

## **BOOK OF ACTS**

### **Book of Acts (Part 1 of 2)**

The book of Luke and the book of Acts are actually 1 book but 2 volumes. Both are written by Luke.

1. Acts 1:1-3 confirms that the author is Luke. The phrase “First book” in these verses refers to the Gospel of Luke.
2. Theophilus was a judge. Luke probably wrote these 2 books as a defence brief for the court for Paul’s trial in Rome. The book of Acts ended with Paul in Rome’s prison waiting for trial in court and it did not end with Paul’s death. Paul also did not say anything about the church in Rome in this book, which means that this book is not written about the growth of Christianity as the primary purpose.
3. In the book of Luke, Luke recorded that it was the Jews who found Jesus guilty but the Roman court concluded 3 times that Jesus was not found guilty of anything. Paul went to trial not because he was against Roman law but because the Jewish people found him guilty. Paul was a Roman citizen (see Acts 21:39) whom the Roman courts cannot treat lightly.
4. Luke was a doctor by training. Hence, we can see very precise records in both the books of Luke and Acts.

### **What is the Purpose of the Book of Acts?**

1. The book of Acts served as a bridge (link) between the 4 Gospels and the Epistles.
  - a) In the 4 Gospels, there was no New Testament Church (with born-again believers) yet. The Gospels only lay the foundation of faith for the New Testament Church.
  - b) If there is no book of Acts, there will be a missing link since the Epistles is about the churches where there were already born-again believers.
  - c) Therefore, the book of Acts is important to show how the people became Christians or believers. The book of Acts is the interface between the Foundation (Jesus) and the Building (Church).
    - i. It shows how a Christian is saved.
    - ii. Conversion experience. One needs to personally repent and believe and then he will be baptised with the Holy Spirit because all Christians need the power of the Holy Spirit to live out their Christian lives. So, the book of Acts is a very important book.
2. Without the book of Acts, we also will not know who Paul is, yet, he wrote so many epistles. Paul was the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle chosen by God.
3. Without the book of Acts, we would not know what a model church is supposed to be because the Epistles were written about the problems in the churches due to deviations from the model church. Today, we ended up with so many denominations with various traditions. Our faith must be based on the word of God and the book of Acts shows the principles of a model church.
  - a) There is no big deal about the physical building. The communities in the book of Acts just sprang up. They knew they were the temple of God. It is not the physical building that matters.

- b) There is no paid professional clergy or class of priests because every believer is to serve as a priest exercising his or her spiritual gifts. It is about universal priesthood.
- c) There is no order of service. The believers in the book of Acts just listened to the Scriptures being read as there was no New Testament Bible at that time. They simply ministered to one another.
  - i. There was no denominations. See Acts 2:42.
  - ii. They were not highly-educated but were filled with the Holy Spirit to serve God.
  - iii. If we have followed the model church given in the book of Acts, we will not have so many weak churches today struggling to keep their buildings, training schools, etc. There will also not be so many denominations! Then, we will not have so many church problems about clergy etc. which are man-made problems.
- 4. The book of Acts is also very important in providing a missionary manual.
  - a) Apostles are by definition “sent ones”. They go into cities to preach because the cities impact the surrounding villages greatly. Apostles go to preach and plant churches, they then appoint local church elders and leave. However, today, foreigners go into a country, bringing in foreign models and the pastors stay there forever to shepherd the church they planted! They never leave it to the locals to run the church.
  - b) But in the book of Acts, the Apostles left and let the elders take over. These elders are the locals who were just more matured believers. They can handle the church within 1 year.
  - c) Therefore, if we build God’s houses in our own ways, do not expect God’s blessings! Planting an apple tree in a tropical country will not yield a lot of fruits! We need to ensure that the locals take over after the church is planted!
- 5. Therefore, though the book of Acts was written with the intention of serving as a defence brief for Paul, it has lots of implications for us today!

Question: Can we take everything in the Book of Acts as applicable practices today?

- 1. We must note that some events are not normal. For example,
  - a) Paul’s conversion in Damascus. We do not expect it to repeat. It was just a one-off event with bright light shining in Paul’s encounter with Jesus.
  - b) In Acts 5, Ananias was struck dead with his wife. This was also a one-off event!
- 2. How do we know what happened in book of Acts that we should practise today?
  - a) If it was a one-off inauguration event (e.g. opening ceremony does not happen every day), it means it is not applicable to us!
  - b) But if it was repeated, maybe it can happen again. E.g. The Holy Spirit came down in Acts Chapters 2 and 10 causing huge revival, then again in Acts Chapter 19. Hence, this means it is possible to have such revival events happening again.
  - c) Or it has been confirmed elsewhere in the Bible, E.g. A church is not about a physical building but gathering of believers wherever it is convenient. So, it is about life on life discipleship ministry and fellowship. You see it repeated in

the Epistles where it is said many times, “Ekklesia in the house of such and such (a person)”. Buildings are not critical in the existence of a church.

The title – Should it be the “Acts of the Apostles”?

1. Many people called this book “Acts of the Apostles”. This is not an accurate title. Only one of the 12 Apostles, Peter, was featured in about 1/3 of the book of Acts. The rest of the 11 Apostles were hardly mentioned. 2/3 of the book of Acts was about Apostle Paul who was the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle. He was not one of the original “Twelve Apostles” chosen by God.
2. The real personality in the book of Acts is not Paul also.
  - a) God was featured 100 times.
  - b) The Holy Spirit was featured 70 times.
  - c) Jesus was featured 40 times.Hence, the book of Acts is about God, not any of the Apostles.
3. As such, a better title would be the “Acts of God through the Holy Spirit, acting in human Apostles, leading men to Jesus Christ”.

Meaning of the word “Apostle”

1. The word “Apostle” simply means “the sent one”.
2. There are 5 different types of apostles. So be careful how we use this word.
  - a) The Chief Apostle is Jesus Christ who was “sent” from heaven to Earth.
  - b) The 12 Apostles are the original Twelve Apostles who lived with Christ while He was on Earth and with Matthias replacing Judas subsequently.
  - c) Paul was the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle. He was the special “sent one” who wrote many epistles.
  - d) Church planters such as Paul and Barnabas. (The Greeks distinguish the different types of apostles.)
  - e) Anyone who was sent to serve. An example is Epaphroditus who never planted a church. He was sent to Rome to be Paul’s helper when Paul was old and in prison. (Pastor Paul Choo said he himself is of this category but he does not like to use the word “apostle” because there are connotations associated with this word that confuse others). Basically, they are just believers sent out to help other men in the field. Technically, it is not wrong to call these people apostles but it emotionally troubles some people, so it is best not to use it.

**Book of Acts (Part 2 of 2)**

What is this Book of Acts about?

1. It is about how the Christian faith spread to the world. There was only one Jewish Church at the beginning of the book of Acts. However, at the end of the book, it became an international Church. God is the God of Universe. God has chosen Israel to be His missionary but Israel failed in this mission badly. Hence, Israel was side-lined for a while. God then chose the Church to be His missionary to spread the Gospel message.
2. In the past, 99% of the world’s people were born into their local religion and died in their own community religion. No one spread their faith because it was their local god.

BUT the book of Acts tells us to bring the Gospel to all the world. This breaking of the norms had caused and will continue to cause lots of clashes.

### What is the Structure of Acts?

Acts can be divided into 5 parts:

1. Chapter 1 is the Introduction
2. Chapters 2 to 7 show what actions were done in the Jewish Church in Jerusalem.
3. Chapters 8 to 12 show what actions were done in Judea and Samaria. (Note that Samaria is half-Jewish.)
4. Chapters 13 to 20 show the missionary journeys to Gentiles territories (i.e. rest of the world) and they covered the 3 missionary trips of Paul.
5. Chapters 21 to 28 show Paul's arrest and he was brought to Rome. At that time, Rome was the centre of the world. Therefore, the Gospel spread to the world.

Before His ascension, Jesus commissioned His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit before bringing the Good News (the Gospel) to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the world. See Acts 1:8. This was being fulfilled in the book of Acts itself.

### Acts Chapter 1 - Introduction

1. Acts 1:1-3 connect to Luke Chapter 24 which is the last chapter of the book of Luke.
2. Acts 1:4-8 talk about the promise of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It was a new phase of God's work.
  - a) The New Testament Church is the Age of the Holy Spirit versus the Age of Patriarch, the Age of Judges, the Age of Princes (or Kings) and the Exile period in the Old Testament.
  - b) In this Age of the Holy Spirit, every believer will have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit unlike Samson or the prophets in the Old Testament who had the Holy Spirit only for a short time.
  - c) New Testament believers should be even more effective than the prophets as Christ lives in us through the Holy Spirit.
  - d) However, the Apostles were told to wait for the Day of Pentecost which happened only in Acts Chapter 2.
3. Acts 1:9-12 mentions the ascension of Christ from Mount of Olives.
  - a) It also says that Christ will return the same way as His ascension on Mount of Olives in His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. It will be a bodily return, just as He resurrected with a new body and ascended to heaven with His new body. See Zechariah 14:4.
  - b) Christ came as the Chief Apostle from heaven to Earth and now return to the right hand of God in heaven.

### Acts Chapters 2 to 7 - Actions in Jerusalem and in the Old Temple

#### Chapter 2 - Day of Pentecost

1. Acts 2:1-3 say that there were divided tongues of fire which rested on each believer and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and started to speak in tongues. When Moses built the tabernacle, on the day of inauguration, a pillar of fire came down to signify God was living in the tabernacle! Similarly, fire was mentioned in the inauguration of Solomon's temple.

2. So, on the Day of Pentecost, the fire was God telling the Apostles that every believer is a temple of God in this inauguration. We, believers are now the temple of God. Even if there is Covid-19, there is no need for us to be present at the physical church in order to worship God.
3. Acts 2:5-12 say that they were speaking in tongues (in about 15 languages).
  - a) The book of Ezekiel says that all of Israel will regather. These verses showed that the Jews did regather in Jerusalem. This was a partial fulfilment of the prophecy in Ezekiel.
  - b) All the scattered Jews who were speaking their own foreign languages could now understand the Apostles. It is like the reversal of the incident at the Tower of Babel where God confused them so that they could not understand each other in Genesis 11:1-9.
  - c) These scattered Jews were surprised that the Apostles who were Galileans could speak the foreign languages of their scattered hometowns. One day in the future, we will no longer have diverse languages that cause us not to understand each other.
4. Acts 2: 40-47. We see the believers sharing their goods and possessions in Acts 2:45. The Church is one family, there is no hierarchy. This is the seed of the model Acts Church.

#### Acts Chapters 3 to 5

1. Peter healed a lame man in the Old Temple. Note that the Old Temple is now no more than just a relic as Pentecost had happened and the Apostles and believers are the New Temple.
2. Due to the clash between this Old and New Temple, Peter and John were arrested.

#### Acts Chapter 6

God raised Stephen who preached against the “Old Temple” worshippers for rejecting God.

#### Acts Chapter 7

They stoned Stephen who became a martyr of the faith and the next phase of Church age began!

#### Acts Chapters 8 to 12 - Actions in Judea and Samaria

1. Acts 8:1-2 – After the stoning of Stephen, there was persecution against the Church. All the believers, except the Apostles, were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria because the Old Temple did not allow them to gather in Jerusalem. Therefore, the New Temple (believers) were scattered.
2. Acts 8:4-8 - The Gospel was preached in Samaria due to the scattering. Philip did many miracles in Samaria.
  - a) In the past, the Jews just went to the Old Temple to listen to the word of God but now they were out there preaching His word!
  - b) We may not realise that God permitted the Covid-19 pandemic to scatter Christians so that we will not all gather in one place. The rise of new communication channels like Internet and Zoom actually allow more people to listen, study and preach God’s words. Sometimes, God has to do certain things to get us out of our comfort zone!
  - c) Many Samaritans were saved through Philip’s preaching of the Gospel.

3. Acts 8:26-40. Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch who came to Jerusalem to worship. In the Old Testament, King Solomon shared with Queen Sheba about God and the Ethiopians thereafter worshipped God like the Jews. Today, there is still an Ethiopian church. (Some say the Ark of Covenant may still be there). Samaritan is half-Jewish and Ethiopian is the Jewish influence in Africa! So, we see the Gospel spreading to Africa! The Ethiopian eunuch was the 1<sup>st</sup> African convert!

### Acts Chapter 9

This chapter is about Saul's conversion who was then renamed as Paul.

### Acts Chapter 10

1. Peter saw a vision of unclean animals and went to preach to a Roman Centurion who was a Gentile. Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his entire household, were saved as a result.
2. Acts 10:44 says the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and the Gentiles and they began to speak in tongues.
3. Cornelius was the first Gentile saved. This was the "inauguration" of Gentiles being saved and the Gospel spread.

### Acts Chapter 11

1. Acts 11:19-21. After Stephen's death, the Jews were scattered due to the persecution. They travelled very far and reached the countries/regions like Cyprus, Antioch, Phoenicia etc. As a result, the Hellenists (Greek Jews) and many Gentiles outside of Judea and Samaria believed in Christ.
2. Thus, Antioch became the first international church. Antioch was a very huge city and it was the home of Luke. Antioch is just at the border of Judea/Samaria!
3. The Church was no more just a Jewish Church! This is the next phase of God's work in the book of Acts.
4. Only the believers at Antioch were first called Christians. Before that, they were always called disciples or followers of Christ. Actually, the term "Christian" is derogatory as it means people who do nothing but just talk about Jesus Christ.

### Acts Chapters 13 to 20 - Paul's three missionary trips

1. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Antioch by the Apostles in Jerusalem to make sure that the church at Antioch did not run wild. The Holy Spirit touched the church at Antioch and they set Paul and Barnabas aside for missionary trips.
2. There were 3 missionary journeys of Paul recorded here:
  - a) The 1<sup>st</sup> missionary trip was to Asia Minor or Turkey. After the 1<sup>st</sup> trip, when Paul returned to the church at Antioch, he realised that the people from Jerusalem said Gentiles needed to be circumcised and to follow food laws. They then went to Jerusalem to seek the Jerusalem Council's decision on the issues of circumcision and food laws which the Jewish Christians insisted should be applied to Gentile Christians as well! The Jerusalem Council decided that Gentiles need not become Jews to be believers, they only need to believe in Christ by faith only.

- b) The 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary trip was also to Asia Minor but Paul heeded the Macedonian call to go to Greece.
  - c) The 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary trip was made by Paul to revisit all these churches he had planted.
3. Classic modus operandi of missionary (or the missionary manual) is found here.
- a) Paul would go to synagogue to preach to the Jews first (These are low-lying fruits because the Jews knew the Scriptures).
  - b) Clashes often happened between the believing and unbelieving Jews in every city where Paul set up a church.
  - c) The pagans were shocked with the concept of “God of the whole world” as this meant that their local gods are not gods!
  - d) The Romans clashed with them too because the Christians say that Jesus is the King of the Jews whilst the Romans believed their emperors were gods and kings.
  - e) Paul suffered a lot in all these missionary trips.

#### Acts Chapters 21 to 28 - Paul arrested in Rome

1. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary trip, the Jews in Jerusalem caused a stir and the Romans saved Paul from being beaten to death.
2. Paul was put on trial before the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council of 70 members), then he was put on trial before the Roman Governor Felix who was later replaced by Festus. They passed the buck because they did not know what to do with Paul. Under the Roman law, he was found not guilty. Governor Festus then passed him to King Agrippa.
3. This could be considered Paul’s most powerful missionary period because he managed to preach to the Jewish leaders (in the Sanhedrin), the Roman governors, King Agrippa and even to the people in Rome while under house arrest in Caesar’s Palace.
4. While under house arrest in Rome, people came to him in Acts 28:30-31. During the 2 years of house arrest, he could preach to people who came to Caesar’s Palace. These visitors to Caesar’s Palace were high ranking people!
5. Paul also wrote the Prison Epistles during this period, which are namely the books of Philippians, Ephesian, Colossians and Philemon.
6. Sometimes, what we see as problems are in fact God’s plan. For example, the persecution in Jerusalem caused the scattering and spreading of the Gospel. Though Paul was put in jail, he reached many whom no one was able to reach.
7. The book of Acts ended in Chapter 28 with a weird ending. It did not say what happened to Paul. Church history says that Paul won this trial but was later re-arrested and beheaded. Therefore, this book is clearly not about Church history as there was nothing mentioned about the Roman church. Rome was at that time the centre of the world. The book of Acts was also not about Paul’s biography but was more a document of defence for Paul’s trial in court!

#### What have we learned in the Book of Acts?

1. God is the God of the Universe, not just the God of Israel.
2. He is the God of love who lives in me, walks with me and guides me every day.
3. Only the Trinity God knows love. A lonely God cannot know love and fellowship. Only the Holy Trinity can be in heaven, yet at the same time Christ was sent to Earth and the Holy Spirit lives in us.

4. The closest person to you (say your spouse), can only go alongside you but God is in you! See the kind of love! Hebrews 13:5 states Jesus is the faithful God who never leaves after He makes His home in us!
5. So, do not focus on Paul or Peter when reading the book of Acts. It is about God, the Trinity!