



THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

GOD'S BIG IDEAS

SESSION 4

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

- Fourth book in the Synoptic tradition (with Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke)
- Sequel to Luke's Gospel, continuing the story after Jesus' resurrection
- Based on carefully researched traditions about the early church
- Author possibly an active participant in the story
- Similar thematic structure to Luke; some themes more developed

1. NATURE OF THE WORK

- Same kind of book as the Gospel: same story, themes, purpose
- Recounts the early stages of the mission of the Holy Spirit and the church
- Explains and defends the first Christians' mission practice

2. SALVATION HISTORY

- Luke writes a history of salvation in three stages
- Acts recounts the start of the third stage, which begins from Jesus' ascension
- Jesus sends out the message of God's salvation from Jerusalem
- It is proclaimed and demonstrated by the apostles and others
- They are supported by the church's prophetic word and corporate life

2. SALVATION HISTORY

- Partial fulfilment of God's promises of salvation in the present
- Complete fulfilment expected in the future
- Mission of the church fulfils the Old Testament scriptures
- God's plan is:
 - Predetermined
 - Effected by God and his human agents
 - Flexible
 - Invincible

3. SALVATION

- Deliverance from evil and restoration to life in relation to God
- Worked out in forgiveness, the gift of the Spirit, and release from bondage to other forces
- Promise of eternal life at Jesus' return

4. JESUS

- God's supreme agent in bringing salvation
- Christ / Messiah
- Lord
- Equivalent to God in dispensing salvation, but subordinate to him
- Continues and extends his own saving mission
- A few additional titles are used (prince, righteous one)

4. JESUS

- Suffers and dies as the humiliated and vindicated righteous man, and as part of God's redeeming plan
- Resurrection reveals fulfilment of that plan and Jesus' identity as saviour
- Resurrection puts into effect God's victory over death
- Ascension accomplishes Jesus' full enthronement
- These events achieve salvation and establish God's kingdom
- Jesus will judge the living and the dead

5. THE HOLY SPIRIT

- Given by Jesus to all believers
- Agent of the saving work of God and Jesus
- Marks presence of the final age
- Marks out the church as the people of God and restored Israel

5. THE HOLY SPIRIT

- Empowers and directs the church in mission
- Inspires prophetic word and gospel proclamation
- Effects works of power and community life
- Legitimizes these words and deeds as the fulfilment of God's saving purpose

5. THE HOLY SPIRIT

- Normally received as part of fourfold pattern of Christian initiation
- Reception involves outward experience: inspired speech
- Reception is not once and for all
- Pattern of initiation is occasionally disrupted

6. ISRAEL AND THE GENTILES

- The story of Israel is fulfilled in the gospel and the church
- God's people now include both Jews and Gentiles
- The church's mission is first to the Jews
- The Jewish mission continues despite a negative response
- The mission to Gentiles shows that their inclusion is God's will

6. ISRAEL AND THE GENTILES

- Many Jews respond positively, but most do not, and some persecute the church
- Their negative response leads to their exclusion from God's people
- Gentile mission is relatively though not entirely successful
- Their positive response leads to their incorporation into the new Israel

7. DISCIPLESHIP

- Initial response to the gospel is repentance and faith...
- ...plus baptism in water
- Corporate discipleship is a context for the outworking of salvation
- Discipleship includes suffering and persecution

7A. DISCIPLESHIP: KEEPING THE LAW

- Jewish Christians continue to keep the law, but with some amendments
- Gentile Christians are not required to be circumcised or to keep the law
- But they must observe the regulations for ‘resident aliens’
- Luke’s view of law-observance is different from those of some other New Testament authors

8. THE CHURCH

- Each congregation is an expression of the one church
- It has leaders, appointed in various ways and exercising various functions
- The Jerusalem church has some jurisdiction over others

9. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

- The twelve apostles are foundational witnesses to Jesus:
 - They provide continuity between Jesus and the church
 - They exercise authority over the church on Jesus' behalf
- They proclaim the gospel and perform mighty works
- Some but not all other believers share in this task
- But the whole church supports the mission

9. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

- Paul is the supreme missionary, through whom the gospel goes to the ends of the earth
- Yet he is an apostle in only a secondary sense
- The message has a stable framework, requires a particular response, and calls believers together
- Acts recounts the geographical spread of the apostolic witness

10. POLITICAL AUTHORITIES

- Christians not called to political action or reform
- The Christian message and movement do not threaten the political authorities
- But believers have a higher loyalty to God

APPLICATIONS

- Expanded vision of Jesus draws us to align ourselves more closely with God's saving purpose in him
- Acts corrects misunderstandings about the Spirit while raising expectations; middle way between naivety and complacency
- Decree of the Jerusalem Council may no longer be applicable, but we should still limit our freedom in the interests of unity
- Call to deepen understanding of the apostolic witness on which the church's life and mission are based