

Acts themes

Prologue

This is the latest in a series of talks that are intended eventually to cover all the books of the New Testament. Among this collection we have identified three main theological streams, and we have begun our studies with what is sometimes called the Synoptic tradition, because it relates to the three so-called Synoptic Gospels, which have many common features and are evidently related to each other. We have already looked at these Gospels: at Mark, which is probably the first to be written and lays the foundation for the others, and at Matthew and Luke, who build upon it in different ways.

Although there are of course *four* Gospels, John belongs to another of our three theological traditions, so we will consider it separately. Next we will turn instead to the other New Testament book that belongs in the Synoptic tradition: the Acts of the Apostles.

It is almost universally agreed that the book of Acts was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. We have seen previously that Mark's Gospel anticipates the life and mission of Jesus' disciples after his resurrection in only a very limited way – partly because it seems to be unfinished – and that Matthew's Gospel does so rather more. But of the three, only Luke takes on the story beyond the resurrection narratives, to recount (if only in part) the history of the early church and the apostolic mission. Most of the content in his second volume is therefore found nowhere else in the New Testament, except in fragmentary form in some of Paul's letters, which offer rather different perspectives upon it.

Luke says at the beginning of his Gospel that regarding the events he describes he has carefully followed or taken careful note of everything from the beginning. From Acts we discover that this interest includes not only the traditions about Jesus that are recorded in his first volume, but also those about the first Christian community in Jerusalem and the ministries of Peter and Paul, which they exercise alongside a range of other leaders. Also some sections of Acts are written in the first person – 'we did such and such' – and these may suggest that the author was an active participant in some of the events, although they can be interpreted in other ways.

Because the two books have the same author, we can expect the key themes of Acts to be consistent with those of the Gospel, and indeed its thematic structure is broadly similar, though with some differences of emphasis due to the subject-matter of the narrative. So in our study we can follow the same basic outline as before. But we should remember that several of Luke's themes are only introduced, quite briefly, in the Gospel and are developed at much more length in Acts, notably the Holy Spirit, Israel and the Gentiles, and the mission of the disciples. Those differences will be reflected to some extent in the balance of this presentation.

So once more we will follow the same approach. We will take some extended time to consider the key themes of Luke's second volume, noting where appropriate how these develop from ideas that we have already explored in his first one. Finally we will draw out a few applications of the book to our lives today as individuals and churches.

Key themes

Nature of the work

Acts begins with a prologue that is very similar to the one in Luke's Gospel, with an address to the same person and a brief introduction to what follows. These parallels tell us that Acts

is the same kind of book as the Gospel: it is a continuation of the same story, affirming the same themes while developing them further, and directed to the same purpose. The difference is that while Luke's first volume dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach before he was taken up to heaven, the second one recounts the early stages of the mission of the Holy Spirit and the church, to bring the salvation secured by Jesus to the ends of the earth, and so to create a new people of God that includes both Jews and Gentiles. Although Luke does not say so, his account is self-evidently very selective, focusing on what he believes to be the most important events.

But although this is the primary focus of Acts, the book probably has a secondary purpose too, which is to explain and defend the mission practice of the first Christians. It suggests that the church was subject to accusations of religious apostasy from Judaism and of political subversion against Rome, brought against it by both Jews and pagans, and Luke devotes significant space to demonstrating that these charges are baseless. That does not mean that the book was intended to be read by hostile outsiders; rather it gives Christians a set of answers to use against them.

Salvation history

In our studies of the Synoptic Gospels we have seen that each of the writers sets his story within what we have called a 'temporal framework'. That is to say: they position the gospel events at a particular point in the story of God and his people, to give readers a context for understanding them. Luke has done this for his Gospel, and he now extends it into the era of the early church.

So to recap: Luke is writing a 'history of salvation' or 'salvation history', which he divides into three sections. The first of these is the Old Testament period, the era of the law and the prophets; and the second consists of the ministry of Jesus that Luke has described in his Gospel. The ascension of Jesus into heaven marks the beginning of the third stage of world history and of God's saving plan within it. As we have just seen, this is the subject of the book of Acts.

In this period, Jesus sends out the message of God's salvation from Jerusalem, to be preached and administered by his disciples in the power of the Spirit to all the nations. Like Jesus in the Gospels, the apostles and others both proclaim the coming of that salvation in him and demonstrate it by works of power. The whole Christian community supports this activity by its prophetic word and its corporate life. There will be more to say about this later when we look at the church and its mission.

Both the second and third phases of world history can be called 'eschatological'; their coming marks the beginning of the last days, in which God's promises of salvation that were given in the first phase are finding their fulfilment. Even now, though, Luke presents that fulfilment as only partial, and he points forward to a future, complete and ultimate realisation of the promises, when God's enemies will be fully and finally judged and defeated and God's people fully and finally liberated. This will happen at Jesus' return, which is anticipated in the apostolic preaching at various points in the book. But its timing is unknown, and at present it is delayed for the sake of the church's mission. As we saw from the Gospel, Luke is more concerned to instruct believers for their task in the world than to fuel expectations of an end in the near future.

Like the ministry of Jesus, the apostolic mission is presented as the fulfilment of the divinely given OT scriptures, as a whole and in their various parts, and as they are interpreted in light of Jesus' coming. The key events of salvation history are held to be specifically prophesied there. So, most notably, Jesus' suffering and resurrection as the Christ, the gift of the Spirit, the mission to the Gentiles and the creation of the Jew-Gentile church are all linked in Acts explicitly to particular biblical texts and implicitly to the unfolding of God's overall saving

purpose. In this way Luke ties together the different phases of that plan into a coherent whole.

God's plan is thus predetermined: he has foreordained its overall course and essential details, and he is the ultimate cause of every part of it. It is effected both by God's superintendence of events and through various human agents. At the same time, the plan is not deterministic, in that God has also left room within it for human response. But that response cannot derail it; even those who oppose it, like the Jewish and Roman authorities that condemned Jesus to death, are used by God in its service. In other words, God's saving purpose is invincible; whatever human beings do, he will guide it infallibly to its ultimate goal.

Salvation

We looked in some detail at the theme of salvation in Luke's Gospel, and as Acts works with some of the same ideas and does not develop them significantly, we need touch on them again only briefly. We saw that Luke defines salvation quite broadly as the deliverance of human beings from all forms of evil, and their restoration to fullness of life in right relation to God. In Acts, we see this deliverance worked out in various ways: in the divine forgiveness of sins, in the gift of the Holy Spirit (which the Gospel only predicts), and in release from bondage to other spiritual forces, while the promise of eternal life is held out for the time after Jesus' return.

Jesus

We also spent a lot of time on the figure of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: mostly on his identity, but also on his death and resurrection and his return. In this case, though, Luke does develop the theme substantially in Acts, so we should take a little more time over it.

Acts picks up on the Gospel's idea that Jesus is God's supreme agent in bringing his salvation to the world. More specifically, the first sermon in the book, by Peter on the day of Pentecost, climaxes in the declaration that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ. As Christ or Messiah, he is the anointed king over God's people Israel, who exercises God's reign and mediates his salvation. As Lord he bears God's authority, and his exaltation to heaven at the beginning of the book demonstrates that his lordship now extends over all things. In Acts Jesus is functionally equivalent to God in salvation – they act together to dispense it – though he is also presented as subordinate to God.

The most notable development in Jesus' saving mission in this book is that he continues it after his exaltation and extends it, both geographically and to different people-groups, through the Spirit and the church. Again, there will be more to say about this later. But we should notice too that Luke not only carries over into Acts other aspects of his Gospel's portrait of Jesus as Saviour, such as son of God and servant of the Lord; he also introduces a few other titles for him, such as prince and righteous one. These are not found widely elsewhere in the New Testament and were probably among the earliest designations used for Jesus in the primitive church.

We saw from the Gospel that Luke does not present Jesus' death as a ransom like Mark and Matthew do, but that he does portray him as a righteous sufferer whose death inaugurates a new covenant in which sins are forgiven. In Acts he develops this idea, affirming that Jesus' suffering and death as the humiliated but vindicated righteous man was part of God's predetermined plan to redeem his people. So when the Jerusalem church recalls Herod and Pilate meeting in the city with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel for the purpose of putting Jesus to death, they declare that the conspirators did what God's hand and purpose had decided beforehand should happen.

After Jesus' death, according to Acts, his physical resurrection then attests to the fulfilment of God's saving purpose through him and discloses his identity as the saviour. It also puts

into effect God's victory over death, in which those who are saved will share. Jesus' ascension into heaven, as we have seen, accomplishes his full enthronement over all things. By these events salvation is achieved and God's kingdom established. And although Jesus' return is not prominent in Acts, Luke does make clear that he is going to judge the living and the dead on a day set by God.

The Holy Spirit

Alongside Paul and John, Luke is the main contributor among the New Testament writers to our understanding of the Holy Spirit, and although his presentation lacks some of their depth and subtlety, it is both varied and dynamic.

So in Acts the exaltation of Jesus is followed by his gift of the divine Spirit to all those who believe in him. This general endowment is earthed in Old Testament prophecy, and it contrasts with the gifting of the Spirit to particular individuals in the age of the law and the prophets and even in the time of Jesus. It is through the Spirit that God and Jesus continue their saving work, and his outpouring marks the presence of the eschatological age: the last phase of salvation history is now here; again this idea is grounded in biblical prophecy. The Spirit also marks out the church as the true people of God and the restored Israel, against the counter-claims of its Jewish opponents.

So the Spirit in Acts is the Spirit of mission: he empowers and directs the church tangibly in its work of bringing God's salvation. He is portrayed especially as the 'Spirit of prophecy' foretold by the prophet Joel, who both inspires all believers to declare the wonders of God, and enables certain individuals to preach the gospel of salvation. But the church's mission is one of deeds as well as words: so the Spirit also energises those individuals to perform works of power that demonstrate and effect God's saving activity, and empowers the extraordinary quality of life exhibited by the first Christian community in Jerusalem, as they share their possessions with each other and live in awe, and praise, and joy. The presence of the Spirit as the agent of these words and deeds legitimates them all as the fulfilment of the next, indeed final, phase of God's saving purpose.

We should say something too about the receiving of the Spirit in Acts, as this has sometimes been controversial. The general rule seems to be that people receive the Spirit when they repent of their sins, believe in Jesus and in the gospel, and are baptised. These four elements together constitute Christian initiation, and they are not supposed to happen separately. Receipt of the Spirit also seems to involve an outwardly demonstrable experience, specifically some form of inspired speech; there is no evidence that this was *always* in other languages, though it was sometimes.

But that general rule does need to be qualified, in two ways. Firstly, the reception of the Spirit in Acts is not once and for all; believers may be filled afresh to speak God's word on particular occasions. And secondly, there are a couple of instances where the fourfold pattern is disrupted: either the gift of the Spirit is delayed, or the various elements happen in an irregular order. There are plausible reasons for these anomalies, however, and they should be seen as exceptions, not as the norm.

Israel and the Gentiles

Issues relating to the place and relationship and responsibilities of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) within the Christian community are very important in the Acts of the Apostles. Three of the central chapters deal with them directly and extensively, and they also bear upon Paul's mission practice and his later encounters with Jews and Romans. Luke's understanding of these issues is not straightforward, but it is worth our taking some time to try and unravel it!

The first point to make is that the God of Acts, the God of Jesus Christ, is the God of Israel, whose earlier dealings with Israel are described in the Old Testament. Luke presents the

gospel as the fulfilment of Israel's history and promises, and the church as God's people is heir to Israel's blessing and vocation. As we have seen already, the events that Luke describes in the Gospel and in Acts are seen as the continuation of the Old Testament story; they do not set that story aside and begin an altogether new one.

At the same time, though, for Luke Israel's promises include the incorporation of Gentiles within God's people. And that people are now defined not by ethnicity as they were before, but by their relation to Jesus Christ and their possession of the Spirit. Since Gentiles, like Jews, can believe in Jesus, and since Gentiles, like Jews, can receive the Spirit, God's people – the church – now include both Jews and Gentiles. The church is not a *replacement* for Israel, but a *fulfilment* of it: the renewed, restored Israel, ruled by the Messiah of Israel.

So because God's work of salvation in Jesus the Messiah involves the restoration of Israel, the church's mission in Acts is first to the Jews. Presentations of the gospel to Jewish audiences call them supremely to repudiate what was done to Jesus in his condemnation and death – for which, of course, some Jews in Jerusalem were partly responsible – and to believe in him as Christ and Lord.

The mission to Jews continues to the end of Acts despite its often eliciting a negative response and sometimes a murderous one. Some commentators think that when in the last chapter Paul tells the Jews in Rome that the salvation of God will be sent to the Gentiles and that they will listen (unlike many of the Jews), he is drawing a line under the Jewish mission, but there is no other indication in Acts that the door will ever be closed to Jews' hearing and responding to the gospel.

Undeniably, though, Acts does record at some length the extension of salvation to non-Jews. This is directed by God through obedient human agents, and it is both effected and authenticated by him through the gift of the Spirit to Gentiles. The outreach to Gentiles is initiated by no less a figure than Peter, and it is approved by the apostles and by the Jerusalem church. It is even furthered by the generally negative Jewish response: it is when the Jews reject the message and become hostile that the missionaries turn elsewhere. Luke seems to be underlining in as many ways as he can that Gentile inclusion is the will of God. The basic gospel call to Gentiles is to repent of their idolatry and sin and to turn to God by faith in Christ.

The Jewish mission in Acts is by no means a total failure. Many devout Jews are converted: three thousand on the day of Pentecost, rising to five thousand some time afterwards, with others added in city after city as the work expands. But Luke implies that most Jews, including their central authorities in Jerusalem, fail to recognise the identity of Jesus and do not accept the gospel offer of salvation. Worse than that, they initiate persecution against the Jewish church for allegedly breaking the law of Moses.

Luke sees this rejection and persecution as itself a violation of the law, and as a recapitulation (a repetition and extension) of Israel's long history of opposition of God and his purposes; this view is set out most clearly in Stephen's speech to the Jewish council before he is martyred. By responding to the Christian message and mission in this way, these Jews (not all Jews) are excluded from God's people.

The Gentile mission, on the other hand, is presented as relatively successful. Of course not all non-Jews accept the gospel either: they exhibit a range of negative reactions, from the sneering of pagan philosophers in Athens to the violent opposition of silversmiths in Ephesus and sundry attacks provoked by Jewish opposition. But many respond more positively, often in contrast to the Jews, and in this way they are incorporated by God into the new, restored Israel that is the church and become heirs of eternal life.

There is more to say on Jews and Gentiles under our next heading.

Discipleship

We have seen that Luke's Gospel presents quite a rich and sometimes distinctive understanding of discipleship. In Acts, Luke has much less to say on the subject in general terms, though he does develop or re-emphasise a few elements.

So as in the Gospel, the prescribed initial response to the Christian message is repentance and faith: turning away from sins to serve God, and giving recognition and trust and allegiance to Jesus. But to this is added baptism in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Luke appears to assume that baptism follows from hearing the word and responding positively to it, despite its being administered to two households in Philippi.

The discipleship of the early Christian communities is also a major context in which God's salvation is worked out. In particular, in his early chapters Luke gives us three snapshots of the life of the church in Jerusalem, which paint a vivid picture of its praise, its joy, its fellowship, its unity, and (picking up a prominent theme in the Gospel) its attitude to material possessions, as believers share with one another and show generosity to the needy among them. As part of their discipleship, believers must also expect to experience suffering and persecution, but this too furthers God's saving purpose.

Keeping the law. But unlike Luke's Gospel, Acts does have a lot to say about the place of the law of Moses in Christian discipleship.

Luke seems to expect that Jewish Christians will continue to keep the law. In particular he seems quite sensitive to the charges levelled against Paul that he teaches them to abandon it. But as in the Gospel, that law is valid only as interpreted by and through Jesus, and as a result we see in Acts some relaxation of the regulations on food and association with Gentiles, which in the context of the first century represents a significant distancing from Judaism. The continued participation of Jewish Christians in the worship of the Jerusalem temple is also apparently approved, but again the understanding of the temple that is dominant among non-Christian Jews is sharply rejected in Stephen's speech. And by the time Acts was written the temple had almost certainly fallen, so the question was of no practical significance to Luke's readers.

The issue of Gentile Christian obligation to keep the Mosaic law occupies most of chapter 15 of Acts, with its account of the apostolic council at Jerusalem. The occasion for this is some teachers from there telling Gentile believers in Antioch that if they are not circumcised according to the custom of Moses they cannot be saved. Before the council some Pharisees who have become Christians claim that Gentiles must not only be circumcised but also commanded to keep the law.

The council decides unambiguously that Gentile Christians are not required to be circumcised, and nor does it lay on them even the qualified obligation to keep the law that Jewish Christians are required to accept. What it does require is that they observe the minimal regulations that the law sets down for 'resident aliens' within Israel, namely not eating idol-food, or blood, or what has been strangled, and abstaining from sexual immorality. In this way they will safeguard their fellowship with Jewish believers, which would otherwise be threatened.

We have seen in our earlier studies that there are significant differences between Mark and Matthew over the ongoing role of the Jewish law in the life of the church. By extending his story into the time of the early church, Luke reveals himself to have a different view again, landing somewhere between the relative continuity of Matthew and the relative discontinuity of Mark. He also, interestingly, marks himself off to some degree from Paul in 1 Corinthians

and Romans and especially Galatians, despite Paul's apparently being his hero. It is no part of the purpose of these talks to resolve diversities of this kind, but where they exist, we can at least acknowledge and clarify them by laying them side by side.

The church

We have looked already at the corporate life of the early Christian community, and Acts has only a little more to say about the church, although what it does say is still significant. So Luke presents each congregation as the one church, the expression or representation of that church in a particular locality. It has leaders, who seem to be appointed in various ways. Their functions include declaring the word of God through the Spirit of God, maintaining and applying the apostolic traditions, exercising discipline over church members, and helping the needy. The original church in Jerusalem exercises some jurisdiction over others: when the council there makes its decisions regarding Gentile observance of the law, these are delivered to other churches in the expectation that they will be obeyed.

The mission of the church

The church's mission is one of the most pervasive themes of the book of Acts; in fact it provides the framework for the whole narrative, as the gospel spreads out from Jerusalem.

Central to that mission are the twelve apostles, who are called by Jesus to be the foundational witnesses to his ministry and especially of his resurrection. The replacement apostle for Judas has to be someone who has been among the disciples for the whole time that Jesus was with them, from John's baptism until the ascension, and who can testify to his rising from the dead. By means of this definitive witness, the apostles both guarantee continuity between Jesus and the post-resurrection church and exercise authority over that church on Jesus' behalf. There have to be twelve of them because (as we have seen) the church is the renewed and restored Israel: the twelve founding patriarchs must be matched by twelve founding apostles.

The apostles thus proclaim the gospel in Jesus' name and support their message with mighty works, and others share in this mission with them. This picture reflects the pattern that we saw in Luke's Gospel, in which Jesus sends out the chosen twelve disciples to preach and enact the message of salvation, but also commissions a larger group of 'others' for the same task. At the same time, we should note that as in the Gospel only *some* believers appear to participate directly in this mission of preaching and mighty works; there is no indication that all of them were expected or had the authority to do so. Nevertheless, the church as a whole supports the mission, whether by its prophetic word or by the quality of its life together.

In Acts, Paul is the supreme example of an early Christian missionary: he not only preaches the word and performs deeds of power like the others, but he is also the one through whom the mission is extended to the ends of the earth. And yet he is not one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus; he is an apostle in only a secondary sense, as someone commissioned and sent out by a church to evangelise on its behalf, even though it is directed by the Spirit to set him aside for this task. So even Paul is one of those 'others' who share in the mission alongside the Twelve. We should note in passing that Paul's letters make clear that he understands *himself* to be an apostle of Christ in the fullest sense, and that he rejects any idea that he is subordinate to those in Jerusalem, but that is a topic for another day.

We have noted how Acts presents the apostles and others as tailoring the form of their message to the particular audiences that they address. But that message has a relatively stable framework, including various broadly common features, and focusing on the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and sometimes his return as saviour and judge, all portrayed as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. It requires its hearers to align

themselves with God's saving purpose, embracing it for themselves and serving it in their lives, and it calls them together into congregations of believers.

Acts also recounts how Jesus' prediction in chapter 1 that the apostolic witness to him would be given in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth is fulfilled. In chapters 1 to 8 we read about mission in Jerusalem, and in chapters 8 to 11 in Judea and Samaria; then it goes further afield, and by the end Paul is preaching without hindrance in Rome. Rome is not the furthest point of the known world even then, but it is the capital city from where the gospel can now go out to every part of its empire; in that sense it represents the ends of the earth.

Relation to political authorities

And Rome gives us a segue into the last of our key themes from Acts: the relationship of the church to the political authorities. There is nothing in the book to suggest that Christians are called to take political action, and the apostles and others seem to accept the existing structures of authority as a given. In the last part of the book, the repeated recognition by Roman figures that Paul is innocent of the charges laid against him by the Jews underlines that the church's message and movement pose no temporal threat to political authorities, though the principle articulated in chapters 4 and 5 that believers must obey God rather than humans indicates that they have a higher loyalty to him.

Applications

As usual, then, having completed our thematic overview, let us now draw out from it a few applications to our lives as individuals and as churches.

Firstly, then, the Acts of the Apostles should expand our vision of Jesus beyond our internal spiritual concerns. Luke builds here on the already rich and detailed picture of Jesus in his Gospel to show us a figure who has now been exalted as both Lord and Christ, one who rules over all things for the salvation of people everywhere, and who is therefore spreading his saving mission throughout the earth through the Spirit and the church, including ourselves. When we see Jesus in that perspective, it cannot but affect our discipleship and ministry and mission priorities, extending them far beyond 'me and my relationship with God' to involve aligning ourselves most fully and effectively with the universal saving purpose of God of which he is the supreme agent.

Secondly, Acts corrects some potential misunderstandings about the Holy Spirit, while also raising our expectations of his work among us. So the Spirit appears to equip only certain people to undertake the church's mission of proclamation and mighty works, while still enabling all of us to declare the wonders of God to others and to attain the highest quality of corporate life. The book excludes the idea of a normative two-stage reception of the Spirit, while acknowledging that believers may be filled with the Spirit over and over again to speak the word of God. And while it does not record that everyone who receives the Spirit speaks in other languages, it does expect the Spirit's coming to be outwardly discernible, apparently in some form of inspired speech. So Acts helps us to steer our way regarding our experience of the Spirit between the twin extremes of naivety and complacency.

Thirdly, Luke offers us a distinctive perspective on the proper role (if any) of the Jewish law in our discipleship. If we were to apply the decree of the council of Jerusalem to our own lives – as Luke seems to expect his Gentile readers to do – we would have to abstain from eating blood and perhaps any food that has been used in a non-Christian religious ceremony, such as halal meat. But Paul in his letters appears to treat such dietary rules as overly restrictive, and in any case the apparent reason for them does not apply to most churches today, who do not have to worry about offending the sensibilities of Jewish

Christians and breaking fellowship with them. And in this way Luke still points us to a wider principle, which Paul also strongly affirms: that we should limit our own freedom on non-essential matters in order to maintain our unity with other believers.

And finally, Acts reminds us that the church's life and mission are founded on the testimony of the apostles, which connects the church to Jesus and the saving events of his death, resurrection and exaltation to heaven that constitute the heart of the gospel. The purpose of these talks is to deepen our understanding of that apostolic witness, to help us ground our personal discipleship and corporate activity, including our engagement with outsiders, more securely upon it, as it has been handed down to us in the books of the New Testament. Engaging with the themes of different books in this way is meant to expand our perspective beyond the narrower issues that can too often preoccupy us and to catch a better vision of what Paul in chapter 20 of Acts calls 'all the counsel of God'.

So thus we conclude our study on the Acts of the Apostles, and also on the whole Synoptic tradition. If you are watching on YouTube, please do leave any comments below. In due course we will pick up this series with the Pauline tradition.

© Steve Carter 2026.