

Introduction to the Book of Acts

by Chuck Swindoll

WHO WROTE THE BOOK?

The title of the book of Acts comes from the Greek word *praxis*, a word often used in early Christian literature to describe the great deeds of the apostles or other significant believers. This title accurately reflects the contents of the book, which is a series of vignettes chronicling the lives of key apostles (especially Peter and Paul) in the decades immediately following Christ's ascension into heaven.

Luke's identification as the author of this work was unquestioned throughout ancient times. It shows a clear progression from the gospel according to Luke, picking up just where that book left off. An ancient prologue to Luke's gospel indicates that Luke was first a follower of the apostles and then became close with Paul.¹ This is exactly how the book of Acts unfolds, beginning with Peter and ending with Paul. Luke even began to speak in the first person plural in the latter portion of Acts, as he traveled the Roman Empire alongside Paul (Acts 16:10).

WHERE ARE WE?

Acts ends abruptly with Paul imprisoned in Rome, waiting to bring his appeal before Caesar. It is worth noting that in this history of the early Christian church, Luke mentioned neither Paul's death (AD 64–68) nor the persecution of Christians that broke out under Nero (AD 64). More than likely, Luke completed the book before either of these events occurred, sometime between AD 60 and AD 62, while Paul sat in prison, awaiting the resolution of his appeal.

WHY IS ACTS SO IMPORTANT?

Acts is the only biblical book that chronicles the history of the church immediately after Jesus's ascension. As such, it provides us with a valuable account of how the church was able to grow and spread out from Jerusalem into the rest of the Roman Empire. In only three decades, a small group of frightened believers in Jerusalem transformed into an empire-wide movement of people who had committed their lives to Jesus Christ, ending on a high note with Paul on the verge of taking the gospel to the highest government official in the land—the Emperor of Rome.

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Acts can be neatly divided into two sections, the first dealing primarily with the ministry of Peter in Jerusalem and Samaria (Acts 1–12) and the second following Paul on his missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 13–28). Acts is significant for chronicling the spread of the gospel, not only geographically but also culturally. It records the transition from taking the gospel to an exclusively Jewish audience—with Peter preaching to a small group in the Upper Room—to the gospel going out among the Gentiles, primarily under the ministry of the apostle Paul. The transition is best illustrated by Peter's vision in which he heard a voice telling him, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (10:15). This led Peter to then share the

gospel with many Gentiles. The lesson? God wants His message of hope and salvation to extend to all people—“in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (1:8).

HOW DO I APPLY THIS?

What opportunities for sharing the gospel can you take advantage of in the days to come? This question should ring through your mind as you page through the book of Acts. In virtually every chapter, apostles such as Peter and Paul powerfully present the gospel to individuals and groups of people. The apostles portrayed in Acts shine with evangelistic zeal, showing a striking transition from the often misguided disciples of the Gospels. Clearly the apostles’ faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus produced a noticeable change in their hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Too often, our own lives do not reflect that sort of change. We struggle with fears over how others will react to our faith or with breaking out of our own routine long enough to invest in the life of someone else who needs the gospel. Allow Acts to encourage you to walk more closely with God so that you might make Christ’s name known with the boldness and the zeal of the apostles.¹

ACTS

	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold; margin-right: 5px;">AD 30</div> <div style="text-align: left; padding: 5px;"> <p>The Church Established at “Jerusalem”</p> <p>The church is . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> born tested purified strengthened <p>CHAPTERS 1–7</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="text-align: left; padding: 5px;"> <p>The Church Enlarged to “Judea and Samaria”</p> <p>The gospel is . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> spreading multiplying changing lives breaking traditions <p>CHAPTERS 8–12</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; font-weight: bold; margin-left: 5px;">AD 60</div> <div style="text-align: left; padding: 5px;"> <p>The Church Expanded to “the Ends of the Earth”</p> <p>The witness is . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> extended received and rejected changing lives unifying Jews and Gentiles <p>CHAPTERS 13–28</p> </div> </div>	
Leaders	The apostle Peter		The apostle Paul	
Emphasis	Jewish evangelism	Transition		Gentile evangelism
Time	AD 33 (1:1–2:47)	AD 36 (8:1)	AD 40 (9:32)	AD 46 (13:1) AD 57 (21:18)
Scope	City evangelism	National evangelism		Cross-cultural evangelism
Theme	In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’s followers carry the good news of Christ to the world.			
Key Verse	1:8			
Christ in Acts	Jesus is the glorified, enthroned Savior, who continues His ministry in the world by means of the Holy Spirit working through His disciples until He returns (1:7–9).			

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¹ <https://www.insight.org/resources/bible/the-history-of-the-early-church/acts>

The book of Acts
words to His apostles in Acts 1:8.²

² <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-acts/>

The Original Founder's Week

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

Devotional

If you are a regular listener to Moody radio, you know about the annual Founder's Week Bible Conference held at Moody Church every February in Chicago. What you may not know is that this historic conference started in the 1890s when D.L. Moody asked that the students at the Institute be dismissed from class on his birthday (February 5). After his death in 1899, the leaders of Moody Bible Institute began holding a yearly Bible conference during the first week of February in honor of his birthday. Back then it was one of many such Bible conferences; today it is almost the only one left in America. Without question Founder's Week has become America's premier Bible conference.

But it wasn't the first. That honor must be given to the meeting Jesus held on Easter Sunday afternoon with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke tells us that "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). What a message that would have been. You might say that the first Bible conference lasted 40 days and had only one speaker: the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of listening to many people teach on many topics, the disciples listened to the Lord give His final instructions before ascending to heaven.

By the way, Acts 1:3 is the only place that tells us that the period between the Resurrection and the Ascension was precisely 40 days. The number 40 seems to have special significance in Scripture:

- The rains fell for 40 days and 40 nights before Noah's flood (Genesis 7:4).
- Moses spent 40 days in God's presence on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 24:18).
- The 12 spies spent 40 days exploring the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:25).
- A Generation wandered in the wilderness 40 years (Numbers 14:32).
- Jonah warned Nineveh of coming judgment in 40 days (Jonah 4:4).
- Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days (Luke 4:2)
- Jesus appeared to the disciples for 40 days after His resurrection (Acts 1:3).

The New Bible Dictionary suggests the following meaning for the number forty:

Forty is associated with almost each new development in the history of God's mighty acts, especially of salvation, e.g. the Flood, redemption from Egypt, Elijah and the prophetic era, the advent of Christ and the birth of the church.

You might say it this way: When you see the number forty, pay attention because it usually means that God is about to do something significant in the world. Christ was tempted for 40 days at the beginning of His ministry and appeared to the disciples for 40 days at the end of His ministry.

And so we come to the last days of Jesus Christ on the earth. For 33 years He has made the earth his home. Now the time draws near to leave. We're beyond the cross, past the suffering, the torture, the mocking, and even beyond the resurrection. We're in that mysterious forty-day period that we'd like to know more about.

Christ is leaving soon, not to return for at least 2000 years. No longer does He speak to thousands but now to only a few. To them is entrusted the responsibility to take the message around the world. To them is given the Gospel—the good news—the best news in history.

Soon enough the incredible burden will fall on their shoulders alone. If they fail, the Christian movement will disappear before it ever begins. In human terms the future of the gospel is in their hands.

Knowing all this, what does Christ talk about? The weather, sports, the latest gossip from Rome? Hardly. He tells that little band of men what they need to know to make it after He's gone. During the 40 days between the resurrection and His ascension into heaven, He accomplished two important goals:

He proved that He was alive.

He prepared them for the future.¹

Open it

1. What are some trends or products that seemed to be an instant sensation when they were introduced but lost their luster as time passed?

Read it

Acts 1:1-15

¹ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1998-02-01-40-Amazing-Days-The-Original-Founders-Week/>

Explore it

2. Who is the recipient of the book?
3. What types of things did Luke write about in the first book?
4. What did Jesus do during the forty days between the resurrection and ascension?
5. What command did Jesus give His disciples?

Apply it

IN MY FIRST BOOK...

A famous Hollywood producer once said that for a movie to be successful, it must start with an earthquake and work up to a climax. Luke certainly didn't follow that formula when he wrote the book of Acts. Except for the ascension of Jesus Christ, events recorded in Acts 1 are anything but dramatic. After all, what is exciting about a business meeting? Then why record these events? Why didn't Luke just start with the story of Pentecost? For several reasons.

To begin with, Luke was writing volume two of a work that started with what we call the gospel of Luke (see Luke 1:1–4), and he had to begin with the proper salutation and introduction. We don't know who Theophilus was or even if he was a believer, but Luke's salutation suggests that he may have been an important Roman official (see Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Likely Theophilus was a Christian, or at least a seeker, who was carefully studying the Christian faith. His name means "friend of God," and we hope he lived up to his name.

But even more important, Luke had to build a bridge between his gospel and the book of Acts (Luke 24: 50–53). At the close of his gospel, he had left the believers in the temple, praising God. Now he had to pick up the story and explain what happened next. Imagine how confused you would be if, in reading your New Testament, you turned the last page of the gospel of John and discovered—Romans! "How did the church get to Rome?" you would ask yourself; the answer is found in the book of Acts. The book of Acts is also the account of the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the church. The gospel of Luke records what Jesus "began both to do and teach" in His human body, and the book of Acts tells us what Jesus continued to do and teach through His spiritual body, the church.²

² Wiersbe, Warren W.. *Be Dynamic (Acts 1-12) (The BE Series Commentary)* (pp. 19-20). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

6. Luke had written two books. The Gospel of Luke centered in on the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Book of Acts focused on the spread of the gospel and establishment of the church after Jesus' departure from earth. Why would both books have been important for the original audience? Why are they still important for readers today?

7. Read Luke 24:50–53. What would we know about the church from this passage? Skim through the headings of Acts in your Bible. What things wouldn't we know about the church if Luke's Gospel is all that we had?

8. If someone was to write a gospel about you, what things would fill the pages? What would be the major headings and what might a stranger think of what they read?

THEOPHIL-WHO??

Luke begins his second volume by dedicating it to Theophilus. Luke addresses the same recipient in the prologue to his Gospel. That Theophilus is called "most honorable" (Luke 1: 3) implies that he was a Roman official (cf. Acts 24:2; 26:25). And based on Luke's intention of providing more "certainty" to Theophilus (Luke 1: 4), he seems to have been a Christian seeker or perhaps a young believer.³

9. How would Luke's writings have brought Theophilus more certainty to his beliefs in Christ? How has your study of Scriptures grown your faith and certainty about Christ and his claims?

³ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 503-507). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

10. Why are the first two verses of Acts 1 foundational to an understanding of the rest of the Book of Acts?

"...ALL THAT JESUS BEGAN TO DO AND TEACH"

11. What does Luke mean when he says "all that Jesus began"—hadn't Jesus finished His work? How does knowing that Jesus' earthly ministry was only the beginning excite you as a Christ follower?

12. In his Gospel Luke chronicles what Jesus said and did. Why are both His actions and teaching needed for us to fully understand and know Jesus?

13. Why must Christ followers imitate the example of Jesus by living what they believe? What hindrances to others happen when we don't?

HE PRESENTED HIMSELF ALIVE....

Luke describes several aspects of Jesus' ministry to the disciples in the period before His ascension. First, Jesus gave them proof that He was alive (Acts 1:3). One of the reasons why Jesus came and disappeared again during the interval between His resurrection and ascension was to prepare the disciples for days when He would no longer be physically with them. Jesus had foretold His departure on many occasions, not least in the upper room on the eve of His death. "I go away," He had said (John 14:28; 16:7). But His departure was not sudden and instantaneous. He remained from Passover to Pentecost, appearing to His disciples individually and corporately in different locations. These appearances would surely have helped them come to terms with the fact that one day soon, He would go away and not return again (at least in their lifetimes).⁴

⁴ Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (Kindle Locations 241-247). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

14. How do you spend time with friends or family knowing that soon they will be absent from you? Thinking back to what the Gospels say about Jesus' time with the disciples, what words and activities might Jesus have said and done with or to His disciples before He left them?

15. Why is it so crucial that Acts 1:3 states Jesus' resurrection as a proven historical fact?

There are seven pieces of evidence from Scripture surrounding the events of the resurrection.

1. The disappearance and removal of Jesus' body while under the watch of a regiment of Roman soldiers
2. The massive stone that had been rolled away
3. The grave clothes in a cocoon-like shape and yet nothing inside it
4. The body was never found nor did anyone ever state that they knew where it went
5. The twelve post-crucifixion/burial appearances of Jesus to over 500 witnesses
6. The initial unbelief of the disciples (They honestly thought Jesus was dead!)
7. The radical change of the fearful disciples to faith-filled disciples

16. What impact would these "convincing proofs" have had on you had you been in the disciples' shoes? What "convincing proofs" have you seen or experienced in your life that deepen your certainty to the claims of Christ?

17. Why were the disciples told to wait rather than immediately spread the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God? When have you sensed God calling you to wait when every part of you wanted to move forward? What did you learn through this experience?

18. Why do you think Jesus described the gift of the Holy Spirit as a baptism? What difference did the Holy Spirit make in the lives of the disciples? What difference has the Holy Spirit made in your life?

UNFINISHED

There is an aspect of Jesus' work that continues to this very day. It's the work of spreading the Gospel, the good news. A few years ago I used to hear people talking about the 29th Chapter of Acts. That's clever because Acts contains only 28 chapters. What they meant was, you and I are writing the 29th chapter of this book every single day. You've heard of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*? Acts is the story of the Unfinished Work of Jesus Christ.

His work in the world isn't finished yet. I know it isn't because the headlines today spoke of immorality in high places. His work isn't finished as long as babies starve and armies march and families break up and children run away and parents abuse their children and students carry guns to school. His work isn't finished as long as Satan still rules this earth and sin reigns in the heart of man.... Most of all, consider this: His work is not finished when over 2 billion people have yet to hear a clear presentation of the Gospel. Think of that. It's been 2000 years and over 2 billion men, women and children don't know who Jesus is. His work is not done.

And that's why we're still here. Our work is not finished because His work is not finished. We're one platoon in God's army.... It's easy to be discouraged because the forces of good and evil often seem disproportionate. So many of them, so few of us, but we forget to take Christ into account. Great men die, but Jesus lives forever. Jesus Christ is not dead. The Apostle Paul died, but Jesus lives. That is our hope for the future. The next time you are feeling overwhelmed, remember this: He's alive.

The first Christians took the message of Christ and turned a pagan world upside down. We stand on the brink of something tremendous, wondering what the future will hold. We wonder, Can the church do the job? Can we do our part in finishing the unfinished work of Jesus? Luke left plenty of blank paper at the end of his treatise so you and I could write our own little contribution to the story of his work in the world. God has provided everything we need to be successful. He has not left us orphans in the world, lonely children with paper swords fighting the dragons around us. Thank God, the Lord Jesus Christ is continuing his work through us.⁵

19. What part of God's unfinished business is He calling you to accomplish for His glory? To whom is God calling you to proclaim the words and works of Jesus?

20. What tangible steps this week can you take to continue writing the unfinished story of God's redemptive love to the world?

⁵ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1998-01-25-The-Adventure-Begins-How-Jesus-Works-Through-Ordinary-People/>