

—The Message of Acts—

Lesson 1—Listening to Luke

- I. Who needs Acts? (cf. the opening paragraphs of Johnson’s book)
 - A. “**Acts** is God’s call to remember and reflect on His design for His church and to consider how our church fits, or fails to fit, the blueprint.”
- II. How should we read Acts?
 - A. God’s Spirit speaks in Acts, not in the form of explicit instructions or answers tailored to 21st c. questions, but in the form of historical narrative. This raises two crucial questions for modern interpreters.
 1. What is God’s moral verdict on the events narrated in Acts? Are we to duplicate everything we read in the pages of Acts?
 2. What is normative in Acts for the whole church in all ages?
 - B. Our dilemma has been called “the problem of historical precedent.” How is the historical portrait of the early church in Acts a normative precedent for the church today? Two extreme answers have been proposed.
 1. Everything in Acts that the Lord approves should be reproduced in the church today.
 2. Nothing in Acts is normative for the church today.
 - C. Among the New Testament evangelists, Luke alone has written a sequel to the earthly career of Jesus; but he’s not simply writing history. He’s writing prophetically interpreted history, history that must make a difference to our faith and life (cf. 1Cor 10.11; Rom 15.4; 2Tim 3.16. “Certainly the foundational, apostolic period may have some unique features about it, just because it is foundational, but the foundation also determines the contours of the building to be constructed upon it (cf. 1Cor 3).
- III. Guidelines for discovering and applying the message of Acts
 - A. Read Acts in the light of Luke’s purpose
 1. Luke is writing about the climax of God’s redemptive acts in history. *What God has done* occupies center stage in Acts. “In Scripture, the starting point of instruction on right behavior is not a list of our duties, but a declaration of God’s saving achievement, bringing us into a relationship of favor with Him.” Thus for all Acts teaches us about the life of the church until Jesus comes again, we’d be hard pressed to turn it into a manual for church polity or mission policies. Its purpose is more profoundly practical and foundational than many of our questions about procedures and strategies.
 - B. Read Acts in the light of the NT epistles
 1. As significant as Acts is for our theology and church life, the fact that it’s written as an historical narrative has both advantages and limitations.
 2. One advantage is that he shows how different Christianity is from religions rooted in mysticism, mythology, or speculation, as he shows that it’s a matter of God’s personal intervention into this world, by His Son and His gospel, to save sinners.
 3. One limitation is that a narrative doesn’t allow commentary or clarification on Luke’s part.
 4. This is why the epistles of the Apostles are so important. They were written expressly to direct and correct the church’s faith and life and thereby provide a necessary check on the applications that we may draw from Acts for the church today. Thus, “once we recognize the purpose of Acts, we’ll be cautious about accepting as normative today any element of its narration that’s not confirmed in the exhortation of the epistles.”
 - C. Read Acts in the light of the OT
 1. The prominence of the OT in the speeches and sermons of Acts is obvious; but Luke’s debt to the OT goes deeper than the citation of passages in sermons. He’s writing in the style of Hebrew prophetic history, bearing witness to the climax of that tradition in the work of the resurrected

and ascended Messiah. Repeatedly we see OT themes brought to new realization through the presence of the risen Lord in His church.

D. Read Acts in the light of Luke's first volume

1. Acts 1.1-3 summarizes Luke and Luke 24.46-53 anticipates Acts. The books are purposely connected as two volumes of one work. Moreover, parallels between the two books abound so that we're compelled to read both volumes together in order to understand either.

E. Read Acts in the light of its structure

1. Luke is an excellent writer with a good command over the Greek language and over the written word. So we should expect an intentional structure and organization to his writing. He gives us four signals to direct our way through his work.
 - a) Acts 1.8 and 9.15. These two promises of Jesus trace out for us the overarching framework for the 28 chapters of Acts, in which Luke chronicles the spread of the gospel:
 - (1) Acts 1.8 provides a preview to the spread of the gospel in the early church: in Jerusalem (1-7); through Judea and Samaria (8-12); to the ends of the earth (13-28). The gospel spreads from the "city of the great King" (Ps 48.2) to the city of the Caesars (Acts 28) as Gentiles are brought under the redemptive rule of the Lord and His Christ.
 - (2) In Acts 9.15 we see three spheres of witness appointed for Saul of Tarsus: 1) Gentiles, 2) kings, and 3) sons of Israel. This threefold description nicely sums up the targets of Paul's preaching as Luke as recorded it (13-20; 24-26; 22, 28).
 - b) Summary statements made by Luke along the way are vital to the purpose of Acts. They show us the ongoing results of each incident and they set the scene for the next event that Luke intends to recount. Thus the summaries quietly but constantly set the tone for our perception of the Spirit's presence and activity in the church: *the word of the Lord grew powerfully*.
 - (1) Several summary statements place the incidents in Acts within the context of the continuing manifestations of the Spirit's power in the church (cf. 2.42-47; 4.32-35; 5.12-16; 9.31; 16.5).
 - (2) Then, after the appointment of the deacons, Luke introduces a theme on which he will present variations in the rest of his narrative: *So the word of God was growing and the number of the disciples were multiplying* (6.7), cf. 12.24; 13.49; 19.20.
 - c) Repeated accounts
 - (1) Although modern readers have little patience for what seems to be needless repetition in a story, the biblical narrators underscored an event's importance by repeating it with slight variations. For example, compare Gen 24.1-27 with Gen 24.34-49. Isaac's marriage is crucial to the fulfillment of the divine promises and so we're invited to marvel, not once, but twice, at the amazing guidance and provision of God in giving him a bride of His own choosing.
 - (2) Luke also uses repetition as an underscore. He repeats the accounts of Pentecost (2; 11.16; 15.8), the conversion of Cornelius and his house (together with the retelling of Peter's vision) (10; 11.4-17; 15.7), the conversion of Saul (9.1-30; 22.1-16; 26.2-18). Luke repeats these accounts because he doesn't want us to forget the world-changing significance of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Christian church, the Lord summoning the ends of the earth to turn to Him for salvation, and the call of the Apostle to the Gentiles.
 - d) The prominence of preaching
 - (1) At least 30% of the text of Acts consists of apostolic preaching. In fact, preaching receives more extended treatment than the related signs of power. These sermons are extremely important for several reasons:
 - (a) Luke strategically selected sermons as samples of how the gospel spread across cultural and geographical barriers.
 - (b) These sermons are divinely given, apostolic commentaries on the stirring events that marked the church's entrance into the age of the Spirit's power.
 - (c) They are inspired examples of how to preach Christ from the OT and inspired signposts declaring to us the unity of the OT and NT community of faith, the fulfillment of the OT hopes in a NT context, and the Spiritual nature of that fulfillment (e.g. heaven is the Jerusalem for which we long, we are the Temple God promised to rebuild, Abraham's seed and offspring are all who have faith in Christ, the Israel of God is all who are circumcised in heart by the Spirit of God, etc.).