

Many New Testament books are epistles (letters) but the longest five are narratives, (stories). Four of these are known as Gospels for they tell the story of God the Son becoming the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. They tell of His birth, life, rejection, crucifixion and resurrection. Two tell also of His ascension, as does the other narrative, the “Acts of the Apostles.” Perhaps a better title for it is “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” for it documents the descent and subsequent working of God the Holy Spirit among men. The Holy Spirit was sent by the Lord Jesus after His ascension to His Father’s right hand in heaven. The Spirit’s dramatic arrival (Acts 2) was proof of the Lord Jesus’ presence in Heaven, and marked God’s approval of His finished work on the cross. This unique phase of the Holy Spirit’s story begins in Acts—His convicting and saving us, then indwelling and working within us and through us. He formed us into a spiritual unity, the House of God, the Body of Christ, the Assembly (Church).

The book of Acts is actually a second of two books written by Luke. They are addressed to Theophilus, a real, devoted, godly, respected friend of Luke. These comprise the second largest volume of any New Testament author, surpassed only slightly by Paul’s epistles. The first book is the familiar Gospel of Luke, from which “The Acts” continues. Luke was the only New Testament author who was probably a Gentile. He was a physician, Colossians 4:14, who joined Paul at Troas, Acts 16, and was his traveling companion much of the rest of Paul’s life. While he may have conducted interviews and other research to compile his Gospel and parts of Acts, much of later Acts is told as an eye witness, “we.”

Luke’s second book documents much of the forty years following the Resurrection. He has carefully reported the compelling historical story of the founding and growth of the Church of God on earth. God set aside the nation of Israel, His chosen earthly people, because they had forsaken Him and just killed His Son. Having many unfulfilled promises remaining in the Old Testament He never contemplated utterly destroying Israel although they deserved it. He will yet restore and bless them, but not now.

With Israel set aside He was then able to implement the secret plan He had in His heart from before the foundation of the earth. The unified gathering of men before Him under a selected natural family head, Abraham, or as a selected nation, Israel, had not worked out because of their sin. So He created and introduced a completely new concept of a unified gathering of men, The “Church,” (more accurately “The Assembly.”). Acts is the story of how He implemented that plan, how founded the Assembly, nurtured its growth and expanded its borders from a small

body of faithful Jewish believers at the ascension into a worldwide unity. This Assembly is a continuing body comprising born again believers without respect to nationality, race, social status, gender, religious hierarchy, sacrifices, rituals and the like. A body where there is no difference between believers of Jewish and Gentile descent. A body bound together by righteousness, with love for one another in the Holy Spirit.

God nurtured the early growth and expansion of Christ’s Assembly on earth,. Yet at first He concurrently repeated His offer to the Jews to repent of their crime against His Son and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The first seven chapters tell of God’s faithful, loving appeals to them. The twelve apostles and other believers faithfully witnessed and preached to them. They showed the divine authority behind their message by miracles and signs. Israel’s leaders repeatedly rejected His pleas, culminating in their murder of Stephen. Yet Acts tells us thousands of the Jewish people did repent and were personally saved. They comprised the Assembly in its early days.

But shortly after Luke finished this second book the City of Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Romans during a brief Jewish rebellion. Romans 9, 10, & 11 tell of the national phasing out and future national restoration of Israel when they are finally bought to nationally recognize Jesus as their King. But until then people of Jewish descent are not excluded because of their national affiliation with the nation that crucified God’s Son. They are offered the chance to become Christians, part of the Assembly, with a heavenly prospect. What Grace! The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to those Jews who do become believers. It systematically weans them away from the Judaism they had valued to the Christ, Who is far better. It shows them they have all things better than their forefathers — the realities of all that were only foreshadowed by their Old Testament religion.

So Acts is the on-the-ground story of a transformation from an earthly religion to a heavenly Assembly on earth. Hebrews is the in-the-heart pitch for a massive change for the Better—for Christ! The Lord also used other New Testament writers to help Jewish believers transition from Judaism to Christian principles. James and 1Peter, especially come to mind. Paul in his epistles also speaks to making the transformation of faith from Judaism to Christ. But one of his sharpest reprimands is reserved for some Gentile believers who were being persuaded by Jewish teachers to take up Judaistic principles of the Law as a way of life. See his epistle to the Galatians. Yet many “Christians” still do that today.

Once the Jews murdered Stephen the way was opened to go to the Gentiles with the Gospel. To have done so sooner might have given the Jews another “excuse” to

reject Christ. What a longsuffering God we have.

So the gospel was spread progressively outward from Jerusalem, as established by the Lord, 1:8. First to the **Samaritans**. Phillip the evangelist goes there, ch.8. Then he is sent to a Gentile **proselyte**, the Ethiopian eunuch, ch. 8. (A proselyte is one who, in seeking God, has voluntarily become a Jew. Before Christ this was the only route for a Gentile to reap the blessing God accorded His people.) Then Saul of Tarsus is struck down by the visible appearing of the Lord Jesus in glory and converted, ch. 9. But during the years Saul is being prepared by God for his mission as Apostle to the Gentiles, Peter is sent to a Roman officer, a **Gentile**, with the gospel. Peter returned to his astonished and bemused fellow Apostles and Jewish saints in Jerusalem with the news of the inclusion of Gentiles in the Assembly. Some time later the last Apostle, Paul, began his ministry to the Gentiles and we hear little more of Peter and the others.

The remainder of Acts centers around Paul's labors traveling among the nations bringing the gospel to the Jews first then to the Gentiles in every town. His many adventures, hardships, persecutions and successes are related for our blessing and encouragement. Several of his addresses are given verbatim. Though Paul was sent to the Gentiles his love for his people Israel was always on his heart. So much so that he traveled to Jerusalem to attempt to reach them one last time. There he was arrested and in chains for most of the rest of his life and ministry. While captive God moved him to write numerous epistles of which those inspired are preserved in the New Testament. (Would we have these had he not been confined?) But Acts shows he also used every hearing as an opportunity to testify of Christ to the authorities and spectators. His goal

to reach Rome, ch. 19:21; 23:11, and Romans 1:15; 15:22-24, 32; was achieved, though in chains, and he preached to the Emperor himself, 2Tim 4:16,17. While we learn most of the details of Paul's life and service in Acts, his epistles also provide numerous details of his activities and events in his life, and his relationships with various believers some of whom are not named in Acts. Paul's life and service of faith can be pieced together by gathering and comparing all the relevant passages of scripture.

Luke did not whitewash difficulties the early believers had, not only with persecution and hardships, but grievous internal trials among them. Some true believers fell into a sin. Others were impostors seeking some fleshly gratification at the expense of the glory of God. In either case God used the apostles and others to detect and expose these, turning them out of the congregation. At the very first God gave a striking example of the holiness He demands in His house—the word of the apostle Peter striking two dead for lying to the Holy Spirit, ch.5.

While Luke was an eye witness to much of the later part of Acts things that happened earlier he heard from others, often eye witnesses. For instance, the intimate details of the early chapters of Luke could have been received directly from interviewing Mary, Jesus' mother. Apostles like Peter, John, Paul and others, ordinary disciples like Philip, Silas, Timothy and Titus are obvious sources for incidents where he was not present.

"The Acts" will thrill and inspire, alert and warn as it presents a broad historical and spiritual background with real life characters and detailed lessons still relevant for us today. God Bless!

By Ronald Canner, July 1, 2009