying and seeing what aspects are relativized in the texts themselves, and where can we draw lessons from the book of Acts so that we are responsible readers of the book of Acts rather than transferring one-to-one.

Student: In the lesson you also mentioned...We've already spoken about there being some continuities between the original setting and ours, but you also mentioned some discontinuities. I would imagine that's part of what you're talking about here, too, and that there are differences between the original setting and the modern setting that would imply that while some of the principles might be obvious and the same, that the application may be different in light of these discontinuities. Sort of like even in the original context where you were drawing attention to the differences between Paul's response to the circumcision of Timothy and to the circumcision of Titus; that we're looking at even the same activity in two different settings appeals to different principles. So in the same way, the same principle in different context might apply in different ways as well. Is that...?

Dr. Bayer: Yah, that's very true. I would agree to that.

Question 16:

Is Jesus a significant character in the book of Acts?

Student: Dr. Bayer, in the lessons, as we're looking at the content and structure of the book of Acts, I noticed just talking about the summary statements and the different places and geography, even throughout the lesson we talked about things that the Holy Spirit has done in the proclamation of Christ, what I didn't see really was Jesus himself emerging as a significant theme or character in the book of Acts. I'd sort of like to get your comments on that.

Dr. Bayer: Yah, I think that should be emphasized very much as I believe that the reality of the resurrection of Jesus is in some ways the driving force behind the energy of the proclamation of the gospel. No doubt it is the outpouring of the Spirit that empowers and gives courage to that proclamation, but the very heart of it is the witness to the resurrection of Jesus. And I would like to just develop that a little more in that Jesus taught the disciples that he was the Messiah of God, and as such, he taught them that he came to suffer along the lines of the servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 42 following, particularly Isaiah 53, and that he is not only the son of David but the lord of David, according to Psalm 110:1 and following, and that he is the exalted son of man according to Daniel 7:13 and following, who comes into the presence of the Almighty to receive glory, honor, power and dominion, a dominion that will never end, a lordship over a people that will never end. And so this teaching is a claim during the gospel time of Jesus. And so the proclamation that Jesus was raised from the dead is the unique, divine authentication of those claims, the approval as we see in Acts 3 that God was pleased to have his *pais*, his servant suffer, and that he was pleased to exalt him and enthrone him as the Lord and Messiah over his people. And

so I would say that self-revelation of Jesus and the divine authentication of that claim is the dynamite, is the driving force that inspires Peter, that inspires Stephen, that inspires Paul and other early witnesses to go out and say this unique Messiah of God is truly capable to accomplish redemption, to accomplish reconciliation, and to bring all people to God who receive that atonement for their sins. And so I would say that should be emphasized in a much greater way. Even the outpouring of the Spirit is identified as the work of Jesus in the book of Acts 2. So Jesus began and continues his work, now by means of the Holy Spirit, but he is very much the center of worship together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he is very much reigning and ruling as Lord and Christ. And so that is very important to understand and for us to see the collaboration within the Godhead between the Father's will, the Son's activity and the Holy Spirit's illumination and quickening the hearts of people.

Question 17:

If the gospel is so simple, why is interpretation so complex?

Student: Dr. Bayer, our lesson says the gospel is simple, and yet it looks as if this very careful, detailed presentation of how to read Acts is complicated. It seems that... I would anticipate a lot of people looking at this lesson might think: if the gospel is so simple, I don't feel at all confident that I understand Acts as much as I thought I did since we have all these different parameters we have to take into consideration. How can this help us gain confidence? As complicated as this may seem at first sight, can it help us?

Dr. Bayer: I think there is a simplicity to the gospel that is wonderful and compelling emphasized in the Gospel of Luke and also in the book of Acts. It is a loving God pursuing a people in and through his son's death, of reconciliation with him, to inaugurate and messianic rule that has been in the mind of God throughout the ages as a fulfillment of ruling over his people. So I believe the message is simple, is straightforward, is compelling, but what is interesting and intriguing is that the way this message is communicated in various Jewish, diaspora Jewish, Gentile settings in the book of Acts indeed varies so that you can say when Peter speaks to Jews, he appeals to the Old Testament. When Stephen speaks particularly to Jews and diaspora Jews, himself being a diaspora Jew, he makes much of the redemptive historical sequence in the Old Testament. When Paul speaks to Athenian Stoics and Epicureans, many of whom were lawyers, he makes reference to creation and perhaps to political and government structures. So what this means is that there is a simplicity of the message that is communicated in very sensitive ways in the particular settings in which that is being presented, because for a Gentile audience in Athens, recourse to the Old Testament may not make much sense. Even though Paul, even there, uses Old Testament truth of the creation of mankind by God, he communicates it in such a way that Stoic and Epicurean philosophers would be able to understand even though they would not know the Jewish Old Testament. So I would say simplicity in content, complexity and sensitivity in application because that is the phenomenon of communication that we must not only speak clearly but reach our audience. And so,

one small example would be the so-called *captatio benevolentiae*, the initial praise of Paul in among the Athenian Stoics and Epicureans. There is a slight praise for their pious ways. And that word pious ways can be seen in two ways. It is ambiguous. But for Athenian sensitivities, you would not want to speak too much praise or too little praise. It has to be measured rhetorically.

And so Paul is very sensitive, coming from the center of stoic thought in Tarsus to the sensibilities and sensitivities of this particular audience, for the sake of communicating the reality that they, being lawyers and judges, themselves will have to face a judge that has been appointed by God, who has been raised from the dead, and then the gospel is being presented to those would like to hear more. So that's how I would approach that, that we are challenged then to become much more flexible along the lines of 1 Corinthians 9 to communicate the gospel in different ways and not to be fixed and set in our ways of communication, but to preserve the heart of the gospel which is glorious about the greatness of Christ and the challenge of our state individually and corporately which we must deal with, and the gospel actually addresses in a very sober and compelling way.

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The Book of Acts

LESSON
THREE

MAJOR THEMES



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The Book of Acts

Lesson Three

Major Themes

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has been around parents with young children knows that parents often have to repeat their instructions many times. Parents have to reiterate the same ideas to their children to help them mature and to prepare them to live fruitful lives.

In a similar way, when we read the book of Acts, it quickly becomes evident that Luke addressed some themes many times. These repeated motifs run throughout his book and are important keys to understanding Luke's teaching. So, if we hope to grasp the significance of the book of Acts, we must pay careful attention to these repeated themes.

This is the third lesson of our series *The Book of Acts*, and we have entitled this lesson "Major Themes." In this lesson, we will look at three major concepts that Luke addressed time and again as he unfolded the unhindered spread of the gospel of God's kingdom in the days of the early church.

In earlier lessons we summarized Luke's purpose for the book of Acts by saying that he wrote a historical account about the dynamic impact of the gospel message. As we have seen, Luke recorded the facts of history as a reliable testimony to the continuing work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this lesson we will explore this purpose more thoroughly by delving into some of the major themes Luke used to illustrate and support this main idea.

We will explore three major themes that are introduced in the opening of the book of Acts and developed throughout its chapters. First, we will look at the theme of the Holy Spirit, who empowered the church to expand Christ's kingdom. Second, we will focus on the apostles, the men called to testify to Christ and authorized to lead and to serve the church of Christ. And third, we will consider the theme of the church that the apostles established to ensure that the gospel and the kingdom would continue to spread throughout history. Let's turn first to the Holy Spirit and his role in Acts.

HOLY SPIRIT

The book of Acts presents a rich theology of the Holy Spirit. It describes him as the one that empowers the church to live transformed lives and to evangelize the world. It records that he performed many signs and wonders to validate the ministry of the apostles and other early church leaders. It testifies that he gave great courage to Christians who faced opposition and persecution. In short, Acts describes the Holy Spirit as the one whose power enables the spread of the gospel and the kingdom, and as the one who empowers his people for godly living.

While the Spirit worked in a variety of ways in Acts, we will focus on his influence over the church in three periods of time. First, we will look at the Spirit in Acts

before Pentecost. Second, we will examine the outpouring of the Spirit in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. And third, we will investigate the work of the Spirit after Pentecost. Let's look first at how the book of Acts describes the Spirit before Pentecost.

BEFORE PENTECOST

In Acts 1:3-11, Luke recorded that Jesus spent forty days between his resurrection and ascension, teaching his apostles. As we read in Acts 1:3:

[Jesus] appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

As we will see, one critical element in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom was that the Holy Spirit would soon come in a particular way to the apostles.

We will touch on two aspects of Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit before Pentecost. First, we will look at the timing of the Holy Spirit's coming. And second, we will focus on the purpose of his coming. Let's first consider Jesus' teaching on the timing of the Holy Spirit's arrival.

Timing

Listen to Jesus' words in Acts 1:4-8:

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised ... in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” [The apostles] asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:4-8).

Notice that when Jesus announced the coming baptism of the Spirit, the apostles asked if Jesus was about to restore the kingdom to Israel. The expression restore the kingdom to Israel is unfamiliar to many modern readers, so we should pause to explain it.

The Old Testament prophets predicted that because Israel and Judah's sins were so great, God would exile them from the Promised Land and subject them to the tyranny of foreign rulers. Based on Old Testament prophecies, Jews believed that God would later send the Messiah to restore his people by forgiving their sins, returning them to the Land, and ruling over them. As a descendant of David, the Messiah would become king over Israel and Judah, turning the Promised Land into the center of God's kingdom on earth, where God's people would enjoy eternal and blessed life. By the first century, Israel had suffered judgment for hundreds of years, and desperately longed for a political

Messiah to restore the kingdom of Israel. So, when the apostles learned that Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, they hoped that he would fulfill these Old Testament predictions before he left. This is why they asked him about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. However, Jesus taught that this popular expectation of a sudden political restoration of the kingdom to Israel was misguided and that the spread of the gospel throughout the world and Christ's glorious return would be the way God fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

But why did the apostles ask about the restoration of the kingdom in response to Jesus' statements about the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Well, once again, the apostles were thinking about Old Testament prophecy. In a number of passages, the Old Testament prophets predicted that when judgment was over, God would pour out his Spirit as never before.

Listen to what the prophet Isaiah said about the Spirit in Isaiah 44:3-4:

I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams (Isaiah 44:3-4).

Here Isaiah spoke about restoration, saying that God would pour out his Spirit on the land.

Old Testament prophets proclaimed that before the Messiah came, Israel would live in what the rabbis called this age of sin, corruption and death. And they announced that when the Messiah came, he would usher in a new age, what the rabbis called the age to come, the age in which God's enemies would be judged, and his people ultimately and irrevocably blessed. Old Testament prophets never spelled out how long this process would take, but most rabbis expected it to happen all at once.

In contrast to this view, Jesus explained that God's kingdom would unfold over time by spreading throughout the nations. Instead of coming all at once, the transition to the glorious kingdom of God would come in stages. The age to come would be inaugurated during Jesus' earthly ministry. It would continue during Christ's reign in heaven, as the kingdom spread through the ministry of the gospel. And when Jesus returned in the future, this age of sin would completely end, and the universal, messianic kingdom would reach its consummation.

This outlook on the coming of the kingdom explains why Jesus responded to the apostles as he did. The Holy Spirit was about to be poured out on the church, but this did not mean that the consummation of all things was near. Jesus had only inaugurated the kingdom, and the blessing of the Spirit would equip his church as it continued to live in a sinful world prior to his return.

With the timing of the Holy Spirit's coming in mind, we should turn to the purpose of his coming.

Purpose

Listen again to Jesus' words to the apostles in Acts 1:8:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

In these words, Jesus redirected the apostles to think about the baptism of the Spirit in new ways. Rather than ushering in the final state of the kingdom, the Spirit was to be poured out to empower the apostles to be Christ's godly and faithful witnesses. Let's unpack what Jesus said by focusing on two dimensions of the Spirit's ministry: power and godly witnesses.

First, Jesus said that the disciples would receive power through the baptism of the Spirit. The association of the Spirit with power was common in the Old Testament, often being represented by the expression "Spirit of God," which translates the Hebrew phrase *ruach elohim*. This Hebrew expression referred to a powerful wind or force of energy from God. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit worked powerfully in the world at large to bring God's will to pass.

The Holy Spirit's power was also manifested in dramatic ways in people's lives. For instance, when the Spirit of God came upon Samson in Judges 14–15, Samson performed miraculous physical feats that brought Israel great victories over the Philistines.

In addition to the Spirit's power, Jesus mentioned that the Spirit would cause the disciples to be godly witnesses. This association also reflects the Old Testament. On a number of occasions, the Spirit of God gave his people power to speak boldly and effectively on God's behalf. For example, listen to the words of Micah 3:8:

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord (Micah 3:8).

In this passage, Micah explained that the Spirit had emboldened him to speak the truth even though he was opposed by false prophets.

So, when Jesus told his apostles that he would baptize them with the Holy Spirit to empower them as his witnesses, he indicated that the Spirit would act in them as he had acted through others in the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit would also perform acts of power to authenticate the truth of the apostles' message, and he would give them words to speak to those who opposed them. And of course, these demonstrations of the Spirit appear over and over in the book of Acts.

Now that we have seen some of the ways Luke introduced the Holy Spirit before Pentecost, we should turn to the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost as the church was gathered in Jerusalem.

DAY OF PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-4 contains this account of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Acts 2:1-4).

To explore the importance of this event, we will touch on three main issues. First, we will look at the significance of Pentecost. Second, we will consider the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. And third, we will discuss the results of these events. Let's consider first the significance of Pentecost.

Significance

Pentecost was a time of celebration in Israel's sacred calendar that was closely connected with Passover. According to Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23, Passover was the time of year when Israel remembered their deliverance from Egypt. It commemorated the night of the final plague, when God killed the firstborn Egyptian sons but passed over the homes of faithful Israelites. The Passover celebration reminded the Jews of the way God had freed them from slavery in Egypt.

Pentecost was held about 50 days after Passover, at the time of the early harvest. It originally celebrated God's provision of sustenance in the land of promise. At this time, the Israelites made offerings from the first fruit of their harvest as an act of thanksgiving for all the crops they hoped to harvest that year.

In addition to this, by the time of the New Testament, the Jews also remembered the giving of God's Law to Moses during the celebration of Pentecost. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at this time was also significant for the early church because it reminded them of the hope announced by the prophet Jeremiah.

Listen to what the prophet wrote in Jeremiah 31:31-33:

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

The writing of the law in the heart was a work of the Spirit of God promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament.

In keeping with this Old Testament background, the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 was particularly significant for the Christian church. Jesus'

sacrifice on the cross occurred during the feast of Passover. He died as the final Passover lamb, securing for God's people eternal deliverance from slavery to sin and death.

As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 5:7:

Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed (1 Corinthians 5:7).

In this light, it is not surprising that the outpouring of the Spirit took place on Pentecost. As Pentecost drew attention to the greatness of the harvest, the coming of the Spirit was the firstfruits of the harvest of eternal salvation. The arrival of the Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost indicated that the church had also received the writing of God's law on the heart, equipping the church for bold witness. As Paul put it in Romans 8:23, Christians

... have the firstfruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23).

As Luke wrote his account of the outpouring of the Spirit, he emphasized its association with Pentecost to indicate the grand significance of what happened. This was no ordinary event; it was not even one miracle among many others. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost began the great harvest of salvation and the inward renewal of God's people to establish the messianic kingdom of God.

Now that we understand some of the significance of Pentecost as the time of the outpouring of the Spirit, we should turn to the phenomenon of tongues as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence.

Tongues

In Acts 2, Luke recorded that when God's Spirit was poured out on the church on the day of Pentecost, the apostles and other believers spoke in other tongues. Unfortunately, there is much confusion in the church over the gift of tongues. So, we should take a moment to reflect on two questions. First, what was the gift of tongues? And second, why did God give this gift?

In the modern church, different Christians understand the gift of tongues in different ways. Some argue that tongues were a miracle of hearing rather than of speaking. In this view, the apostles spoke ecstatic utterances, which the Spirit enabled the audience to understand in their own languages.

But at least two aspects of Luke's description make it more likely that the miracle was one of speaking, one in which the early Christians spoke actual human languages that they had never learned. First and foremost, Luke specifically wrote that the Holy Spirit enabled the speakers to speak in other tongues. As we read in Acts 2:4:

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Acts 2:4).

Luke made no mention of the Holy Spirit imbuing the listeners with miraculous hearing powers. Second, the term "tongues" translates the Greek noun *glōssa*. In the New

Testament and other Greek literature, this word usually refers to ordinary human languages. And there is no substantial reason to doubt that it means anything different in this context. So, we can have confidence that the miracle of tongues at Pentecost was a supernatural ability to speak unlearned human languages.

But *why* did the Holy Spirit manifest his presence in this particular way? What was the significance of tongues on that day? Listen to Peter's explanation in Acts 2:16-21:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy... before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:16-21).

In this passage, Peter referred to Joel 2:28-32 to explain what was happening at Pentecost, including the miracle of tongues.

Interestingly, Peter did not precisely quote the words of Joel. In the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, the text of Joel begins "*And afterward* God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people." But Peter paraphrased Joel 2:28 saying, "*In the last days.*" Peter's change in the wording of Joel indicates that he believed that the events on the day of Pentecost were part of the *last days*, the *end times*.

Now, Peter's belief that the outpouring of the Spirit took place in the last days is supported by other words he quoted from Joel. As Peter quoted Joel 2 he indicated that the Spirit's coming was to occur before the great and glorious day of the Lord.

Throughout the Old Testament, the day of the Lord was a day of God's judgment and blessing, and on a number of occasions in the Old Testament, it refers to the day when God finally and utterly defeats all his enemies and blesses all his faithful people.

So, when Peter explained the outpouring of the Spirit as a display of the great and glorious day of the Lord, he was saying that what was happening on the day of Pentecost was at a great moment in history. The Spirit came at Pentecost as a wonder of the last days, a time of the glorious divine intervention establishing the final stages of the kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, many Christians today miss the grand significance of the outpouring of the Spirit. Instead, it is popular for Christians to think of the events in Acts 2 as a model for every Christian's personal sanctification. We create the expectation that all truly spiritual Christians will experience the dramatic manifestation of the Spirit that occurred at Pentecost and several other occasions in Acts.

Think about it this way. The New Testament teaches us that a number of great and mighty acts of God took place to inaugurate the kingdom of God. Christ died for our sins, rose from the dead, and ascended to the right hand of God the Father. Each time a person comes to faith in Christ, the merits of these events are applied to that person's life. But Christ does not die, rise and ascend every time an individual receives new life in him.

In much the same way, the New Testament teaches that Pentecost was also one of those great once-for-all-time events through which God brought the last days. Later in

this lesson we will see that the same is true of several other occasions when the Spirit was poured out in special ways in Acts. Since those early days of the Christian church, the presence of the Holy Spirit has been applied to the church, empowering us for service. We should always expect the Holy Spirit to be present in the lives of believers, but we should not expect precisely the same kind of manifestation as we see at Pentecost. In fact, even on other occasions of special outpourings of the Spirit in Acts, the manifestations of the Spirit were not precisely the same. The visible tongues of fire and the sound of wind, as well as the gift of prophecy and tongues at Pentecost, were not ordinary Christian experiences. They were the result of a great divine intervention, an act of God by which he inaugurated his kingdom.

Now that we have seen the significance of Pentecost and looked at the miracle of tongues that accompanied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we should turn to the results of the events that occurred that day.

Results

As you will recall, we saw earlier in this lesson that Jesus said the Holy Spirit was given to empower the apostles to be his godly witnesses. So, as we discuss the results of Pentecost, we will focus on the way that the Holy Spirit gave power to the apostles and used this power to bless the spread of the gospel of the kingdom. To begin with, consider the way the Holy Spirit empowered the apostle Peter.

As we survey the Gospel of Luke, we find that before the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter was not always the clearest of thinkers. He was rebuked on the mount of transfiguration because he wanted to build tabernacles for Moses and Elijah. He denied Christ three times on the night of the Lord's arrest. And even during Peter's ministry in Acts, Luke drew attention to the fact that Peter did not have higher education and was not the type of person who could be expected to speak in compelling ways. Listen to Luke's words in Acts 4:13:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

Given this picture of Peter, it was undoubtedly the power of the Holy Spirit that transformed him and enabled him to preach such a dynamic and successful gospel message on the day of Pentecost. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter refuted those who accused the Christians of being drunk. He quoted, interpreted and applied the Old Testament in convincing ways, demonstrating that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. The Holy Spirit also empowered Peter and the other apostles to work miracles as a testimony to the truth of their proclamations. As we read in Acts 2:43:

Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles (Acts 2:43).

In light of the great power that the Holy Spirit gave to Peter and the other apostles to bear witness to this gospel proclamation, it should come as no surprise that God blessed the witness of the apostles. Listen to how Luke described their witness in Acts 2:41, 47:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:41, 47).

Three thousand people were converted on the day of Pentecost! And this external, numerical growth came through the empowerment of the Spirit. But the growth of the church was not only outward. Internal growth also resulted from the empowerment of the Spirit. Listen to Luke's words in Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.... Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people (Acts 2:42-47).

The church grew internally as the early Christians lived by the apostles' teachings, dedicating themselves to lives of service to God and to their fellow believers. The results of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost were astounding in the early days of the church.

Having looked at Luke's discussion of the Holy Spirit before Pentecost and on the day of Pentecost, we are ready to look at the way the Holy Spirit worked after Pentecost as he continued to empower the ministry of the gospel.

AFTER PENTECOST

In the book of Acts, Luke returned many times to the dramatic work of the Spirit after Pentecost. For the sake of illustration, we will focus on three of these passages. We will look first at an event that took place in an unnamed city in Samaria. Second, we will focus on an incident in Caesarea. And third, we will consider the manifestation of the Spirit in Ephesus. Let's turn first to the Spirit's ministry in Samaria, just north of Jerusalem.

Samaria

In Acts 8:14-17, Luke reported another time when the Spirit came upon believers in a special way. Listen to what Luke wrote there:

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17).

Generally in Acts (like today), the Holy Spirit is poured out on people when they first come to faith, not at a later point in time. In this regard, the scenario here resembled Pentecost: believers received the Spirit after their conversion. It was a special time, a dramatic display of the Spirit's outpouring. Why did the Spirit come to the Samaritans in this way?

Well, the best explanation for this unusual outpouring of the Spirit is that it marked the first time Samaritan converts came to Christianity in large numbers. As you will recall, Jesus commissioned the apostles to expand the kingdom of God from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. Jerusalem in Judea was the starting point on Pentecost. But the Samaritans were of mixed heritage, being both Jewish and Gentile, and they did not worship God according to the dictates of the Old Testament. So, when the gospel reached Samaria, it represented a new stage, a major step in the fulfillment of Jesus' commission to his disciples. It was the first major expansion of the gospel across ethnic borders. The Holy Spirit empowered these believers to speak in tongues in order to testify to the apostles and to the rest of the church that the Samaritans could be fully incorporated into the church.

With this understanding of the Spirit's work in Samaria in mind, we should turn to Caesarea, where the Holy Spirit once more came to the church in ways that recall what happened at Pentecost.

Caesarea

Similar to the event in the unnamed city in Samaria, the situation in Caesarea marked the first time the gospel moved across another ethnic boundary. In this case, Gentiles were converted to Christ in significant numbers for the first time, specifically the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household.

Acts 10:44-47 records what happened when Peter preached the gospel to the household of Cornelius:

While Peter was still speaking ... the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with

Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said ... “They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:44-47).

Once again, a striking parallel to Pentecost is evident: those who believed the gospel began to speak in tongues. Peter even commented that the believers in Caesarea received the Holy Spirit just as we have, probably referring to the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost.

In the Old Testament, Gentiles were outside God’s special covenants with Israel. And faithful Jews regularly separated themselves from unconverted Gentiles. So, it came as a surprise to the early church when Gentiles were converted to Christ without first being fully converted to Judaism.

Consequently, the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and his household in this astounding way to demonstrate that the door had been opened at last to the Gentile nations. Listen to these words from Acts 11:4, 15, 18, where Luke recorded the church’s response to the Gentiles’ conversion:

Peter ... explained everything to them precisely as it had happened ... “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.” ... When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11:4, 15, 18).

By coming on the Gentiles in a way that resembled Pentecost, the Holy Spirit demonstrated that their conversion was genuine, and that his plan to build his kingdom through the Gentiles had begun.

Now that we have looked at the Spirit’s work in Samaria and in Caesarea, we are ready to see what happened in Ephesus.

Ephesus

This event is recorded in Acts 19:1-6, where we read the following account:

Paul ... arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John's baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:1-6).

Once again, we see significant parallels to the day of Pentecost. After their baptisms into the name of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came on these men, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

In this passage, Luke described a dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Ephesus, a major city in Asia Minor, far from Judea and Samaria. As we have seen, Luke had already traced the expansion of the Spirit's work from Jerusalem, to Samaria, and to the Gentiles. Here the unusual factor is that the recipients of the Spirit were disciples of John the Baptist. Presumably, these were repentant Jews who had received the witness of John the Baptist prior to John's revelation that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

Luke highlighted this event because it brought closure to an issue that Luke stressed at the beginning of Acts: the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. You will recall that in Acts 1:5, Jesus contrasted his ministry with the ministry of John the Baptist in this way:

John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5).

This story of the Spirit's outpouring on John's disciples in Ephesus indicated that now Jesus' work of bringing the Spirit had reached a new level. Even the disciples of John had to become followers of Christ and to receive the Spirit of Christ. Nothing short of fully embracing Christ and living in the power of the Holy Spirit was in accord with the will of God.

Luke made it clear that as the apostles advanced the mission of the church, their work on the frontiers of the kingdom was consistently confirmed by dramatic outpourings of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit's power, the gospel spread unhindered from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Even today, the power of the Holy Spirit is the only means by which the church can be transformed and effectively spread the gospel. We too must seek to depend on the Spirit's power if we are to be godly and effective witnesses to the gospel message.

APOSTLES

Having considered the role of the Holy Spirit, we are now ready to address our second topic: the apostles. Before Christ ascended into heaven, he appointed the apostles to continue his ministry, to extend his kingdom from Jerusalem to the very ends of the earth through the gospel. Earlier in this lesson we saw that Acts 1:8 describes the vital role that the Holy Spirit played in the early church. Listen again to Jesus' words to his apostles:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

At this point in our lesson, we want to focus on a second issue that stands out in this verse: the role of the apostles. As Jesus put it here, the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles so that they would become his *witnesses* throughout the world.

In the early church, those who testified to the gospel in adverse circumstances came to be known as “martyrs” or “witnesses.” In the most extreme cases, witnesses were tortured or even killed for their witness to Christ. In fact, church tradition tells us that most of the apostles died in this way. This theme of witnessing for Christ in the face of opposition was a prominent concern for Luke as he wrote about the early church. And in this regard, no one surpassed the apostles as courageous, effective witnesses for Christ.

We will focus on three dimensions of the apostles’ role as witnesses to Christ. First, we will note that their witness was unique. Second, we will see that it was authoritative. And third, we will look at the varied nature of their witness, the way they used different means to present the gospel message. Let’s begin with the unique qualifications of the apostles for their office.

UNIQUE

The apostles were unique for at least two reasons. To begin with, the requirements for their office excluded anyone else from being called as an apostle.

Requirements

We all know that one of Jesus’ original twelve apostles, namely Judas Iscariot, betrayed our Lord to those who crucified him. Later, Judas took his own life, leaving only eleven apostles. Then, after Jesus had ascended to heaven, one of the first priorities of the eleven was to choose a twelfth apostle to replace Judas.

In Acts 1:21-26, Peter described the requirements for the new apostle in this way:

“It is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us ... For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” So they proposed two men... Then they prayed, “Lord ... [s]how us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry” ... Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias (Acts 1:21-26).

These verses establish requirements for the office of apostle, all of which were unique to the apostles listed in Scripture. First, they had to have been taught directly by Jesus. Second, they had to have seen Jesus after his resurrection. And third, they had to have been appointed to their office by God himself. The eleven apostles met these requirements because they were taught by Jesus during his earthly ministry, they saw him after his resurrection, and they had all been appointed by Jesus himself.

Matthias met these requirements because he was also taught by Jesus during the Lord’s earthly ministry, he saw the risen Lord, and he was chosen directly by God

through the casting of lots.

After Matthias, only one other man in Scripture was appointed to the office of apostle: Paul. Paul was chosen as an apostle after Jesus had ascended into heaven, so the church was originally skeptical about his appointment. But Scripture teaches us that he did in fact see and learn from Jesus after his resurrection, and that he had been appointed by Jesus himself.

For example, Paul witnessed the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, as Luke records in Acts 9:3-6. Also, he was appointed to his office by God himself, as we read in Acts 9:15, and 22:12-16. In fact, Luke recounted Paul's appointment three times to establish his claim as a true apostle in Acts 9, 22 and 26.

But even Paul admitted that his qualifications were somewhat unusual, since he had not come to faith until after Jesus' ascension. Paul mentioned his unique and particular apostleship in 1 Corinthians 15:8-9:

**Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.
For I am the least of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:8-9).**

Foundational Time

Besides meeting these unique requirements, the apostles were unique because they served at the foundational time in the life of the church. In this special time, they were appointed to the task of establishing the church of Jesus Christ. And because they did their job, and because the church has stood firm on their foundation, there has never again been a need for their special work.

Luke noted many ways that the apostles served as the foundation of the church. As we have seen in a prior lesson, the apostles were the primary witnesses who carried the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. Through their evangelism, the first Christian converts were gained from Judaism, from the corrupted worship of the Samaritans, and from Gentile paganism. Through their leadership, the first churches in history were established, and in them the patterns the church would follow. In these and many other ways, the apostles did unique work at a unique point in time. These times will never come again, and this work will never need to be completed again.

In Ephesians 2:19-20, Paul summarized the unique foundational role of the apostles in this way:

God's household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

There can never be another cornerstone, another Jesus. And in the same way, there can never be another foundation, another set of apostles and prophets who serve as the foundation for the church.

Unfortunately, in our day there are still churches who claim to have such authoritative apostles ministering among them. Yet, Luke made it clear that the original apostles were uniquely qualified for the requirements of their office, and they served at a

uniquely foundational time that can never be repeated. We still have the witness of the apostles collected in the writings of the New Testament, but we should not expect this kind of apostle in the church today.

AUTHORITATIVE

Having seen that the apostles witnessed to Christ in a unique way, we are ready to look at the authoritative nature of their witness. The apostles' authority is seen in many ways throughout Acts, but for the sake of simplicity we will focus on just four of these. First, the apostles' authority can be seen in the function of their office. Second, it is shown in God's blessings on their ministry. Third, it is evident by their power to perform miracles. And fourth, it is apparent from the revelation they continued to receive. Let's look first at the way the function of their office demonstrates their authority.

Function

The word "apostle," or *apostolos* in Greek, basically means one who is sent. It was commonly used to refer to messengers, to agents sent to accomplish missions, and to ambassadors who were authorized to speak on behalf of those who sent them. For example, when Jesus appointed seventy-two missionaries to preach about the kingdom of God in Luke 10, these were temporary ambassadors, appointed to bear a portion of Christ's authority for a time.

In Luke 10:16, Jesus commissioned the missionaries with these words:

He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Luke 10:16).

Here we see that the missionaries were to be treated as surrogates for Christ. Those who received the missionaries were counted as receiving Christ, and those who received Christ were counted as receiving the one who sent him, namely, the Father.

Beyond this, listen to the discussion that took place when the missionaries returned in Luke 10:17-19:

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you" (Luke 10:17-19).

When he appointed them to be his missionaries, Jesus delegated a portion of his authority to the seventy-two. So, their representation of him was not simply symbolic. Rather, they were his authorized agents. They were not infallible teachers, but they did have authority to cast out demons and to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom.

Similar to this, the apostles were authoritative ambassadors. But their representation of Christ differed from other disciples in two significant ways in the book of Acts. First, Luke's stories make it clear that the apostles were not only appointed to the mission of spreading the gospel, but also perpetually appointed to an office of the church. In Acts the apostles were not supplanted by some other persons or offices. They bore Christ's delegated authority perpetually, not just for a limited time. Second, the apostles were authorized to speak to all matters related to the establishment and governance of Christ's church. As the record of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 indicates, the word of the apostles was to be accepted by the church at large. Whatever judgments they rendered were to be received as the will of God. Listen to the way Peter described apostolic authority in 2 Peter 3:2:

I want you to recall ... the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles (2 Peter 3:2).

As Peter indicated here, the apostles' words were to be received because they served as faithful stewards of Jesus' will and teaching.

Having described the apostles' function, we should turn to the way God blessed their particular and unique ministry through the spread of the gospel.

Blessing

In the book of Acts, God blessed the apostles by giving them converts almost every time they preached the gospel. As we have seen, Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost expanded the church from about 120 people to over 3,000 people. And this kind of blessing continued throughout the book of Acts.

As an author, Luke was careful to teach his readers that this external, numerical growth of the church was evidence of God's approval and power. One way that he did this was by quoting the words of the respected Pharisee Gamaliel.

In Acts 5:38-39, Gamaliel said these words about the apostles before the Sanhedrin:

Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5:38-39).

Viewed from this perspective, the apostles' blessed gospel ministry throughout the book of Acts is evidence that the Holy Spirit empowered and verified their ministry.

Besides the proof offered by their function and God's numerical blessing on their gospel ministry, the apostles' authority can also be seen in the miracles accompanying their ministry.

Miracles

Throughout the Bible, one of the main functions of miracles is to prove that God's messengers speak the truth and bear God's delegated authority. In the book of Exodus, Moses performed many miracles before Pharaoh to prove that he spoke for the true God. In 1 and 2 Kings, Elijah and Elisha performed miracles that confirmed that their prophecies and teachings were from God. In the Gospels, Jesus performed miracles to prove that he was the Christ, God's anointed servant and prophet who was sent to save and to rule his people.

And in much the same way, the apostles' miracles in the book of Acts proved that their testimony concerning Christ was true. The apostles healed the sick in Acts 5:16. They restored the lame in Acts 14:8. They raised the dead in Acts 9:40. They afflicted the wicked in Acts 13:11. They escaped from prison in Acts 12:10. They survived shipwreck in Acts 27:44, and poisonous snake bites in Acts 28:3. In fact, their power was so great that according to Acts 5:15, Peter's shadow healed anyone it touched. And according to Acts 19:11-12, cloths touched by Paul could exorcise demons and heal disease. Miracles this powerful can only come from God, proving that the apostles were truly his authoritative witnesses.

This is why Paul characterized his own miracles in this way in 2 Corinthians 12:12:

The things that mark an apostle — signs, wonders and miracles — were done among you (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Miraculous works empowered by the Holy Spirit were the mark of an apostle, the proof that he was testifying truthfully to Christ and his work.

Now that we have looked at the apostles' function, God's blessing on the spread of the gospel through them, and their miracles, we are ready to see how revelation they received served as proof of their authority.

Revelation

Luke recorded many times that the Holy Spirit gave guidance to the apostles, leading them to flesh out the truth of the gospel, to make decisions for the church as a whole, shaping structural elements that allowed the church to grow into maturity. For example, in Acts 10, Peter received a vision from God that taught him to bring the Gentiles into the church without requiring full conversion to Judaism. And in Acts 16, Paul received a vision that he should proclaim the gospel in Macedonia, greatly expanding the spread of the gospel of the kingdom.

For Luke's original readers, and for the rest of the early church, the apostles' official function, blessing in ministry, authenticating miracles, and revelation were convincing proofs of their unquestionable authority. And as Luke recorded throughout Acts, the early church responded to the apostles' authoritative witness and leadership by accepting and submitting to all their teachings and judgments. And in the same way,

modern Christians must also submit to these authoritative ambassadors of Christ, both through the summaries of their teachings in books like Acts and through their authorized writings in the New Testament.

With the unique and authoritative nature of the apostles' witness in mind, we are ready to look at the varied ways in which they and their followers were witnesses of the gospel of Christ to the world.

VARIED

Our discussion of the varied ways the apostles and those who followed them witnessed to Christ throughout Acts will divide into two parts. First, we will consider the various strategies used to testify to Christ. Second, we will mention several of the various settings in which they offered this testimony. Let's look first at the various strategies they employed in the book of Acts.

Strategies

While there are countless ways to describe the strategies the apostles and their followers used in presenting Christ to the world, it is helpful to think of six primary approaches. First, they often appealed to history, especially by making reference to things like the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, events from history that were reported throughout the Roman Empire.

For example, in Acts 26:26, Paul spoke these words to King Agrippa:

The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner (Acts 26:26).

In this passage, Paul's main point was that the basic facts that he and the church proclaimed were known events in the ancient world. Appealing to historic events like this was a common strategy the apostles used when they witnessed to unbelievers.

Second, the apostles frequently appealed to truths of Scripture to support their evangelistic endeavor. When witnessing to Jewish audiences, the apostles often appealed to the Old Testament. For instance, in Acts 3:22, Peter appealed to the words of Moses to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. And in Acts 23:6, Paul appealed to the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead that derived from Old Testament Scriptures.

Third, when witnessing to Gentile audiences, the apostles appealed to the revelation of God in nature and to true beliefs that could be found within pagan systems of thought. For instance, in Acts 17:24-27, Paul used common pagan outlooks on God and human history as a starting point for his gospel presentation in Athens. Listen to what he said there:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27).

The points of view Paul presented here were held not just by Christians and Jews, but by many pagans as well. In fact, in the same address at the Areopagus in Athens, Paul even referred to pagan literature. Listen to what he said in Acts 17:28:

“For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring” (Acts 17:28).

Here Paul appealed to Greek poetic writings to build his case for Christianity as he witnessed for Christ in Athens.

Fourth, the apostles often appealed to personal experience as they presented Christ to others. In the book of Acts, Luke recorded many times that Paul used this approach. For instance, Paul referred to his dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus, which Luke recorded in Acts 9. He recounted this experience before the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem in Acts 22, and he described it to King Agrippa in Acts 26.

Fifth, the apostles performed many signs and wonders that proved the truth of the gospel they preached. As we have seen earlier in this lesson, the book of Acts is replete with the miracles the apostles performed. Wherever the Spirit empowered the apostles to work miracles, he did so to support their witness to Jesus Christ.

Sixth, the apostles witnessed through their steadfast loyalty to Christ. They constantly used the attention they received to point people to Christ, and they refused to abandon his call even when persecuted or threatened. For example, in Acts 14 when the people of Lystra tried to worship Paul and Barnabas, Paul insisted that he was merely a man, and he directed the people to God. And in Acts 4, when the Sanhedrin threatened the apostles and commanded them to stop evangelizing, the apostles refused to be quieted. As we read in Acts 5:28-29:

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” [the high priest] said... Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:28-29).

The apostles employed a variety of strategies as they bore witness to the gospel. And through their example and teachings, they trained the early church to do the same. This feature of Luke’s record in Acts should encourage Christians in every age to search out the many strategies God wants us to follow as we too serve as witnesses of the gospel.

Alongside the various strategies the apostles used to witness to Christ, we should consider the different settings in which they testified on Christ's behalf.

Settings

There are many ways we might summarize the various settings in which the apostles bore witness to the gospel in the book of Acts. But for the sake of ease, we will group these settings into four basic categories. First, there were public speeches. Here we have in mind those events in which the apostles addressed a large group of people in a public setting, whether in sermons, defense speeches, or other types of orations.

In these types of presentations, the apostles were careful to choose their words according to the audience they addressed. As we have already seen in this lesson, they spoke to Jews in one way and to Gentiles in another.

Second, the apostles witnessed in the context of dialogue or debate. In this setting, people would have been invited to give counterarguments, and the apostles would have been expected to defend the gospel. For example, in Acts 19, Paul debated in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, a place in Ephesus where rhetorical skills and new ideas were tested before people.

Third, in Acts the apostles and those who followed them often witnessed in households. In the ancient world, households typically included far more than just parents and their children. There were often many relatives, friends, and household servants. So, when we read of households in Acts, we ought to envision relatives such as children, grandparents, uncles and aunts, as well as employees and servants, and in many cases even slaves. The total group of a household may have numbered around 15 to 20 on average. We find examples of the apostles witnessing to households in several places in Acts, such as chapter 10, where Peter addressed the household of Cornelius; and chapter 16, where Paul addressed the households of Lydia and the Philippian jailor.

Fourth, Acts also contains examples of personal evangelism as a form of witness. For instance, in Acts 25, Paul spoke to King Agrippa as an individual, tailoring his words specifically to Agrippa's knowledge and experience.

In short, the apostles did not limit themselves to witnessing only in certain ways or in certain settings. As we survey the book of Acts, we find them taking advantage of every opportunity, presenting the gospel in ways that were appropriate to each audience. In doing so, the apostles provided an example to us, teaching us to emphasize those elements of the gospel that resonate most strongly with our audience, and to find specific ways to relate the gospel to the life of each unbeliever.

THE CHURCH

Having looked at the themes of the Holy Spirit and the apostles, we now turn to our third major theme in Acts: the church that the apostles established.

We will explore the theme of the church in two ways. First, we will look at the necessity of the church. And second, we will look at the preparation the church received from the apostles to continue their work. Let's look first at the necessity of the church.

NECESSITY

Christ commissioned the apostles to build his church. Why? The apostles knew that a handful of men could not take the message of Christ to the whole world by themselves; they needed an army of witnesses to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in every land.

We will look at two factors that made the church necessary for the accomplishment of the apostles' mission. First, we will consider the apostles' physical limitations, the fact that they could not physically accomplish the task they had been assigned. Second, we will look at their temporal limitations, the fact that they would live normal human life spans and be unable to witness to future generations. Let's begin with the physical limitations of the apostles.

Physical Limitations

As we have already seen, the apostles' job was to bear witness to Christ by proclaiming the gospel. But they could not, by themselves, be "living letters" to the entire world. To solve this problem, the apostles delegated much of the responsibility of being authentic witnesses to the church. As people were added to the church through the apostles' evangelism, these believers also became "living letters" in their own right. They lived out the gospel, thereby testifying to their families and to their neighbors about Jesus. Some of them even became missionaries and evangelists. In this way, the apostles created a self-replicating model for authentic evangelism in every generation, with the church itself doing most of the work. To be sure, the church was not able to evangelize with the same authority and miraculous confirmation that attended the apostle's preaching. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit was still pleased to work through the church's authentic testimony in life and word, and to convert many new believers through this means.

For instance, listen to what Acts 11:19-21 says about the believers who were scattered by persecution:

[They] traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them ... went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21).

With this understanding of the apostles' physical limitations in mind, we should look at the temporal limitations caused by their mortality.

Temporal Limitations

The apostles were convinced that Jesus would return, but they did not know when. By the time King Herod killed the apostle James in Acts 12, it was obvious that at least some apostles would not survive until Jesus returned. So, the apostles trained the church not only to evangelize under direct apostolic supervision, but also to carry on the work of building the church after the apostles died.

For example, listen to Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:25-28:

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again... Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:25-28).

Paul wanted to make sure that the church would continue to depend on Christ to spread the gospel in authentic ways and to bring believers to maturity. So, he made sure that its leaders were prepared to continue their ministries after his own death. Because of the apostles' physical and temporal limitations, the church was central to the apostles' short-term and long-term strategies for advancing the kingdom of God.

Now that we have spoken of the necessity of the church for authentic witness, we should turn to the preparation of the church by the apostles.

PREPARATION

There are many ways in which the apostles prepared the church to continue the mission of spreading God's kingdom. But for the sake of time we will limit ourselves to three considerations: First, we will look at the fact that the apostles instructed the church to remain faithful to the teaching of the apostles, which consisted of their faithful testimony to Jesus. Second, we explore the apostles' provisions for designating church officers, such as elders and deacons. And third, we will see how the apostles prepared the church to endure the hardships that would inevitably come. We'll turn first to the teaching that the apostles passed on to the church.

Teaching

In Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul described the church as a building, built on Christ as the cornerstone and on the apostles and prophets as the foundation. Listen to his words in Ephesians 2:19-20:

You are ... fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Notice here that Paul had in mind not simply that the apostles were the initial leaders of the church, but that their teachings were the foundation of the church, the basis for the church's beliefs.

In Ephesians 3:4-6, Paul described the foundational role of his teaching in this way:

You will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:4-6).

This is why Luke was so careful in the book of Acts to highlight the fact that the church dedicated itself to the apostles' teachings. As he recorded in Acts 2:42:

[The believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

Luke wanted his readers to know that in order to be faithful to Christ, and in order for God to bless our attempts to spread his kingdom, the church must be built not only on Christ as the chief cornerstone, but also on the foundation of the apostles and prophets of the early church. The apostles authoritatively and reliably passed on the work and teaching of Jesus. So, Christians in every age must proclaim, preserve and live by the apostles' teachings.

This is true even today for the church of Christ. The most obvious way that this is true for us today is that the New Testament itself was written primarily by apostles. And those books that were not written by apostles, such as the book of Acts, obtained apostolic approval. As the church of Christ today, we build our lives on the writings of the New Testament as the true summation of the teachings of the apostles.

Having seen that the apostles prepared the church by instructing it to remain faithful to their teaching, we are ready to consider how they prepared the church to raise up officers to lead and serve the church as it expanded into new territories and new generations.

Officers

As we have seen, the apostles encountered physical and temporal limitations that prevented them from completing their mission on their own. And part of the solution to this problem was to raise up additional officers in the church.

Here we should pause to say that various Christian traditions have understood the government and offices of the early church in a variety of ways. Some branches of the church recognize three offices: bishop, elder and deacon. Others recognize only two

offices: elder and deacon. Still others include offices like apostle, missionary, evangelist, and more.

The question of proper church government is beyond the scope of this lesson, but we want to emphasize the general point that the apostles appointed additional church officers to ensure that the church would be able to carry out God's mission.

In fact, the apostles began appointing additional officers very quickly because they recognized almost immediately that they themselves could not perform even the ministries associated with the local church in Jerusalem. We see this very clearly in Acts 6, where the apostles created the office of deacon to ensure that the church would be able to meet the needs of its members. In this case, the apostles instructed the church to select men who would be responsible for the daily distribution of food.

Listen to the way the apostles handled this in Acts 6:3-6:

[The apostles said], “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” ... [The church] presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:3-6).

The apostles also appointed elders, often called pastors, to shepherd and to lead the various local congregations of the church. For example, during Paul's missionary journeys, the apostle typically gathered new converts into churches, and appointed leaders who would take charge of the church when he left.

We see an example of this in Acts 14:23, where Luke provided this account:

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:23).

In fact, the apostles were so intent on preparing elders for the church that they encouraged the elders to lead alongside them even when the apostles were present. The most prominent example of this in Acts was the council in Jerusalem that was convened to address the Gentile question — the question of how to incorporate Gentiles into the church. This council was presided over by apostles and elders together. In Acts 15, where this event is recorded, the apostles and elders are mentioned together as the leaders of the church at least five times.

Listen to the way the chapter begins in Acts 15:1-2:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15:1-2).

Paul and the others were sent to consult with the apostles and elders. We find similar phrasing in verses 4, 6, 22 and 23 of this same chapter.

Throughout the book of Acts, the apostles called on the officers of the church to carry out God's mission of the messianic kingdom. We see this in Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. We find it in the prominent role of elders like James, who appears to have led the church in Jerusalem in Acts 15 and 21.

Listen to the way Paul wrote about the appointment of officers in Titus 1:5:

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you (Titus 1:5).

Paul instructed the young pastor Titus to straighten out what Paul himself had left unfinished. That is to say, the elder Titus was to finish what the apostle Paul had started; he was to continue the apostolic mission of spreading the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Paul and the other apostles appointed these officers to take over the work of the ministry from them. God never intended the apostles to do everything themselves. He intended the apostles to establish his church. But he also intended them to train up others who would receive the leadership of the church from the apostles, officers who would continue to build on the foundation of the apostles, expanding the kingdom of God into areas and times that the apostles could never have reached.

So far we have seen that the apostles taught the church the work and teaching of Jesus and raised additional officers to fulfill Christ's mission. At this point, we are ready to speak of the way the apostles prepared the church for the hardships that would inevitably come as it pressed forward.

Hardships

Luke described the apostles' work as being fraught with difficulty, danger and persecution. They were frequently arrested and beaten. The apostle James was even executed by King Herod. And the apostles knew that what was true in their own lives would also be true in the lives of other Christians.

In one very characteristic episode, Paul was stoned and left for dead by angry unbelievers in the city of Lystra. The next day, he escaped to the nearby city of Derbe. But soon after, he returned to Lystra and other cities to encourage the believers.

It was in the context of this attempt on Paul's life that Luke recorded these words in Acts 14:21-22:

[Paul and Barnabas] returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said (Acts 14:21-22).

The apostles wanted the church to understand that they would face hardship and persecution. Some would even be murdered for their faith. But the goal of the kingdom was worth it. And therefore, the church needed to remain steadfastly faithful to Christ.

The way the apostles prepared the church to face hardship can also be seen in Paul's famous address to the elders from the church in Ephesus. In Acts 20, Paul told them that he probably would not see them again. He said that he was going to Jerusalem, where he expected to be arrested and perhaps killed. In the context of this grim outlook for his own life, Paul offered warnings and exhortations to prepare the Ephesian church for their own hardships.

In Acts 20:28-31, he spoke these words to the Ephesian elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31).

Several apostles wrote similar things in their letters to churches. Peter, John and Paul each exhorted churches to watch against enemies of the faith, to depend upon the Scriptures and their teaching, and to remain faithful to Christ.

In all of this, the apostles' intention was not to discourage the churches. Rather, it was to prepare the churches to trust Christ in the face of hardships, to depend on the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, and to continue to pursue the mission of God.

By grounding the church in apostolic witness and teaching, by establishing officers in the church, by preparing the church to face hardships, and in many other ways, the apostles ensured that the church in every place and age would be able to carry out the mission of expanding the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we explored three main themes that are woven through the book of Acts. We have looked at the Holy Spirit's activities and gifting. We have discussed the importance of the apostles as Christ's uniquely authoritative witnesses. And we have seen how the apostles fulfilled their appointed task by establishing the church.

The book of Acts is a remarkable work of history and theology. As Luke wrote to Theophilus and the early church, he highlighted the vital importance of spreading the gospel of the kingdom of God through their witness to the nations of the earth in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we apply these same lessons to our lives today, we too should dedicate ourselves to the kingdom of God, looking forward to the day that Christ will return to consummate his eternal kingdom.

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The Book of Acts

LESSON
THREE

Major Themes Faculty Forum



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The Book of Acts

Lesson Three: Major Themes

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Hans F. Bayer

Students
Larry Gwaltney
Ra McLaughlin

Question 1:

How should Christians think of the Holy Spirit?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson and, I think following the book of Acts, really puts an emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the early life of the church. And at times in Acts, the Holy Spirit moves powerfully and yet impersonally, and at other times it's subtle and quietly but very personal. How should Christians today think of the Holy Spirit?

Dr. Bayer: I think it's important to remember that the presentation in the book of Acts is really the mission of God, and the mission of God begins with sending his Son... the culmination of the mission of God, was sending his Son, and then as Jesus predicts, that he would send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to continue to instruct, convict of sin, etc., what we read in the Gospel of John, and this is really played out in the book of Acts. So that we need to understand that the work of the Holy Spirit is to continue the mission of God. So it wouldn't be impersonal in that sense, but it would be continuing the purposes of God, and we see that as the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested. What is significant in the book of Acts is that we have little reference to the person of the Holy Spirit. Much more reference to the work of the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. And you're quite right. Sometimes it is supernatural and dramatic, such as the Pentecost event, and sometimes when Paul is guided through a vision not to go into a certain area but to listen to the voice from Macedonia, it is more subtle. And I think that sensitizes us to the fact that the Holy Spirit works in different ways in different situations. But we must keep in mind that there is an overarching mission to the Holy Spirit, and as I mentioned already, it is really the exalted Christ who pours out the Spirit to his messianic people of God to equip them, not just for powerful witness, but for transformed lives, as I have mentioned. It is the power of the Spirit that really transforms us to live godly lives and to be surrendered to God so that we are authentic witnesses and not just talking words.

Student: Now you mentioned that in the book of Acts we don't hear very much about the Holy Spirit described as a person. Are there times in Acts where we can see his personhood coming through? Or do we mostly draw the theology of his personhood from other books of the Bible?

Dr. Bayer: I think we would mostly draw the understanding of the Holy Spirit's personhood from other parts of the Bible. On the other hand, we see the collaboration between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit at various points. Obviously in the Gospel of Luke at the baptism of Jesus, it is a most conspicuous Trinitarian event with the voice of the Father and the Holy Spirit equipping in a particular way the public ministry of Jesus. But we can see that at various instances in the book of Acts but more implicitly, more indirectly, and we would need to look at other parts of the New Testament to understand the person of the Holy Spirit as Lord and as the third person of the Trinity.

Student: You know, there's an interesting passage in Acts — and forgive me, I don't remember which chapter it's in — but there are some disciples who haven't received the Holy Spirit or even heard that there is one. And I think that's a fascinating statement because, you know, we look back at the Old Testament and we're accustomed to reading our trinitarianism in the Old Testament — It's fascinating to me that in the New Testament we have a group of faithful believers who have received Jesus in some sense but have not heard about the Holy Spirit and haven't received him. It's curious to me that they don't even really think about him in that sense. Is this revelation of the Holy Spirit's personhood something that's new to the New Testament, or should they have seen it in the Old Testament and just missed it?

Dr. Bayer: Well, you're referring to the passage in Acts 19 when, what it says there, the disciples of John had not heard about the Holy Spirit. And I would say there is teaching about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. You may remember when David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, in Psalm 51 he prays that God would not remove his Spirit from him. So there is an understanding. There is a sensitivity to the Spirit of God. But certainly it becomes more prominent and comes to the fore in the New Testament. In this particular group, followers of John had not heard of the coming and the promise of the Paraclete connected with the ministry of Jesus.

Question 2: What is the ministry of the Holy Spirit?

Student: Dr. Bayer, I think we can all recognize that the church has a variety of views on the charismatic gifts in the church today, the way that the Holy Spirit gifts and graces believers. I'm curious to know your thoughts regarding the nature of the Holy Spirit's ministry in the church today, and also where you think we might find common ground between all of these different views. What can we take from the book of Acts to help bring us together and unite us in our theology? Where can we start in that?

Dr. Bayer: This is certainly a very divisive issue and a very important one. Because, on the one hand, Scripture challenges us not to quench the Holy Spirit, and on the other, we are warned that signs and wonders are not necessarily a sign of divine blessing and divine presence, so that we have to be sensitive to anti-Christian forces and realities with signs and wonders. So we are holding a tension here, and it certainly would be wrong to ignore this tension, and the book of Acts speaks to that. So my appeal would be to find common ground on what the book of Acts affirms itself. And as we read together from different traditions, from different backgrounds, different experiences, we see that the book of Acts speaks much about the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit and that there are many different phenomena, many different manifestations there.

One thing that is significant that I mentioned a little bit in the lecture is that all tongues in the book of Acts are languages. They're not angelic speech, they are not something alien to human experience, but they are known languages and dialects, as Luke says. So it is miraculous, but it is certainly something that we can have access to in terms of different languages. So I would appeal to the focus that the book of Acts itself lays on the fact that the presence of the Holy Spirit is always the end product. The sequence, the modality varies, but the fact of the receiving of the Holy Spirit for each believer is given, and so I would draw attention to Acts 2:38 where that is summarized in some ways as a paradigm that is then presented in different ways and different circumstances. I have made mention in the lectures to the fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Samaritans, among Gentiles; these are significant progressions of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and we need to be careful that we do not simply transfer one-to-one and say this is what needs to happen now. So I would advocate an openness to the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, while seeing that the primary focus of signs and wonders, of miraculous work in the book of Acts, is the confirmation of the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus. That is the primary use, or the primary function of the miraculous and the significant transcendent manifestation of the Holy Spirit. But I would not exclude that, therefore, from the experience of a life of the Christian in different circumstances. So I would want to navigate a path that is guided by the book of Acts and that is open to the work of the Holy Spirit without demanding a one-to-one copying and equation of the manifestation of the Spirit.

There are some people who teach that in the book of Acts there is a second blessing, that you may receive the Holy Spirit as a believer but then you are baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit. But it can be demonstrated that there is no foundation to a second blessing in the book of Acts. So what happens is that the terminology in the book of Acts varies; it can be receiving the Holy Spirit, it can be being baptized in the Holy Spirit, but what happens is always the same thing. Now there is a possibility in the book of Acts of being renewed in the Spirit, of having a further work of the Holy Spirit, but that can happen at multiple times. So it would not be distillable to a doctrine of the second blessing. So I'm advocating a focus on the affirmation of the apostolic witness and a careful openness to the work of the Holy Spirit without

focusing on myself, and my experience, and my emotions, because it is the mission of God that I'm called to come under.

Student: I was kind of intrigued by your use of the word openness, because in my tradition that I came out of, we really diminished the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And I suspect a lot of people who might be watching this right now come from a similar background and never really talked about it very much, or didn't want to associate with what they would consider some of the more extravagant manifestations out there. But yet, the same people would often tell me, and I felt the same, that they kind of envied people, charismatics, who maybe theologically we didn't agree with but for whom the Holy Spirit was a very real person and a very real experience. So that idea of being open it seems to me a good start toward a movement in that direction without compromising some of the other things that we've learned from other books of the Bible.

Dr. Bayer: I think also, to elaborate on that just a little bit, the work of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts is by no means limited to empowering for witness. I have argued that the event of Pentecost is very much God's Spirit writing his law on your heart. And that is a character transformation issue. That is a renewal of the inner heart and inner mind, so it is overcoming sin in our own lives. That certainly has ramifications for authentic and believable witness. So I would want to add that, that the presence of the Holy Spirit is not only for outward ministry but for internal transformation, which is exactly what Jesus says the Spirit will come, he will convict of sin and guide in righteousness. So I would that is a more comprehensive understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit that will help us not to focus too much on signs and wonders and particular supernatural manifestations, but on the miracle of the transformed heart.

Question 3: **What are the last days?**

Student: Doctor, our lesson mentions Peter referencing Joel 2 when it talks about the Holy Spirit being poured out on his people in the last days, and that had immediate reference then, and now it's 2000 years later. What does the term last days mean? Are we in the last days? And if so, what does that mean for us in terms of the Holy Spirit's application now?

Dr. Bayer: You see, it is interesting to begin to understand how the Bible speaks about time and event sequences. And I would argue that as we look at the Old Testament and especially at the New Testament, Gospel of Luke, the book of Acts, there is a much greater emphasis on sequences than on time. So when you speak about the last days, it sounds to us like there is a focus on time when, in fact, from a redemptive historical understanding of Scripture and the understanding of Jewish expectation, it would be much more, what things need to occur? And since the

coming of the Messiah, since the massive fulfillment of not only particular Old Testament prophecies but an entire anticipation of consummation, we have moved forward in the unfolding of the event sequences in God's unfolding mission, so that Peter, at this point, speaks of the end times, the culmination of the events that need to occur before the culminating day of the last judgment and the beginning of the manifested eternal messianic kingdom of God, with coming of Christ being the most significant marking point. So perhaps we need to think less in terms of time sequence and more in terms of event sequence, and then this way we can say Peter understands the time in which he is, as well as our time, as the time that has moved very close to the consummation of the event sequences. We could say not much needs to happen in the unfolding of God's redemptive historical work before the great day of the Lord. And so in that sense, we have been living in the end times since the establishment and inauguration of the messianic kingdom of God with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Question 4:

What is life like in the overlap of the ages?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks about the last days, or the end times, in terms of the overlap of two ages, this age of sin and death and the age to come when everything is wonderful and perfect. And it says that the rabbis had this understanding that we would transition from this age to the age to come rather immediately, that it would be a fairly short period of time in which this transition would take place. And yet, the lesson describes that while this age is still going on and the age to come has started, that this transition is going to be a long time. We've gone through at least 1900 years and working on 2000 now, and we don't know when this overlap will end. What does this teach us about the nature of the last days and about what we can expect the Holy Spirit to be doing within this time? Can you give me some insight there?

Dr. Bayer: You see, that's a fascinating aspect of Jesus' teaching. That understanding of rabbis drawn on some Old Testament texts was modified by Jesus and clarified in the sense that the coming of the eternal messianic kingdom is not as you have described it, but that there is the intrusion of the eternal kingdom of God in the person of Jesus into the existing age of sin and decay, and that within that setting, the new kingdom, the new life is growing side-by-side, coexisting with the current age, and only at a future consummation point will there be the full manifestation of this new age. So this has enormous ramifications to our understanding of reality. That in a precise way is truly eschatological. Eschatological does not speak about the future as much as the intrusion of the eternal kingdom of God now. Wherever Jesus is, there is already that new eternal kingdom. And so at that marking point then the work of the Holy Spirit is that first fruit given to the believers to seal them for this age in which there is transformation, spiritual battle, growth, maturity, and evangelism testifying to the reality of Christ and his eternal kingdom as an equipment within the

context of this decaying age with its opposition, with its darkness, with its moral decay and its challenges, to be able to be a witness in this time. So the giving of the Holy Spirit is a very significant mark of empowering so that this future age that has begun already now would be realized in part in a fragile way in our own personal lives, in our churches, as a first fruit, a testimony, a witness to, the consummation of the messianic kingdom of God.

Student: Well, does the church have any reason to be optimistic? I know many people are quite content to be frozen in the sense that, okay, the Holy Spirit is here, the kingdom is here, but we can't expect much more until Jesus comes. And some people anticipate that things are just going to gradually improve, and some people just assume that things are going to get worse. Without going into any great detail, because I know that this is an issue that could go on for hours if we were going to discuss it, I would just ask, is there a reasonable basis for Christians to have hope that the Holy Spirit's ministry is going to improve? I mean, do we have to resign ourselves to either march in place or that things have to get worse?

Dr. Bayer: It's a very challenging way to look at reality because Luther once evidently said, "If the world ended tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today." So there is this sense of hope and commitment to transformation, not only of individual lives but of the culture and setting within which we live, but at the same time realizing that that will not overcome the old age, so that we always only planned in part. The transformation that happens is preliminary, is penultimate, and we are looking forward to the day when Jesus returns and restores all things in such an overwhelming way that it will be sustained. So we have hope, but we should not be triumphalistic in our understanding of what will happen and change now. But we should also not lose hope, and give up, and remove ourselves from our societies, the economic and social, environmental problems that we face, but plant our apple tree today; in the trust in the Holy Spirit, give ourselves to this sign, to this indication of what God will be accomplishing in a much more overarching way in the future. So neither triumphalist nor fatalist would be the path empowered by the Spirit of God to stand in our age in which we live.

Question 5:

How do we draw modern application from narrative texts?

Student: Doctor, the lesson mentioned some things that believers can expect from union with Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and then there are some things that are somewhat exceptional in the book of Acts because we're talking about a narrative structure. For our part, what can we do as believers when we're reading a narrative story to be able to discern what we can expect, what we have a right to expect, and what would be termed extraordinary?

Dr. Bayer: That's important. I've already mentioned that it is clear in the book of Acts itself that signs and wonders and particular manifestations of the Holy Spirit are primarily given to confirm and affirm the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Christ, but certainly there is an openness to the manifestation of the Spirit in certain ways of being guided, etc., etc., in the book of Acts. So the expectation of the individual believer should be guided by that. And I would advocate not only by the book of Acts but to look beyond that, to look into the teaching of Jesus, and to see that Jesus says: Listen to the message. If people are raised from the dead, even then, you will not believe what Moses said. So that, he makes a clear distinction between the miraculous confirmation and affirmation of words, and the true change of heart that happens when someone is yielded to the work of the Holy Spirit, and to the call to repentance, and to believe. So I would be careful on that point, but certainly to be open that where the book of Acts is very strong and clear, that the Holy Spirit will work in your life towards godliness, towards equipping you to be courageous in your witness, to be willing to suffer on behalf of Christ, that these things are very much within the purview of what you should anticipate, expect, and await. If God gives you healing, if God in a particular way quickens your heart, you may praise him as an additional blessing, but these aforementioned basics I would say would be very much at the foundation and a common ground to all believers all over the world.

Question 6:

How does the modern church relate to the apostles?

Student: Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks about how special and unique the apostles were in their role and in their office. At the same time, it recognizes they are human, but in their teaching and in their authoritative role, that they are infallible. My question is really, what place should the apostles have in our lives now? Since we don't have apostles currently, are they just a historical remnant that we appeal to for doctrinal clarification, or is there some other role that they play as the foundation of the church?

Dr. Bayer: I have emphasized a good bit the authority of the apostles in the lesson. And it is important to understand that it is not an innate authority, but it is derivative. They function as ambassadors. And an ambassador never speaks in his own authority, has his own agenda, but he always speaks on behalf of the one who sends him, on behalf of the authority that he represents. And so we need to understand the authority of the apostles in this way; that Christ is really the one that we are submitting to when we listen to the apostles. And that's an important point that the apostles, as they go out and proclaim and testify to the resurrection of Christ, and with that, the authentication of what Jesus claimed to be, that it is derivative. It is pointing to Christ. And as I mentioned before, Jesus himself shaped the understanding, shaped the framework, the paradigm of understanding in such a way that the testimony of the apostles is very much reflecting Christ. So in that way, as we submit to these messengers, we submit to Christ, and with Christ, we submit to him who sent him so

that we worship the Father with receiving the Son. So it is not innate apostolic authority but derivative, and in that sense, it is unique. There is no replication; there is no continuation of that. And that is why the church is built on the foundation of this apostolic witness to Christ with Christ the cornerstone. Now we understand that in some ways, all of it goes back to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So in that sense, we can freely submit to the authority of the apostles because they themselves do not speak in their own authority, but they reflect Christ.

Student: Is there a sense in which any of that continues today? As you were speaking, it made me think of the idea that the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. I wonder if those are parallel ideas in any sense. Not to say that our modern preachers speak with that type of infallible accuracy or with that exact same authority, but how do those ideas relate?

Dr. Bayer: The preaching of the gospel today continues that proclamation of the apostles, but it reflects their testimony. It refers back to their testimony. So as I preach the gospel, I believe their witness exactly as Jesus prayed for in the high priestly prayer that they would believe their witness. So there is no innate authority in the preaching of the Word today, except that it is based on that authorized witness, apostolic witness, which in turn refers back to Jesus. So we have direct access to Jesus through that witness line, and therefore we still today refer to the apostolic witness in the New Testament, and then particularly also in the book of Acts, we refer back to that, because there we have the authoritative testimony, the reliable testimony to Christ, and that is our lifeline today. It is not a new teaching. It is not a new authority structure. It is the reality that is established once and for all. And that testimony is reliable, is fixed, is a guidepost for us, so that we can say we have direct access to Christ through the apostolic witness.

Question 7: **Was Paul a legitimate apostle?**

Student: Dr. Bayer, Peter lists some pretty specific qualifications for apostleship in Acts 1, and given that, by what standard then can we consider Paul an apostle? And if he is, and it states that he is, then what is unique about his apostleship?

Dr. Bayer: First it is significant to note the qualification requirement for replacing Judas. It's a wonderful testimony to understanding that these people must have heard, listened to, lived with, and been shaped by Jesus, so not just anybody could be replacing Judas. And I would argue Paul could never qualify to replace Judas directly. So in that sense, we need to uphold the wonderful criteria established in Acts 1 to replace Judas. And Mathias rightfully takes that place. He stands there with the other apostles in the beginning of the book of Acts as a witness who nods when Peter speaks. So he's there. He's testifying to the truth of that testimony. Now regarding Paul, it is very significant to note that he was not a follower of Christ during his

earthly ministry. In fact, he was the enemy of the early church because the early church worshiped Jesus, and according to his understanding as a pharisaic Jew, that was blasphemy and that had to be persecuted, and that is why he went to Damascus, why he went elsewhere to seek to have the early Christians blaspheme Jesus, as he says himself in Acts 26. So what about the apostleship of Paul? Paul himself is one of the opponents of the gospel. You see the dynamic in the book of Acts of internal and external growth despite internal and external opposition. Paul is a member of the external opposition, and now you see that God can reach into the external opposition and have one of the great enemies of the church, a very well-trained Jewish rabbi, become one of them. He crosses the line from opponent to participant through the appearance of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Now when Jesus appears to Paul, he gives him an apostolic commission; you will be a witness for me, you will suffer for me, a witness to the Gentiles. So we can certainly say that the criterion of having encountered the risen Christ, being a witness to the resurrection, is part of what Paul can claim for his particular apostleship, and in 1 Corinthians 15, he says very much that. But he does identify himself as one abnormally born. Yes, he was also instructed by revelation during the time in the desert. But in some ways, I would say the apostleship of Paul is distinct from the apostleship of The Twelve, and yet it is a significant collaboration and corroboration of the reality of the risen Christ that not only trained followers testify to the reality of the resurrection of Christ, but the most outspoken enemy also testifies to the reality of the risen Christ. So the handshake in Jerusalem between those apostles who were systematically trained by Jesus and Paul is, in fact, the joining of two trajectories of witness lines that testifies to the reality of the resurrection of Christ. So he is an apostle, he has encountered the risen Christ, and he is authorized on behalf of Christ with the particular authority of an apostle to testify the gospel to the Gentiles.

Question 8:

Do the apostles have authority over the modern church?

Student: Dr. Bayer, we've been talking about the authority that the apostles possessed, and we've spoken a bit about how that authority worked in the early church. I'm interested to see what you think about how we should respond to that authority today. You know, we live in a world where we often reject authority, where authority over us is perceived as a bad thing. How should we respond to the apostles and how should we think about their authority in our own Christian lives?

Dr. Bayer: That's very important since today we do have examples of abuse of authority in the church not only outside. And so when we use the word authority and refer to the authority of the apostles, for some listeners, that would be very, very depressing and would need to be rejected. So it is very good to reflect on the nature of their authority, and perhaps Paul is a good example. When we look at the ministry of Paul, we do not see an authority of pushing around his weight, of demanding and of commanding, but we see a broken man, we see a humble man. We see a man who has

suffered much, who is willing to work with his own hands so as not to burden churches that should perhaps support his ministry so as to have a clean conscience before God and before the people to be able to minister the gospel. So in 2 Corinthians 6, perhaps the long list of the various trials and tribulations Paul has endured would be a good starting point to understand what kind of an authority, what kind of leadership we have in the early apostles. And certainly that echoes the ministry of Jesus. When we think about the Philippian hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, we see how Jesus himself humbled himself, and let go of privileges in order to serve you and me. How much more then should a follower of Christ, who has only delegated authority, follow in the footsteps and in the pattern of humility and servant leadership to exercise the derived authority, or derivative authority, in the way of appeal rather than command, in the way of example rather than expecting somebody from someone without living it out yourself. So it is an open letter. It is a transparent natural authority, and then again, as I mentioned, not innate but derivative. And when we reflect on that, it is a wonderful outgrowth of the lordship of Christ that his apostles, the main testifiers to the reality of the resurrection of Christ, would themselves reflect the character, demeanor and humility of the Lord they serve, and with that authority then appeal to humility, to obedience, to surrender, not to them as much as to the one that has sent them. And so that in the end, the body of Christ is being built up to humility before Christ. So build on the foundation of the apostolic witness in this more holistic understanding is a wonderful example then for us if we are elders or leaders in our churches, if we have a responsible function in our churches that we would do likewise.

Student: Does that mean the church is really going to have to address a change in strategy? I mean, we live in an age of hyper-individualism, and yet we are preaching submit yourself to the authority of Christ.

Dr. Bayer: I think very much so. I see it in my own life, and we can recognize our default mode of being our own master rather than submitting to the lordship of Christ.

Question 9:

How did special revelation impact the apostles' ministry?

Student: Dr. Bayer, how is the fact that the apostles were given special revelation supposed to affect our understanding of their ministry in the early church?

Dr. Bayer: It's important to reflect on the nature of their prophetic commission. You see, when Jesus came and made particular claims that were affirmed through the resurrection of Christ, foundational truths were established. I've mentioned the fact that Jesus himself identifies himself as the Lord of David in Psalm 110:1. Once that's established, there is a revelation truth through Christ that then enables the apostles to make further applications and to see further implications of that established truth. So one example would be the prophetic ministry of Peter in the first Pentecost speech,

that he can say this is that, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit corresponds to Joel 2. This is a prophetic authority that we would not have. He makes that link, but in some ways it is already derivative; it follows through, for instance, on the promise of Jesus that he would send the Paraclete, the Spirit, to continue to lead his church. So yes, there is a prophetic authorization of the apostles, but in some ways it is fleshing out what has already been established. Another example would be the vision that Peter receives before he goes to the house of Cornelius. He sees the vision of the unclean animals and he's supposed to eat. There you see it is not new revelation in the sense of understanding the messiahship of Jesus. It fleshes out the consequence that there is purity in Christ even for Gentiles. He is supposed to learn that the gospel does not only apply to all Jews, even those who live far away, but even unclean Gentiles. And so I would argue that there is a prophetic ministry, but it is fleshing out the consequence of what is already foundationally established in the reality, in the claim, in the teaching and the revelation of Jesus himself.

Student: Dr. Bayer, what you've said makes sense for much of what I see in Acts, but what about something like Acts 15 where we have this council in Jerusalem that's convened to discuss the issue of the inclusion of the Gentiles, and we come down to circumcision, which in the Old Testament is the sign of the covenant. And yet, at this council, they say, okay, we're just going to take that away. Is that not some sort of new revelation that the apostles had received in order to make that judgment?

Dr. Bayer: Certainly there is a new aspect to the fact that the apostolic council agrees and decides that no requirement of circumcision should be made for Gentiles. But as you reflect on Colossians 2:11-12, you see that Christ affected the circumcision of the heart which is necessary for circumcised Jews. And since he affected that circumcision both for Jews and Gentiles, it follows that the necessity of the circumcision of the flesh is now replaced, is no more a requirement as God is applying that work in such a specific and deep way. Now obviously in the Old Testament we have an appeal to the circumcision of the heart as well, in Deuteronomy 10 for instance. So it has always been God's goal to have people with a circumcised heart. But you can see that the decision of the apostolic council, looking back on the finished work of Christ, would draw out the consequence of that finished work and say, this is the basis of salvation and reconciliation with God, not the particular covenant sign of circumcision that was significant among Jews up to this point. And so I would argue that we have a sense of revelation there, but it still is derivative to the reality and the substance of the finished work of Christ, and the application of that finished work in circumcising the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles. And Paul would elaborate on that in Romans 2 as well, so that the goal is that both Jews and Gentiles are purified before God in their hearts based on the finished work of Christ.

Student: So there's a sense in which these new revelations are reapplications of existing revealed principles and knowledge about the character of God?

Dr. Bayer: That's well put.

Student: How then would we apply that to something, say...? I'm not trying to trip you up, but I'm curious. How do we apply that to something like Agabus and his prophecy of famine?

Dr. Bayer: Yes, there I would say it is not a new revelation about the foundations of the Christian faith but is a particular guidance in terms of events that are to happen that at different times and different circumstances throughout redemptive history God has made known. So yes, there is a revelation aspect, but it is not foundational.

Question 10:

In what sense is the church necessary?

Student: Dr. Bayer, I think it's easy for Christians to take the church for granted today. Many of us were raised in it and just knew it our entire lives. What I'm wondering... your lesson says that the church is necessary, which I think a few people might be surprised to hear. A lot of them just take it or leave it, even if they had been raised in it. In what sense can we say that the church is necessary?

Dr. Bayer: In the lecture, I emphasized that the church is necessary to continue the apostolic witness to the reality and the work of Christ, but I think we need to go a little deeper and begin at the beginning, and that is that God has always sought a people for himself. In fact, when we look at the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, the known Septuagint, the translation of words that refer to the people of God is *ecclesia* which then later was used for the messianic church in the New Testament. So there is always a sense in which God seeks a people unto himself that he redeems unto himself, and the primary purpose there would be to reflect God's glory, to worship the reality of the creator of this universe so that the people would reflect the glory of God and be transformed, and as such, testify to his salvation, testify to his work among the people. So it's a larger understanding of the church as the people of God who reflect his glory. So in the lecture, I emphasized the testimony aspect of it, that it is actually much greater. So the church is not only necessary for witness, the church is the very manifestation, the very window to the world through which the world can see the glory of God and is to see the glory of God. So there is a great commission then for the church to be purified, for the church to humble itself before the risen Christ, and to be renewed, and to reflect the character of God, and then obviously also to speak the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Student: So then it's necessary for Christians to be part of that in order to participate in that transformation and in that building of godly character. Is that the kind of thing you're saying here? That if we exclude ourselves from that arena in which all of that is taking place and God is pouring out his grace, that we don't benefit from that. Even if we go home and preach the Gospel to somebody else, we

may be carrying on the witness in some sense, but we are divorcing ourselves from that arena of blessing and transformation.

Dr. Bayer: Precisely, and we can see that in the book of Acts. I have mentioned the breaking through of barriers; that the dynamic of the gospel is breaking through barriers and a new people of God is being brought together from Jews and Gentiles. What is that? That is a community of believers. So the mission of God is not individual salvation. It is individual salvation in the context of a body of Christ, of a community of believers that together in their relationships and their individual lives reflects the glory of God. So we can see the formation of the messianic people of God in the very effect of the outpouring of the gospel work in the book of Acts. So it is a non-negotiable. It is a foundational aspect of God's mission that he would manifest himself not only in individual lives but in the corporate entity of the church, and that visualizes by relationships, by interactions, by authority and submission structures, the very person and nature of the Triune God.

Question 11:

How should we live in anticipation of Jesus' return?

Student: Dr. Bayer, in the book of Acts, we find the apostles who at least initially might suspect that Jesus is coming back fairly quickly, and their response is to build a church for long-term goals that can exist beyond their lifetime. You mentioned earlier that Luther had the idea that if I knew Jesus were coming back tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today. That doesn't seem to be the mindset of many Christians in our day. There seem to be a lot of people believe and even hope that we are in the last generation before Christ, and they expect him to come back all the time. At regular intervals, we have new books published, Jesus is coming back in 10 years, or maybe it will be 5 years. How should we really be thinking about this? Even if we really think Jesus is coming back tomorrow, should we be following the apostles' model, or does the circumstance of the modern world require us to adopt a different strategy?

Dr. Bayer: I believe the biblical focus and also the focus of the book of Acts is not so much on time sequence but event sequence, as I have mentioned. And even in the early church, I believe there were two extremes as reflected in 1 and 2 Thessalonians particularly. One extreme was Jesus is coming back today or, at the latest, tomorrow. These were people who said therefore we do not need to work, we do not need to transform the culture, we do not need to become active in our world because Jesus is coming back tomorrow. And then there were the other ones who had such a delay expectation of the coming of Christ that they would say, I need to organize my life, I have to be responsible to raise my children, I have to find employment. Who knows, Christ may never come back. So there are these extremes that Paul deals with, and I believe the center in the book of Acts and in the entire New Testament, the biblical understanding of the future is to have a readiness for the nearness of Christ at all

times, getting our lives in such order that if he came today, our lives would be in such order that we are ready to be with him, and yet not to speculate on particular times. So that we would have a living, alive, expectation and anticipation of the coming of Christ without falling into the trap of these two time faults of an extreme near expectation or an extreme far expectation. And I think that has a particular impact on our lives, namely that we really anticipate the coming of Christ, but we do not speculate on our own understanding, but we put our focus on watching and praying, which is what Jesus instructed his disciples to do in terms of the anticipation of the future. So I think that's very important for us to see that that is being taught in the book of Acts as well.

Student: So if I'm hearing you right, then as individuals and as the church, we should plan for the long term in terms of the things that we do, buildings that we erect, the strategies we come up, the missionaries we send out, but at the same time, we live as though Jesus is coming in the next hour.

Dr. Bayer: I think that is a good way to put it. I would say we have a future indicative. The reality of the coming of Christ is as sure as the death and the resurrection of Christ. So we live suspended between the past indicative of the finished work of Christ and the future indicative of his coming, but we do not speculate. So, we live in an alive life to him today, and as you said, we look forward to his coming now, and yet we do not speculate on the particular timing.

Question 12:

Was character or experience more important for church officers?

Student: Dr. Bayer, when the apostles were creating criteria for the establishment of church officers, they really stressed that person's character issues. I find that interesting, because the apostles' own background, sterling character or not, seems to be their office is derived from the experience of the miraculous and big events. If that's the case then, why in looking at church officers, did they stress the character so much rather than, for instance, their own personal experience of what they may have seen or heard?

Dr. Bayer: That's an interesting question, and I wonder if there's a little bit of a hidden false dichotomy. I would argue very much, and I have tried to illustrate that with 2 Corinthians 6, that as much as the apostles were particularly gifted and commissioned, and as much as there was a miraculous confirmation and affirmation of their witness, very much so were they living letters, transformed hearts. The real miracle in Paul was not his miraculous abilities, but that an enemy of the gospel was an outspoken witness and servant of the risen Lord. Very much a character issue. Very much a transformation of his heart away from pride to dependency, away from heavy authority to a servant leadership approach. So I would argue that the critical scholarship that has said there was a charismatic phase in the early church and then it

went to the phase of office with calling of elders and appointing deacons is in some ways a false dichotomy. Look at Stephen. He was called to minister as a deacon, and yet he was filled with the Holy Spirit. So in many ways, in the calling of the church officers, it would be assumed that they are living under the authority of the triune God, that they received the Holy Spirit in transformation and enablement to witness, but their character needed to reflect the fruit of the Spirit, the work and manifestation of the Spirit rather than simply being young, that their lives needed to testify to the reality of the Spirit of God. So I would argue that we can see these two elements side by side without necessarily expecting the miraculous manifestation with the call of church officers. And I've already tried to illustrate that and demonstrate that, that signs and wonders and miracles were particular affirmations of this unique foundational apostolic witness to the reality of Christ. But I would say that leaders in the church, if we look at James 5, are still called to pray for the sick and to look to God for his intervention and perhaps healing. So I would see those lines coming a little more together, while maintaining a particular authorization, a supernatural authorization, of the apostolic witness to the reality of the resurrection of Christ.

Question 13:

Why did the apostles take joy in their suffering?

Student: Dr. Bayer, I'm curious about the nature of the apostolic experience in the early church. We talked a little bit before about how God blesses and shows his approval of people by blessing them. We've talked about how persecution and martyrdom and hardship are in some ways an exception to that general rule caused by the corruption of the world. What I'm curious about is why the apostles, when they were persecuted in the book of Acts, responded with joy? Why did they rather than say, wow, I wish I could have avoided that exception, why did they embrace it and rejoice that they had been counted worthy to suffer for Christ's Name's sake?

Dr. Bayer: That is an important aspect of the understanding of the apostles as followers of Christ, and certainly we need to first quote Peter who said, if you suffer for your own stupidity, don't count yourself as a martyr for Christ. So we need to be very careful that we do not develop a martyrdom complex by being offensive to other people, and then because of their rejection, consider ourselves sufferers for Christ. So we have to be very careful there that we do not misinterpret our own foolishness in this way. But as we testify to Christ, as we live before him, and as these apostles followed in the footsteps of Christ, they certainly understood that God's love is one of discipline and purification. And God's love is one of testifying in and through suffering. Even in Hebrews 5:7, it says that when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that the cup would be removed, that he would not have to undergo that particular form of suffering. It says that his prayer was answered. And how was his prayer answered? It was answered in the resurrection of Jesus rather than in the protection from suffering. So I think there is a profound truth here that we see exemplified by the apostles embracing the reality of persecution and suffering, because this world in its satanic

expression and its human resistance to the authority of God, will oppose the very purpose of the Master, and will certainly oppose those who follow in his footsteps so that there is a particular form of suffering and persecution that comes with being associated with the light. So I would say that is the ministry of the apostles to the followers and to us, to make us sober followers and to preserve us from a health and wealth gospel that would say if you believe enough, you will neither be sick nor suffer, rather than to say commit your ways to the Lord and he will lead you also in and through suffering. So that we understand that our protection is the presence of God and the ministry of God rather than our physical wellbeing. Let me illustrate that, to conclude, with the way Paul accepted his suffering. He was persecuted. He was interrogated. He was under house arrest. And he could have claimed his citizenship, his Roman citizenship, and he could have tried to avoid particular investigation. But he appealed to Caesar; I believe not to protect his own life and his own wellbeing. He appealed to Caesar because he saw an opportunity to testify during and in that investigation, during and in that difficult time. So he was not seeking his own. He was seeking the glory of God, and he yielded to that, not in an unhealthy martyrdom complex, but in a healthy dedication to the glory of God. And that is what we are called to follow and to count our lives in such a way that we would give ourselves to the glory of God.

Dr. Hans F. Bayer (Host) is Professor of New Testament and Chair of the New Testament Department at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Bayer received his M.A. and M.Div. from Ashland Theological Seminary, and his Ph.D. from University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Born and raised in Germany, Dr. Bayer taught for ten years at the German Theological Seminary at Giessen, where he also planted and co-pastored a church. He lectures and preaches regularly throughout the U.S. and Europe and has published numerous English and German monographs, essays, dictionary articles, and commentaries, primarily on the Gospels and the Book of Acts. He is also the author of *A Theology of Mark: The Dynamic Between Christology and Authentic Discipleship* (P&R, 2012).