

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

(1)



Author and Date of Composition: St. Luke, A.D. 69-96. The Acts of the Apostles is the author's second volume after his gospel.

Place of composition: Likely Antioch (Syria). As with his gospel, Luke gave no title to his history of the early Church. Ancient writers used similar titles for biographies, such as the "Acts of Alexander the Great" or the "Acts of Hannibal." Early Christians likely adopted this manner of identifying Luke's account of the Christian movement. One of the earliest known witnesses to the title is from St. Irenaeus (A.D. 180), who refers to the book as "Acts of the Apostles." By that time, the name was already well established in Christian usage.

Audience and purpose: In the beginning Christianity was handicapped by the widespread suspicion that the new Way ("the Way" was one of the earliest names for Christianity, Acts 9:2) was a subversive movement because it was "**everywhere spoken against,**" and thus threatened imperial law and order (28:22). Luke aims to counter this perception of the early Church with his history, and to give an accurate and orderly account of the origins of Christianity.

At first Luke's Gospel and Acts comprised a single work. However, in the second century the four gospels were gathered together into one collection and circulated as a whole. Acts was circulated on its own. In this sense, Acts is a kind of thirty-year sequel that follows the progress of the gospel proclamation, and especially Paul's missionary activity from Judea to Rome, ending with Paul proclaiming the Good News in the heart of the empire—Rome.

The birth of the Church; the Apostles' commission; the Ascension (1:1-11)

Between Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension, the Lord appeared to the Apostles and other followers, leaving no doubt that he was alive. Thus, the proclamation of the kingdom of God concerns the events of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Moreover, until Christ's Second Coming, believers are to see themselves as living temporarily in this present age, for they belong to the heavenly kingdom and anticipate its full realization in the age to come.

Before his Ascension, Jesus instructs the Apostles not to leave Jerusalem until they are "**clothed with power from on high**" (Luke 24:49). The Apostles ask if Jesus is speaking of Israel's restoration (1:6). For the Apostles, it is perhaps the last glimmer of their excitement for an earthly kingdom, with themselves as its "chief officers." However, they would soon devote themselves to the proclamation of God's kingdom, which men and women enter by repentance and faith.

Matthias replaces Judas Iscariot (1:15-26)

To fill the vacancy caused by the treachery and death of Judas Iscariot, an acceptable replacement must have been an associate of the Lord and the Apostles from the time of John the Baptist's preaching to the day of the Lord's Ascension; and he must have been a witness to the Resurrection.

Pentecost: the descent of the Holy Spirit (2:1-2:36)

For the Jews, Pentecost or the "Feast of Weeks," was the fiftieth day from the first Sunday after Passover, when the first fruits of the wheat harvest were presented to God (Exodus 34:22). Later, Pentecost became the anniversary of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1).

But on this particular Pentecost, Peter proclaims the fulfillment of God's purpose. Now that Christ has been "**made manifest at the end of the times**" (Peter 1:20), his followers need look no further and inquire (as the prophets had done) as to the person or time for the coming of the Christ. The "last days" have already begun with Jesus, and are to be consummated by his Second Coming. Indeed, in quoting the Prophet Joel, Peter makes plain the prediction of God's Spirit being poured out on the whole human race—"on all flesh."

Peter's proclamation begins

Early apostolic preaching comprised four elements: 1) announcement that the age of fulfillment has arrived; 2) an account of the ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus; 3) citations of Old Testament Scriptures fulfilled by Jesus; and 4) the call to repentance.

The first Christian Church (2:41-47)

The experience of living together as a community and sharing their goods with one another offered a deep sense of unity among the early Christians. Of course, such zeal for the faith could be maintained only when this unity was exceptionally active. For as soon as the initial enthusiasm began to wane, the attempt to maintain the communal life was met with difficulties.

Arrest of Peter and John (3:2-4:4)

The Temple authorities intervene to maintain order after the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. The Sadducees especially object to the Apostles' preaching that Jesus has risen from the dead, as they reject any teaching of an afterlife, considering it an innovation of the Pharisees.

Peter and John are arrested, and the next morning the Sanhedrin interrogates them. While the Apostles were technically *defendants*, they soon took the offensive. Peter dares to preach the gospel to his judges, reminding them of the well-known Old Testament psalm text, "**The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner**" (Psalm 118:22).

Debate in the Sanhedrin (4:13-17)

How could these untrained fishermen who are accused of breaking the law for healing the cripple on the Sabbath, defend themselves against the Sanhedrin? On the other hand, how could the Sanhedrin set them free to continue teaching and healing in the name of Jesus? The Sanhedrin thought they had settled the matter with Jesus' condemnation and execution. Unable to proceed, the Sanhedrin dismisses Peter and John. Yet neither on this nor on any other subsequent occasion do the authorities try to disprove the Apostles' claim that Jesus has risen from the dead.

The deceit and death of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-6)

Peter concedes that the property belonging to Ananias and Sapphira was theirs to keep or sell as they wished. But to pretend they were donating *all* their property, when in fact they were holding back a part, was akin to lying to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, what is an offense against the community is an offense against the Spirit of God. "**Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are**" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

The court's decision (5:33-40)

Once again, the Sanhedrin considers sentencing the Apostles to death, but Gamaliel the Elder advises them to take no hostile action. If the “Way” was not of God, he reasons, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, the Sanhedrin would not wish to be found fighting against the Lord.

Persecution and expansion; Stephen; the appointing of the Seven (6:1-9:31)

The nascent Church was largely comprised of Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists) who had once been exiled, and Hebrew-speaking Jews who had not been exiled. In this mix, the complaint arose that Hellenist widows were being neglected in the daily charitable distribution of food. The Apostles acted quickly and called the community together to select seven men to administer the charitable provisions. The seven were installed with prayer and the imposition of hands. These men became the first *diakonia* or “ministers of service.”

Stephen arouses opposition (6:8-15)

The “great wonders and signs” that one of the *diakonia*, Stephen, worked among the people provoked the Sanhedrin. They thought his arguments constituted an attack on the law of Moses and thus was an attack on God.

Stephen's reply to the high priest's question: “Is this so?” (7:1-8:1)

The Jewish leaders' refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah was typical of their attitude toward the Prophets. Listening to Stephen, the judges are enraged, especially when Stephen flings the charge of blasphemy back on them. They take off their outer garments to stone Stephen. Nearby a young man named Saul (Paul) minds their cloaks and robes. It was the beginning of the campaign of repression against the Jerusalem Church.

Simon Magus is baptized; Peter and John visit Samaria (8:9-24)

Impressed by Philip's ministry, Simon the sorcerer submits to baptism; however, despite his initial fervor, Simon instead craves the same power that Philip has to produce “signs.” Simon even offered to “buy” from Peter and John a share of their power. From this base desire of Simon's comes the term “simony” (the buying or selling of a church office or favor).

The Apostles return to Jerusalem; Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:25-40)

The Ethiopian eunuch that Philip encounters along the Jerusalem-Gaza road is reading aloud from his copy of the Book of Isaiah. At that time it was common to read aloud so that more difficult words could be sounded out and understood.

Conversion of Saul of Tarsus (9:1-31)

With the high priest's commission in hand to arrest Christians on sight, the Pharisee Saul set out for Damascus and had almost arrived when suddenly a light overwhelms him. As he lies on the ground, he hears, “**Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?**” As truly as Jesus chose the Apostles, now he chooses Saul. Saul's conversion means that whereas he had planned to arrest the followers of Jesus, he now went to the synagogues of Damascus to preach Jesus.

The Apostles were naturally wary of Saul's conversion, that is, until Barnabas—a man known for his integrity—steps in and vouches for him. Note: ‘Saul’ is also known as ‘Paul,’ which was his Roman name since he was a Roman citizen from birth (13:9).

Cornelius' vision; Peter's vision (10:1-8)

In Caesarea, the centurion Cornelius was a Gentile “God fearer;” that is, he was attracted to the Jewish faith and its worship, but was unwilling to become fully initiated. Such God fearers in fact formed the nucleus of the early Christian communities.

Peter's vision of animals descending on a sheet before him and the command to slaughter them for food, ran counter to Peter's Jewish sensibilities. Unclean animals were forbidden, and even "clean" animals had to be slaughtered with ritual propriety. But with the vision Peter later declares in vs. 28 his understanding of the vision; that after the Resurrection of Jesus, just as there are no longer "clean" and "unclean" animals, so also "**God has taught me to call no man common or unclean**" (10:28).

Messengers from Cornelius arrive at Joppa (10:17-48)

When Peter accompanies Cornelius' messengers to preach the gospel, no one suggests that Cornelius should be circumcised. Thus Cornelius' conversion sets an important precedent when the question of the circumcision of Gentile believers was later raised at the Jerusalem Council (15:8-9).

Peter's action endorsed at Jerusalem (11:1-18)

The news of Peter entering a Gentile house in Caesarea aroused great alarm in Jerusalem. If news got around that the leader of the Apostles himself was fraternizing with Gentiles, it would threaten the good will that was enjoyed among Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Peter vigorously defends the truth made known to him earlier, that God makes no distinction between believing Gentiles and believing Jews.

Antioch becomes a Christian base (11:19-30)

The Gentiles of Antioch, who worshipped the gods Artemis and Apollo, were intrigued by the Christian message. When news of the conversion of those in Antioch reached Jerusalem, a delegation—headed by Barnabas—was sent to continue their evangelization.

Herod Agrippa I and the Church (12:1-24)

The Jerusalem Church continued to resist any further diminishment of their former Jewish faith and its traditions. Thus for some twenty years more, they continued to enjoy general toleration from Jewish authorities. Still, Herod Agrippa arrested Peter for his fraternizing with the Gentiles. But Peter miraculously escapes and makes his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

Arrival at Pisidian Antioch (13:44-52)

In Pisidian Antioch (southern Turkey) a great crowd of Gentiles enters the synagogue, annoying the Jews, who believed their synagogue was being taken over. In the end, Paul and Barnabas were forced to leave Pisidian Antioch, but returned a few months later.

Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (14:1-28)

As they did in Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas visited Jewish synagogues and preached the gospel in Iconium (central Turkey). Paul and Barnabas then made their way to Lystra and Derbe (southern Turkey), where in Lystra Paul commands a lame man to "**stand upright on your feet.**" Upon seeing the man instantly healed, the people of Lystra think the gods have visited them. For the local legend was that the gods Zeus and Hermes had once visited them in the likeness of human beings. So the people hail Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes, and quickly prepare to offer a sacrifice of oxen. Horrified, Paul and Barnabas rushed out to protest. Only with some difficulty did Paul and Barnabas finally succeed in preventing such "honors" being given to them.

The following day Paul and Barnabas set out for Derbe some sixty miles southeast of Lystra. With prayer and fasting they commend the young churches there and their leaders to the Lord and then continue on to other cities in Turkey: Phrygia, Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia. Their missionary tour thus far has taken the better part of one year.

The Mass of the Early Church

Following Pentecost, **“Peter and John went up to the temple to pray . . . all with one accord in Solomon’s portico”** (Acts 3:1; 5:12).

After the momentous events of the Ascension and Pentecost, the Apostles continued to practice Judaism as before: praying in the Temple; attending synagogue and listening to the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and the *drasha* (Hebrew, “homily”) that followed.

However, as the Apostles began to preach the gospel—the Good News—they also interpreted the Old Testament prophecies as having been fulfilled in Jesus the Christ: **“When they arrived at Salamis** (largest city in Cyprus), **they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues”** (Acts 13:5). As a result, by the close of the first century, Jewish leaders began to exclude Jewish Christians (*minim*) from the synagogues for their unorthodox beliefs.

First century Jews used the pejorative term *minim* (Hebrew, pl., “heretics,” “apostates”) for Jewish converts to Christianity, but not to Gentile converts because they were not “among the people.” Still, first century rabbis lived on generally friendly terms with the Jewish Christians, who would have continued to live within the Jewish community. However, relations between the Jews and the Jewish Christians soon worsened as new converts began proselytizing their belief in Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Messiah. Such preaching was seen as sowing division among the Jewish people, a threat more dangerous to the unity of Judaism than the influence of pagan worship. The prominent Rabbi Tarfon of the first century declared, *“The writings of the minim deserve to be burned, even though the holy name of God occurs therein, for paganism is less dangerous than ‘minut;’ the former fails to recognize the truth of Judaism from want of knowledge, but the latter denies what it fully knows.”*

Early worship spaces

Since there were no special meeting places available for the young Church, the faithful came together in little groups for a common evening meal in houses with sufficient room. It was during these common evening meals that Christians celebrated the Eucharist: **“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”** (Acts 2:42). **“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people”** (Acts 2:46).

In antiquity Jews regularly “broke bread” and consumed wine during the evening meal. The father of the house took a piece of bread, pronounced a short prayer of blessing, broke it and distributed it to the guests at table. Likewise the father said a short prayer of blessing over the cup of wine, acknowledging God as the creator of the fruit of the vine. Following the Lord’s example at the Last Supper, Christians incorporated the Eucharistic celebration—the “breaking of bread”—with prayers and in the context of a meal: 1) preparing bread and wine; 2) thanksgiving prayer; 3) the breaking of bread; 4) communion.

St. Paul in fact gives us the earliest recorded account of the Eucharist as it was celebrated in the first century: **“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also a cup, after supper, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes”** (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Since the Lord commanded the disciples at the Last Supper to “**Do this in remembrance of me,**” the first Christians believed that the Lord was truly “**in their midst**” in the fellowship of the Last Supper (Matthew 18:20; Luke 24:41-43; Acts 10:41). Indeed, they believed this sacred meal anticipated the messianic banquet which the Lord spoke about in his parables (Matthew 22:10).

Initially the food items for the meal were supplied from the provisions brought by the well-to-do and were shared with everyone gathered. But in time abuses crept in. Instead of waiting for the start of the supper, the people began to divide into groups and selfishly consume their own food while drinking to excess. Under such conditions the celebrant or “leader of prayer,” could find himself saying the words of consecration over the bread and wine and scarcely be noticed. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Corinthians: “**When you meet together, is it not the Lord’s supper that you eat? For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the Church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I command you in this? No, I will not**” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

Ultimately, the communal meal was eliminated, and the prayers of blessing over the bread and wine were brought together into one solemn prayer of consecration. The precise date for when the meal disappeared differed regionally, but by the second century the separation was complete. Now with the communal meal gone, the space for such gatherings became more of a religious assembly. Now all that was necessary was a table for the prayers over the bread and wine.

Also, since the “breaking of the bread” need not be limited to the evening hours—the usual time for supper—the celebration could be moved to another time. The obvious choice became the early hours of the first day of the week in remembrance of the Lord’s Resurrection. The synagogue services were also conducted in the morning, albeit on Saturdays (the Sabbath). In fact, as the Christians slowly fell away from the temple worship with its daily sacrifices, the services of synagogue liturgy fit for more easily with the celebration of the Eucharist.

Dura Europos, a town in eastern Syria where the earliest “house church” (A.D. 232) was discovered in the 1930s, complete with a baptistery and a deep stone tub, and framed by a wall fresco of *The Good Shepherd*.

