

Lesson 3 - The Acts of the Apostles

Introduction

From the opening verses of Luke's writing we learn about his purpose for writing his account of Jesus and the early church. The Christian church has Luke's writing separated into two books, The Gospel According to Luke and The Acts of the Apostles. Open by reading Luke 1:1-4 and then Acts 1:1-8 and then pray thanking God for this man that He chose to record these two books to help you know Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church. Ask God to help you as you continue to study His holy word, that you might know God, and your Savior Jesus Christ, and the indwelling Holy Spirit better.

Hermeneutical Insight: The Canon of the New Testament

The focus of this hermeneutics lesson is the way in which the NT message was established as the canon of Scripture. The word canon is from a Greek word (*kanōn*) that was used to describe a "ruler" for measuring or drawing, as well as the "measure" itself that was used as a standard for life's conduct. The Apostle Paul used forms of the word canon in Gal. 6:16 and 2 Cor. 10:13, 15-16. The word canon was first used to represent the body of NT books considered as sacred in the fourth century by Athanasius in a letter that he circulated. Athanasius ended his list of the 27 NT books by saying "nothing be added to nor anything taken away from these." By the second half of the fourth century, consensus was reached concerning what was to be included in the NT as we know it today.

At the time of Christ's teaching, the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures were considered sacred. Jesus honored the Hebrew Scriptures in His teaching, and said He did not come to abolish or dismantle the Law, but to fulfill its message. In fact, as Jesus taught, He commanded His followers to "go beyond" the Law as they knew it, in His Sermon on the Mount. At the time of Christ, the canon of what the Protestant church later called the OT, was in two forms, the sacred writings in Hebrew and the Septuagint in Greek that also includes books written during the Second Temple era. The LXX contains some books that the Christian church leaders decided not to include in the Bible used by the Protestant church, while the Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church includes the "extra" books found in the LXX. (These include the following: 1 Esdras, Judith, Tobit, 1-4 Maccabees, Odes, Sirach, Psalms of Solomon, Baruch, and the Letter of Jeremiah.)

When the apostles mentioned Scripture in their writing they were referring to the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter wrote of Paul's writing in 2 Pet. 3:16 and Peter associated what Paul wrote with "the rest of Scriptures." Read Peter's comment and what the Apostle John wrote at the end of Rev. 22:6-8, 18-19. What do these verses say about the apostles' writing?

In the centuries before Christ, written words were recorded on stone, metal, or on parchment scrolls, of which the longest ever found was 32 feet. In the first century a new "style" of book called the codex was being used, that is similar to books published in modern times. The codex was used for note taking, text books, and commentaries. The codex was sometimes made with sheets of wax that could be reused or by using thin

veneers of wood bound together with leather straps, although a “proper” book was in the form of a scroll well into the third century.¹ In the first century the Gospels, the book of Acts, and Paul’s epistles were widely distributed among the early Christian church. These writings were all accepted among church leaders. Later, other books were added to what became known as the “canon” of the NT. The leaders decided that the books of the canon had to be written by men who were apostles of Christ, or had been closely associated with one of the apostles, as with Luke and the author of Hebrews.

Marcion, who taught in the mid-second century, was the first to ask the church to compile a list of sacred Christian writings that later became known as the NT. Marcion was not considered to be “orthodox” in his beliefs by other church leaders and he lost the respect of the church fathers for a number of reasons, one being that he, along with the Gnostics, did not believe that the Hebrew Scriptures should be included with the NT writings.² The oldest known “list” of NT books was found in 1740 in Milan, Italy by Ludovico Muratori and was called the Muratorian Canon or the Muratorian Fragment. Evidence within the writing has led scholars to believe that the list was compiled at the end of the second century. It is called a fragment because the beginning of the list of NT books is missing.

The NT canon was accepted as the authority for faith by the early church fathers and included an understanding of what was the “correct” teaching or what was “orthodox.” Several councils took place where debate determined what books would be included in the NT. The establishment of the canon also addressed the debate concerning the identity of Jesus. Years later the formation of the Apostle’s Creed focused on the identity of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, having been compiled to confront the heresy that had penetrated the church, as the church fathers took seriously their calling to guard the flock of believers so that they would not be led astray by false teaching. Each phrase in the Creed addressed an area of heretical teaching. (The word “catholic” does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the “universal” church of the Lord Jesus Christ.)

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

¹ Loveday Alexander, “Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, Richard Bauckham, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 73-75.

² Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 62.

When a group of nearly 300 evangelical leaders met in 1978 to formulate the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy they included a section on their document on the canon. This included “No new revelation (as distinct from Spirit-given understanding of existing revelation) will be given until Christ comes again. The canon was created in principle by divine inspiration. The Church’s part was to discern the canon which God created, not to devise one of its own.”

1. There are many ways to approach a study of Luke’s second volume. To begin with, it would be so worthwhile to read through the book of Acts in one or two sittings, to see the context of the book, especially in regard to the presence of the Holy Spirit and the difference that the indwelling Holy Spirit made in the life of Jesus’ followers. After taking the time to read through Acts (as the rest of the lesson will call the book), meditate on what you have read and write out a brief response to God’s message that was recorded for you. Open in **prayer** seeking God’s truth to be revealed to you as you study Acts.

The early church called Luke’s writing “The Acts of the Apostles” because that is what Luke presented: the actions of those whom Jesus called His apostles. (Look at the word studies for these two key words, “acts” and “apostles” in the word studies in Question 2.) Actions can include words that are spoken as well as the actions themselves, leading to an investigation of what the apostles said and what the apostle did. This could be one possible way to approach the study of Acts. Acts is a historical narrative and in comparison with the writing found in OT narratives, it is different. Israel was used to the narrator “telling” about events and often the main characters are not directly quoted, as their life is recounted for the reader. Not so in the first five books of the NT, where Jesus is directly quoted in the Gospels and the apostles are quoted in Acts. I once studied the twenty sermons in the book of Acts, beginning with Jesus’ words delivered to His apostles (in Acts 1:4-8) and ending with Paul’s words that he spoke while he was in Rome (in Acts 28:17-31). This is an excellent way to discover how the message of the gospel spread after Jesus’ ascension, as Luke shared the messages preached by several of the apostles. Jesus had commanded His followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching people to observe all that He had commanded them. Jesus then told His followers that the message was to go to Jerusalem in Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth. You will be asked to look at some of the sermons recorded in Acts, within these regions that Jesus commanded. Look at the passages below and choose **one** from each “category” to study. It is always important to read a passage in its context, so while the verses will be given for the immediate context, it might be helpful to read what comes before that as well. As you read the passages given, answer the following questions: Who spoke? What were the circumstances that came before the speaking, or when did this take place? What were the main points of the “sermon”? What were the instructions given? Who comprised the audience that listened? What were the responses from those who heard the message?

In Jerusalem:

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|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Acts 2:14-41 | b. Acts 3:12 – 4:4 | c. Acts 4:5-12 |
| d. Acts 4:23-31 | e. Acts 5:25-33 | f. Acts 7:1-54 |
| g. Acts 11:1-18 | h. Acts 15:5-31 | i. Acts 21:37 – 22:1-24 |

In Samaria:

- a. Acts 8:5-25

To the Uttermost Parts of the Earth:

- | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| a. Acts 8:26-40 | b. Acts 10:34-48 | c. Acts 13:14-50 |
| d. Acts 17:19-34 | e. Acts 19:1-10 | f. Acts 20:17-36 |
| g. Acts 24:10-21 | h. Acts 25:24 – 26:1-32 | i. Acts 28:17-31 |

2. Please examine these word studies for the **key words** found in this lesson.

Strong's # and Transliteration:	Definition from Strong's Concordance, unless written in italics:	Use of the word in other Scriptures:
652 <i>apostolos</i> <i>apostólois</i> Acts 1:2	Apostles , sent ones, a delegate; an ambassador of the Gospel; officially a commissioner of Christ (in the early church, one with miraculous powers)	Eph. 4:11
1411 <i>dunamis</i> <i>dúnamin</i> Acts 1:8	Power , force (literally or figuratively); specially, miraculous power (usually by implication, a miracle itself)	Acts 10:38
3144 <i>martus</i> <i>mártures</i> Acts 1:8	Witnesses , a record, martyr. <i>This word meant to remember something and then share information.</i>	1 Pet. 5:1

3340 <i>metanoe metanoeésate</i> Acts 2:38	Repent , to think differently or afterwards, reconsider (morally, feel compunction). A compound word from the words “after” and “to know.”	Acts 17:30
859 <i>aphesis áphesin</i> Acts 2:38	Forgiveness , freedom; (figuratively) pardon: deliverance, liberty, remission	Eph. 1:7
3870 <i>parakaleo parekálei</i> Acts 2:40	Exhorting , to call near, i.e. invite, invoke, ... consolation: call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhortation, pray	Acts 11:23
2842 <i>koinonia koinonía</i> Acts 2:42	Fellowship , partnership, lit. participation, (to) communicate (-ation), communion, distribution	Phil. 2:1
134 <i>aineo ainoúntes</i> Acts 2:47	Praising , to praise God; in Scripture this word only refers to praising God	Luke 2:13
4991 <i>soteria soteería</i> Acts 4:12	Salvation , rescue or safety (physically or morally): deliver, health, save, saving	Acts 13:26, 47
4100 <i>pisteuo pisteúonta</i> Acts 10:43	Believes , to have faith (in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing), credit; by implication, to entrust, especially one’s spiritual well-being to Christ	Acts 16:31
4567 <i>Sataná Satanás</i> Acts 26:18	Satan , the accuser, i.e. the devil: a Hebrew word used in the NT	Matt. 4:10

3. Besides the apostles who are introduced in the Gospels, Luke also introduces others who were important in the early church. One way to learn about someone who is in the Bible is to look at a concordance to see where the person’s name is mentioned. A concordance shares where their name appears, but not where pronouns are used to take the place of the person’s name, like the words he, him, or her. Choose **three** people listed below and look for information about them, their role in the church, and what this meant to others. Try to choose passages that you had not studied in Question 1.

- a. Stephen: Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-60
- b. The Ethiopian: Acts 8:25-39 (It was recorded after the time of the writing of the NT that this man “took” the gospel to northern Africa.)
- c. Paul: Acts 7:58-60; Acts 8:1-3; Acts 9:1-22 (This is only the beginning of Paul’s story.)
- d. Barnabas: Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-31; 11:22-30; 13:1-5 (More is written about Barnabas in Acts.)
- e. Cornelius: Acts 10:1-8, 20-33, 44-48 (In the first century a “god-fearer” was a Gentile convert to Judaism.)
- f. James: Acts 15 (This James is the “brother” of Jesus, and not the brother of the Apostle John. Glance back to see what is said in John 7:1-10 about Jesus’ family.)

- g. Timothy: Acts 16:1-3; 17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4 (These are all of the references to Timothy in Acts.)
- h. Lydia: Acts 16:14-15, 40
- i. Aquila and Priscilla: Acts 18:1-3, 24-28
- j. Apollos: Acts 18:24 – Acts 19:1
 - 1.)

 - 2.)

 - 3.)

What is one key word you would use to associate with each of these people? You could write that word in the margin.

What would God want you to remember about one of the people that you studied? How can you apply this principle in your own life?

4. When Jesus spent His last evening with His disciples before He was crucified, He shared with them about the Holy Spirit and what this would mean to them as His followers. During the time before Christ, the Holy Spirit “came” upon certain individuals for a specific purpose and for a specific period of time. One example is seen in the life of David, who was anointed in preparation for service when he was young, because God chose him to lead Israel. This changed significantly when Christ promised His followers that they would receive the Holy Spirit after He was no longer with them, and that the Spirit would indwell His disciples. Jesus said the Holy Spirit was a teacher, a comforter, the One who would guide believers into the truth, and bring conviction of sin, of righteousness, and of the coming judgment. In the passages below Luke specifically mentioned the Holy Spirit. Look at these passages to see how the Holy Spirit ministered among the early church after Christ ascended to heaven and summarize **five** of these in the space below. From reading what took place as the gospel message spread from Jerusalem,

to Samaria, to the uttermost part of the earth, how did Jesus' promises about the Holy Spirit come to fulfillment among His followers?

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|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| a. Acts 2:1-21 | b. Acts 4:1-12 | c. Acts 4:31 | d. Acts 5:1-11 |
| e. Acts 5:27-32 | f. Acts 6:5 | g. Acts 8:29, 39 | h. Acts 9:31 |
| i. Acts 10:19, 38 | j. Acts 11:15-16 | k. Acts 13:1-4 | l. Acts 15:8, 28 |
| m. Acts 19:1-6 | n. Acts 20:28 | o. Acts 21:4, 11 | p. Acts 28:25 |

1.)

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Stop to meditate on what you have learned about the Holy Spirit from Luke's writing and what this means to you today. How does this affect your faith in Jesus?

5. Remember that Acts was actually a part of a two-volume set of writing and at the beginning of Luke's Gospel you find a declaration about his writing. Look at Luke 1:1-4 so that you can write out the purpose for his writing below. Questions about Theophilus have never been answered, although many have put forward ideas about who this man was. Some say that Theophilus could have been a "sponsor" for Luke so that Luke could take the time to write. Others say that Theophilus could have been Paul's defense counsel when he went before the Roman Caesar. L. Alexander suggests that if Theophilus was

Luke's patron his writing would have become the foundation of the library for the early church so that the writing would have a wider audience than Luke originally considered.³

Book: The Acts of the Apostles
Author:
Recipient/s:
Occasion:

6. After spending time in the book of Acts, you will now review. Turn to the Appendix, on page 127, and think back over what you have learned about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in Acts. Record between **five** and **ten** truths about each and meditate on how these truths have ministered to your spirit as you read the Scriptures in the lesson. Now consider what you have learned from Acts about sin and its consequences, the gospel and salvation, what it means to be a disciple, and what is said to the church, by reviewing these doctrines on the sheet in the Appendix on page 141. Think about the impact these truths have upon your spirit, and how this is relevant to you.

Did you memorize a verse that you read in Acts? What truth does God want you to commit to memory from Acts? Ask God to help you with this, He delights to have you treasure His word in your spirit.

Memory Verse for Lesson 3:

Acts presents a unique record about the early Christian church. Read these passages and reflect on the relationships that the believers had with the Lord and with each other, and how the church was being established among those who followed Christ.

a. Acts 2:37-47

b. Acts 20:28-36

Based on what you have learned about the early church, how does your role in the church reflect what is taught about the church?

Your closing prayer might be directed with the acronym ACTS: praying ADORATION to God, CONFESSING your sins, THANKING Him for all that He has done, and in SUPPLICATION for yourself and others.

³ Ibid., Alexander, "Ancient Book Production," 103.

