

Acts

I have experienced in Scotland, Germany, and the United States that the interpretation of Acts can become a big point of contention. There are so many different views on the different aspects of Acts that I think it is very important for us to step back and do some reflecting. Acts has been used as an instruction manual for snake handling, has it not? It has also been used as an instruction manual on the structure of church governance: Congregational church governance, Episcopalian, Presbyterian—Acts is cited as the manual for them all. Acts has been used as the manual for the work of the Holy Spirit. It has been used for communities that share goods and sell all things to live together. It is true that all of the above issues and many more, such as the question of how often a church should celebrate the Lord's Supper, are either addressed or talked about in Acts. The only question is, what are we to take from Acts? Or more pointedly, what is God's purpose with Acts as part of his Word?

What is the purpose? How are we to learn from Acts? I think it is necessary to step back and ask the question, "Are there indications in Acts regarding its purpose?" before we bring our special concerns to bear on Acts. If we do not do this we will tend to say things like, "I have always been interested in the sharing of goods and, see, at the very early stages of the church there was sharing of goods." I do not mean to de-emphasize that part. I think it is a significant part, but is that the purpose of Acts? Rather than be caught up in our desires of what we want to hear, how can we observe what its own intent and purpose is? In order to study the purpose of Acts, we need to look at the literary structure of Acts.

I believe that literary forms from ancient times to the 20th century, have always had the purpose of "serving their content." Only in recent decades have we encountered some poetry and writings which purposely contradict their contents. But generally speaking, and certainly in ancient world, the "form of literature serves its content." Thus you will find in the literary structure and shape of a book such as Acts certain guideposts, signals, and indicators helping you to see the purpose of Acts. If there were only two summary statements in Acts, you could probably accuse me of special pleading, but once it gets to be five or six or seven summary statements, and even eleven, I do not think I will have to raise my voice anymore in order to make my point. There is significance to the repetition of summaries in Acts that says, "Watch and see." Literary features such as repetitions serve as a form of "red underlining." If there are such literary features in a text, we had better heed those and see whether they inform us and guide us as to what the purpose of the text is.

You will find in your reading of Acts that, very frequently, the account ends with, "And many were added to their numbers," or, "and they lived in peace and unity with each other." Thus you get from these summary statements and repetitions the following conclusion: There was internal and external growth of the messianic, covenant community. They grew in numbers, in maturity, in sharing, and in unity.

That does not mean that they did not have external opposition, and it does not mean that they did not have internal tension. They did, and we will see that shortly. But the wonderful thing is that these summary statements say, "The Word of God took root, brought them maturity, and led to numeric expansion." And we can add that this was the case wherever and to whomever the Word went, because with the progression of Acts we move out of Palestine into Asia Minor, North Africa, Italy, and Greece. We are encountering many different languages, cultures, convictions, and perspectives on life, and each time there is this expansion and external and internal growth.

As we formulate a general understanding of the thematic thrust of Acts, we must recognize this phenomenon of repeated summary statements because it conveys the interest of the author—the account

of Acts is intended to give a description of external and internal growth, despite external opposition and internal tension. Yes, there are references to sharing goods, to forms of governance, and to the work of the Holy Spirit. But the main thematic thrust is to show internal and external growth, aided by the Holy Spirit, facilitated by his work. We will study what that entails at some length. But we capture part of the intent of Acts when we recognize this structure.

I would also like to note that Acts is a narrative text. We have to become sensitive to different kinds of literary genres in the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament. There is a difference between a narrative discourse and an argumentative discourse. One difference is that a narrative text is not direct, but rather it is indirect. An argumentative discourse, on the other hand, is direct. It says what it intends to say. I have the privilege of having a little daughter, among our three children. One day, she had been instructed not to eat chocolate before dinner. She came into the house with chocolate around her lips and a big-eyed denial: "I did not have any chocolate." As a parent, you have the following option: You can go into an "argumentative discourse" or a "narrative discourse". The argumentative discourse option is what I fall into all too quickly. With a raised hand you might say to your daughter, "You are not telling the truth. You have had chocolate even though I told you not to have chocolate before dinner." The narrative discourse option is the more elegant one, and it has more promise of "pedagogical success". With this option, you might take your little daughter on your lap and say, "Once upon a time, there was a little girl and she had instructions not to play in her good clothes, not to get dirty. [You make the story slightly different than the actual situation.] And she denied that she had played and gotten herself dirty. Guess what happened?" Then you invite the child to say, "Isn't it bad that the little child did not obey?" Then at some point you do what Nathan did with David, saying, "You are the man." That is a narrative discourse approach. That is the beauty of narrative – it is not direct. It involves you in the story. It does not make you defensive. You get so engaged that the one telling the story has the opportunity to say, "See yourself," and you cannot avoid it. You are personally involved. On the other hand, the argumentative discourse option may lead to defensiveness.

There are thus different purposes with different genres of texts. I find it interesting that in God's wisdom, the Gospels and Acts are narrative discourses. There is a good bit of argumentative discourse material in Acts, mostly embodied in the speeches, which make up 30% of the book. But the majority of the book is in a narrative form, as if God's way of communication is, "Let me tell you the story of Christ and his apostles. I will not bombard you with decisions, responsibilities, and guilt. Guess who this man is?" The Gospel of Mark, for instance, begins like a film. It is as if there was a large mass of people going down to the Jordan River, and then the camera focuses on this one person who also goes to the Jordan. Then slowly the story of who this Jesus is develops. As you read the narrative, you find that there are those who follow and those who oppose him. You are slowly being urged to take sides, as a reader or as a hearer. Who do you take yourself to be? Are you a follower or an opponent? Do you take sides with those who call him a blasphemer? Or do you take sides with those who do not quite understand him but are drawn in by the way he deals with them? As the story unfolds you are indeed confronted, but very slowly, very indirectly. Part of the challenge of narrative discourse is that you do not know the purpose of, say, the Gospel of Mark or Acts right away. You have to get into the story. You have to stay with it and just see where it goes and how it impacts you. Thus, Acts as a narrative discourse challenges us to ask, "How does it impact personally?"

The good thing about narrative discourse is that you do not have to focus on every detail. The important thing with narrative texts is to discern the emphasis. As you read Acts, what are you left with? What is the narrative repetition? That is its focus. That is what you are supposed to gather from the total narrative. In Acts, there is much "narrative relativizing," as I would call it. That means, here something happens in one way, there it happens in another. Here the work of the Holy Spirit is manifested this way,

there another way. Thus there is, for instance, continuity with regard to the Holy Spirit, such that every person who comes into contact with the living God receives the Holy Spirit. But how it happens, what the manifestations are varies. So there is a narrative relativizing of particulars and a narrative emphasis of essentials. That is what you need to look for as you read long narratives such as Acts and the Gospels: What is impressed upon you as the reader, and more strongly, as the hearer, and what is perhaps relativized in the narrative?

We will return to that when we reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit as portrayed in Acts. That is a little bit of methodology in the beginning—seeing how we can follow the text and, in that way, be guided in our interpretation and focus. As far as I am concerned, when you look at the structure of Acts you cannot say, “But what I am interested in is this.” We can observe many things, but we must follow the stated momentum of Acts to understand its message. Based on the repeated summaries, I believe that Acts demonstrates the internal and external growth of the church despite external opposition and internal tension. This is what marks the life of the messianic church, driven by the mission of God.

I have been asked, “Does not Acts give its own purpose statement by stating, ‘This is what Jesus began to do and now continues to be doing,’ in Acts chapter one?” The answer is emphatically, yes. Luke wrote a two-volume work of which his Gospel is volume one and Acts is volume two. The reason we see that very clearly is that both volume one and volume two are dedicated to the patron Theophilus. This is an ancient convention. Josephus wrote a two-volume work that has a very similar structure to Luke and Acts. Josephus wrote a preface to his work in volume one, which is paralleled in Luke 1:1-4, and that preface is briefly repeated in the second volume just like we have in Luke and Acts.

Thus, to understand the purpose of Acts, we have to go to the prologue of Luke 1:1-4, which is really the heading for the entire two-volume work. As we go back to that we find at least some indication as to the purpose of the total work of Luke and Acts. These books were written to a patron and all others who might have read them with him, so that those who had already heard of the Gospel would know the sure foundation and reliability of the account that they had heard. The purpose of Luke and Acts is very much a catechetical instructional encouragement. Luke was writing so that the readers might know by the detailed research and work that he had undertaken, as a companion of Paul and as an investigator of apostolic witness, what Jesus had said and done. He also wanted to show how the messianic church was inaugurated and launched as a part of the Gospel account, and to see the reliability thereof. If you look at Luke and Acts, this would be a broader purpose statement. In discussing the purpose statement earlier, I was a little more focused on Acts itself. What I have said before about Acts and its purpose is a subordinate point under the prologue in Luke 1:1-4 as the major purpose that Luke gives. We are fortunate with the book of Luke to have that kind of a purpose statement in the prologue. We do not have that in the Gospel of Mark or of Matthew, though we do have a purpose statement concluding the Gospel of John: “It is written so that you may believe.”

Let us move to the general characteristics of Acts. There has been much discussion on this particular point. I want to present what I consider to be the most significant characteristics that we find in Acts, drawn from the purpose statement that I have just given to you. Acts brings to conclusion the salvation purpose begun by Christ in the Gospel. The term that is very significant here is, “salvation history.” Some critical scholars consider the writer of Acts to be the inventor of salvation history, and I have a problem with that kind of a statement. I believe that Luke understood a basic biblical principle, that of salvation history. What I described to you in the first lecture will become a little more concrete here. God in his mercy chooses to reveal himself in history—salvation-in-history. It is not an abstract thought or a body of truth to be meditated upon, but it is the fact that God acts in history. In the incarnation of Christ, he actually lives and works in—and through—history, revealing his truth. This is what is meant

by salvation history. Acts is particularly strong here, showing that there is a salvation-historical continuity.

Acts shows that God continues to work in history. God continues to intervene in history. That is part of the reason why no other author in the New Testament makes as many references to general history as Luke does. He is very concerned to place that which occurs through Jesus and that which occurs with the early messianic church in the setting of generally-known history. In Acts we find references to Gallio, Felix, and Festus, who were all known figures in the ancient Roman world. You can read about them in Josephus, the Jewish historian, or Tacitus and other Roman historians who speak about these figures. Luke, more than any other author, indicates that these events are not happening in a quiet corner, but in the context of generally-known history. Paul appealed to Caesar, to emperor Nero, who was a ruthless emperor, especially toward the latter years of his reign, and the first major persecutor of Christians in Rome. What horrific deeds he committed in 64 AD by crucifying Christians upside down in Rome and holding them responsible for the fire that had broken out in Rome—most likely at his instigation.

Salvation happens in history—salvation-in-history. This is a very important theological characteristic of Acts. You do not have God's truth and work somehow suspended in mid-air, a surreal image detached from the realities, constraints, and challenges of real life. Rather, salvation and history are completely connected. That is why some theologians say theology and history are indivisible, particularly in Acts. If you try to separate history and theology, it is like cutting through braided hair; you split up the whole thing. You cannot divide the intertwining of God's work, God's speaking, and God's action in history. You cannot divide it; it is intertwined and interconnected. God speaks his eternal word, and he pursues his eternal purposes, in—and through—history.

This is a supreme philosophical challenge: to have the “eternal” mix with the “temporal”, and the “absolute” mix with the “relative”. Ever since the Enlightenment the concept of salvation-history has been a greatly debated concept in Western culture. To some people that simple term, “salvation history,” is a contradiction in terms. You cannot have salvation and history, they would say. Either you need to lift salvation from the empirically-known world into some kind of a “sacred history”, which some people have done, or you completely synthesize salvation into real history as the projection of human beings—what they would like to see about salvation. But to have salvation-in-history, real, true, binding, and strong, is nearly too much. The incarnation of Christ is where the eternal is connected with the temporal, and where the absolute intersects with the relative. It is the incarnation that answers that nearly impossible question of bringing the divine together with humanity. Salvation is something unique and amazing, and Acts makes no excuse but confronts faith directly and says, “God is acting in history. I will name to you Gallio, and I will name to you Pilate. I will give you the figures that you know from the coordination system that you are acquainted with, and in that coordination system of history I will show you the eternal work of God.” That is perhaps the single most important theological characteristic in Acts, beyond this purpose that I have just stated, that there is this salvation-historical continuity. Again, this impacts us because if God works in history, we are connected.

We are connected with that history, and if God can intervene in the history of 2,000 years ago, he can also work now. There is a strange aspect in some people's theology in that they deny that God can actually work in human history, and therefore deny that God can work real salvation now. Your theology has great consequences. If you buy into a teaching that salvation is not real or that salvation-history is a “spiritual history” that is not connected with our known history, you have sold out to a philosophy that robs you of the impact and the reality of the gospel now. Many philosophies will leave

you thinking that either you have some kind of illusionary salvation or you have some kind of illusionary history. Thus the challenge is great.

Marshall, e.g., is concerned to show that Luke, in Acts, describes salvation-in-history. Real salvation, real history, and real intervention of God are necessary elements of salvation and real history as well. It is fascinating to study Acts as an historical document. There are wonderful scholars, such as Ramsey and others, who have studied Acts in this way, to see how it functions. How does it “perform” as a “historical document?” More recently, Colin Hemer has taken up this study. Hemer is not so much concerned with the “salvation aspect” of Acts, as he is with the “historical aspect”. He has gone through thousands and thousands of inscriptions, gleaning evidence from the ancient world to see how Luke “performs” as an historian. As a result of his study, Hemer has found that Luke “performs” as an incredibly refined historian, to the point that he uses the terminology that is in use at the time of the regions he describes. For example, when Luke describes the Island of Malta, he calls the leader of the islands “the first of the islands.” Subsequent archeological research has shown that this was the official title, such as a reference to the “First Lady” of the U.S.A.

Another illustration of Luke’s capabilities as an historian can be found in his description of Paul’s actions on his journey to Rome. Critics have said it is impossible that a man under house arrest, being virtually a prisoner on a ship, could speak up at all. Paul says many things on the ship and it does not seem right. After all, he is a mere prisoner. It seems that he would have had to be quiet, yet he says, “Do this, do not do that and follow this.” It seems at first that Luke is simply portraying Paul as the hero of his story, ignoring actual circumstances such as his status as a prisoner. But the Rhodian Sea Law that was operating at the time of the New Testament has been discovered and it stipulates the following: normally, prisoners are to be quiet; however, if a ship is in danger, these laws should be temporarily suspended. Everybody’s voice counts regardless of their social status. A communal decision has to be reached and all on board have to act in unison to assure survival. You cannot have division on the ship when your ship is about to sink. You must have unity, and therefore you suspend the normal social laws and work together. Anybody’s word, anybody’s counsel will be sought. In the context of this law, Luke’s description of Paul’s actions makes perfect sense. The description seems to be ahistorical until you find out the particulars of the historical situation. It is amazing how well Luke performs as an historian, but you see that he always comes back to the fact that it is God who is working redemption in that history.

I would like for you to reflect on the relationship between history and salvation. The connection between the two is so significant in Acts. Acts 1:8 is an important theological and historical statement that fits into what we have seen in the purpose statement—the internal and external growth of the church despite internal tension and external opposition. In Acts 1:8 we see the geographic, concentric expansion of the salvation message going out into the world. This command is borne out in the rest of the narrative. God is deeply concerned that this witness goes out and captures not only Palestinian Jews, not only Diaspora Jews, but also Gentiles. And not only God-fearing Gentiles, or people who may be Proselytes, but also people who subscribe to mystery religions in Asia Minor and people who are less religious or “rationalists” in Athens, Greece.

Another general theological characteristic is the inclusion of the Gentiles. This is a major theme that is addressed in Acts, and in all of Luke and Acts. I am fascinated by the wonderful passages in Isaiah 42 and 49 where God speaks about his eternal purpose: that his message would be a “light to the Gentiles”. The quotation that I gave from Simeon in Luke chapter two refers to this, saying that Jesus is the light to the Gentiles. While God chose Israel as a demonstration of his covenantal love, he intends for that mercy and grace to go far beyond the confines of the Jewish people. That expansion of God’s vision

happens in Acts in an amazing way. Human nature has a tendency (I do not know if you have seen that in your churches at all) to become ingrown and to say, “We are the chosen people and the other ones are the “other” ones. We are important and special.” We lose sight of the fact that God calls you, and called the Jewish people, to reach out. Thus Acts is an amazing description of how God’s Spirit, sent by Christ, is moving the disciples to break through these century-old barriers and to recover the ultimate purposes of God—which include the Gentiles across the globe. It is amazing how much space Luke “wastes” describing the enormous change that Peter must undergo in order to speak to Gentiles.

Luke spends two chapters on this change in Peter, and it is presented in an amazing literary form. Chapter 10 of Acts describes what happens to Peter, and chapter 11 repeats it in Peter’s own words. The same story is repeated over again, “And then I did that and then this happened and then I saw this and . . . do you not understand?” Thus chapters 10-11 of Acts are nearly like slow motion of a film. Luke slows down so that the reader may go with Peter through the process of recovering God’s purposes which are also for the Gentiles. It is amazing how that is being described. The slowing down of the narrative speed is in order to make sure you understand how significant the breaking through of this barrier is. I am moved in my own heart, as I see the discussion and concern about racial reconciliation in the United States, as well as reconciliation among various churches, ethnic groups, and socio-economic groups. Relatively speaking, these are small issues compared to what has happened there in Acts in terms of breaking through barriers. We need to see that God’s purposes are not exclusive; they are inclusive. Not in the sense of the religion tolerance teaching, but in the sense of finding Christian fellowship across ethnic, socio-economic, cultural, and political lines, and being bold in cutting across those lines. We must be very purposeful in cutting across those lines so that the power that is demonstrated here with the gospel breaking through to the Gentiles is continued and manifested in our own days as well. We need to see how we have succumbed to certain barriers that hinder the gospel. I am not advocating a gospel of truthless tolerance in which we have an attitude that says, “Everything is good and let us just hold hands and be brothers and sisters.” But where God establishes his people, his gospel cuts across all those lines powerfully and amazingly. We ought not to allow ourselves to be shy and give too much respect to those lines of division. Rather, we need to recognize that Christian fellowship must cut across those lines and be manifested.