

Acts: Overview and Background

AUTHORSHIP

The book of Acts was written by Luke, an early follower of Jesus and a later traveling companion with the apostle Paul. It is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, written to the same person - Theophilus - who was likely a Roman government official who had converted to Christianity.

Some scholars argue that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were originally one volume, later separated in church history during the process of canonization. Whether this is true, or it was two volumes, Luke's goal remains the same: He wants to give further evidence of the life of Jesus before, during, and after His time on earth to bolster his friend Theophilus in the faith.

DATE OF AUTHORSHIP

Since the book closes on a rather abrupt note - Paul is left under house arrest in Rome waiting to face trial before Caesar, it is likely Luke wrote the book in and around this time period - C. A.D. 62. If Luke would have written later, as some scholars argue, we would likely have an account of Paul's defense, release, and further gospel preaching, that we are aware of based on other early church writings.

GENRE OF ACTS AND PRINCIPLES FOR READING

Acts falls within the genre of historical narrative. It tells the story of the early church. This means, as we read the book of Acts we have to keep in mind several principles:

- 1. Acts must be read as both descriptive and prescriptive.** As a good historian, Luke is careful to recount both good and bad moments within the early church. There are some high-highs (3,000 people being saved in one day), and some low-lows (Peter and Paul fighting over the salvation of Gentiles and the role of Jewish law). As we read Acts, we have to remember that not everything we read should be applied one-for-one in our local setting. Some of it should, but not all.
- 2. Acts is a story first and foremost about God, not people.** While there are many great men and women who do great things for the Lord, Acts is primarily a book about the work of the Holy Spirit. As we read Acts, we shouldn't strive to find "10 healthy principles for church growth", but rather we should be left in awe of the power of God and more earnest for Him to work the same way in our time.
- 3. Acts doesn't give every detail or record every event.** Luke covers 30+ years of history in 28 chapters. That means much of what He includes, as He was inspired by the Holy Spirit, is sort of a highlight reel of the early church. What you miss in that is the many small and faithful acts of obedience by hundreds, if not thousands of Christians, in establishing the early Church.

DATE OF EVENTS

The book of Acts records much of what transpired during the 30 or so years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The book begins with Jesus and His apostles last meeting together before He goes to the right hand of God the Father (Acts 1:9) in A.D. 33/34, and the book ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome in A.D. 62. This was a crucial 30 years in the history of the Church. In Acts 1, there are 120 believers in one house in the city of Jerusalem. By the time we reach Acts 28, there are thousands of believers, spread out across the known world, congregated in churches, worshiping Jesus and declaring the gospel.

KEY THEMES

The central theme of Acts is the Holy Spirit empowering believers to share the gospel among all people, thus leading to the establishment of Jesus' Church and the fulfillment of God's promises.

The book is also punctuated by smaller themes throughout, including:

- The work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers individually and collectively.
- The ministry of Paul to plant churches where the gospel had not been preached.
- The emphasis on the gospel being for all people - both Jews and Gentiles.
- Christian faithfulness in the midst of suffering and persecution.
- The ministry of the church in both Word and deeds.

THE KNOWN WORLD AT THE TIME OF ACTS

The gospel is first preached in Acts 2 in Jerusalem (far right side of the map), and the book ends with Paul taking the gospel to Rome (far left side of the map).



(From the ESV Global Study Bible)

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- [*Christ Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Acts*](#) by Tony Merida
- [*Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*](#) by I. Howard Marshall
- [*The Book of the Acts: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*](#) by F.F. Bruce
- [*Acts: A 12-Week Study*](#) by Justin S. Holcomb (Crossway)
- [*Practicing the Power*](#) by Sam Storms
- [*Acts Study*](#) by the Bible Project
- [*Sent: Acts*](#) sermon series by The Summit Church RDU