



TEACHING ACTS

Unlocking the book of Acts for the Bible Teacher

DAVID COOK

SERIES EDITORS: DAVID JACKMAN & ROBIN SYDSERFF





For Elisa, Joanna, Ashleigh, Ben and Luke.

'Like arrows in the hands of a warrior'





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ISBN 978-1-84550-255-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2007

by

Christian Focus Publications Ltd.,

Geanies House, Fearn,

Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland, Great Britain

with

Proclamation Trust Media,

Willcox House, 140-148 Borough High Street,

London, SE1 1LB, England, Great Britain.

www.proctrust.org.uk

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Moose77.com

Printed by Nørhaven Paperback A/S, Denmark

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SERIES PREFACE

Whether you are a preacher, a small group Bible study leader or a youth worker, the *Teach the Bible* series will be an ideal companion in your study. Few commentaries are written specifically with the preacher or Bible teacher in mind, and with the sermon or Bible study as the point of reference. The preacher or teacher, the sermon or talk, and the listener are the key 'drivers' in this series.

The books are purposely practical, seeking to offer real help for those involved in teaching the Bible to others. The opening chapter offers an overview of the book (*Getting Our Bearings in Acts*), identifying key themes, structure, literary style etc. Chapter 2 suggests how the material might best be divided up for preaching or teaching (*Planning A Series on Acts*). This outline provides the framework for the meat of the book, with a separate chapter devoted to each sermon / Bible study. The content of these chapters is neither commentary nor sermon, but specifically geared to help the teacher get to grips with the text with its intended



purpose clearly in view, its proclamation as the living Word of God. Chapters follow a consistent structure: 'Listening to the Text', 'From Text to Teaching' and 'Proclaiming the Message' (which includes a suggested preaching outline and format for a Bible study).

We are delighted that David Cook has written *Teaching Acts* for the series. Acts is a tough book to teach, but vital for the Church in every generation. David's wealth of experience in teaching Acts to generations of students at Sydney Missionary and Bible College is evident in the careful and logical way he unlocks the text. Above all, he is a passionate preacher and the best books for preachers are invariably written by preachers! We trust that *Teaching Acts* will be a welcome companion at your desk, helping you to arm the Spirit with His sword, as you participate in God's mission to the ends of the earth.

Our thanks to Tim McMahan, Moira Anderson, Zoe Harris and Anne Sydserrf for editorial assistance and, as ever, to the team at Christian Focus for their committed partnership in this project.

David Jackman and Robin Sydserrf,
Series Editors, London, January 2007



AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This book is written for preachers. Preachers are busy people. As well as preparing to preach with some expertise at least once each Sunday, they generally have to administrate, coordinate, chair, visit, console, counsel, rebuke, correct and evangelize! For this reason, books for preachers, such as those in this series, must strive to be succinct.

The introductory chapters will help preachers get their bearings in Acts, and then to prepare three teaching series to take a congregation or small group through the whole book of Acts. Each of the main chapters takes the preacher through the process of preparing an expository sermon from the text. They include comments on the text and its context, identification of the big idea and the big questions raised by the text which the sermon will seek to answer, some possible points of contact between the message and the audience, dominant pictures which engage the hearer, and some hints on the application of the passage. Issues of application are always difficult, however. In an interview



for the *Leadership Journal*, Haddon Robinson comments that 'more heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis' ("The Heresy of Application", *Leadership Journal*, Oct 1, 1997). Readers are referred to the book, *How to Prepare a Bible Talk*, published by SMBC Press (2003) and my chapters, "A Method of Preparation" and "Illustration and Application", for an elaboration of the need for Big Idea, Big Question, Dominant Picture and Application in expository preaching.

A word of warning! Too often as preachers we let the commentaries do our thinking for us. Under pressure, we immediately go to the commentaries, without first thoughtfully reading the text itself. If that is our 'method', our preaching is likely to be a regurgitation of the commentator's thoughts on a passage. The result is powerless preaching. Read the text thoroughly and thoughtfully, using different translations, and only then consult the commentaries for extra insights, clarification etc. So if you haven't done so already, start reading the text of Acts!

I am grateful to the faculty and students of Sydney Missionary and Bible College who listened and gave feedback on a series of sermons on Acts, delivered in Principal's Hour in 2006. Thank you to Kay Hoe Tan for his research assistance and to Tim McMahan who edited the manuscript. Tim's attention to detail and ability to turn preached material into written form were invaluable. Finally, thank you to all the team at The Proclamation Trust, particularly Robin Sydserrf, for his enthusiastic commitment to this series.

I trust that you find this book a help as you seek to be a faithful and engaging preacher of the book of Acts.

David Cook,
Sydney, December 2006



I

GETTING OUR BEARINGS IN ACTS

The receiving society in the time of Acts

The great diversity of the society to which the gospel came in the first century AD is in many ways much like the multicultural society of today. Christianity in the time of Acts was one among many religions. As well as the dominant religion of Judaism there were followers of the Greek gods – Artemis (19:27-28, 35), Zeus (14:12-13) and Hermes (14:12). There were many religious figures – sorcerers (13:8ff), fortune tellers (16:16) and Jewish exorcists such as the Sons of Sceva (19:14) and Elymas (13:8). The language groups in Acts 2 evidence the diversity of cultures, even in Jerusalem. An individual had the ability and opportunity to pick and choose regarding their belief. Within Judaism, Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, while Sadducees, the Bible-carrying clerics, did not. Then there were the philosophical schools of the Greeks: the Stoics who pursued knowledge and a



virtuous life in apathy, and the Epicureans who sought after happiness in serene detachment. Both are mentioned in Acts 17:18.

Over all this diversity was the Roman insistence on tolerance. For Rome, religion was not about conviction, but superstitious ritual which did not affect everyday life at any profound level. 'Nike' was the religion of Rome: 'just do it, offer your sacrifices, go your way, live your life, don't give the gods a second thought, for they are not concerned about you! That's why many Romans found the Jews fascinating. Their religion affected their lives - the way they worked, rested, ate, etc. - in stark contrast to the Roman conception of religion.

In an environment of such diversity, the Roman Empire was uncompromising in its commitment to maintain unity. This was done by requiring all citizens to sacrifice to the gods (which included the Emperor) regardless of their other religious beliefs. All religions were tolerated as long as they tolerated other religions, including the Emperor cult.

Tolerance was the great civil imperative, but Christians knew that it was a spiritual impossibility because of the unique claims of the Lord Jesus. The way the apostles confronted this culture provides a model for the church today. The church made every attempt to communicate sensitively without being offensive (see the way they preached in synagogues, market places and fields in 4:19-20; 13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:30-31). However, eternal salvation was at stake and Christians had a jealous regard for God's honour, so they were clear and could not be silenced. They determinedly sought to communicate the gospel faithfully in all the diverse situations that confronted them. Note Peter's twin convictions in 5:29, 32 – the apostles were the

commissioned witnesses of God and *co-witnesses with God's Spirit* of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel, focusing on Jesus, was therefore preached fearlessly in country, city, synagogue, market place, and field; and hearers were called upon to repent and trust in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

The author

Luke is not explicitly attributed with the authorship of Acts in the text of the book itself. However, authorship has been consistently attributed to Luke from the latter part of the second century (for example, by Irenaeus in the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* and *Muratorian Canon*). But the strongest reason for accepting Luke's authorship comes from a comparison of the texts of Luke and Acts. Acts evidences an author whose writing style and interests match those of the author of the Gospel of Luke. Both have a great interest in:

- **the ministry of the Spirit** (cf. Luke 1:35, 41, 67; 2:25; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 11:13; 12:12; 24:49; Acts 1:2, 16; 2:4, 33; 4:8; 10:44; 16:6);
- **prayer** (Luke 1:10, 13; 2:37; 5:16; 6:12, 28; 11:1ff; 18:1-8; 19:46; 21:36; 22:39-46; Acts 1:14, 24-25; 2:42; 3:1; 4:24-30; 6:4, 6:1; 7:59-60; 8:14-24; 9:40; 10:2; 14:23; 28:8);
- **God's interest in outcasts** (cf. Luke 4:18, 25-27; 5:29-30; 7:11-12, 22, 31-32, 37-50; 8:2-3; 13:11; 16:19-31; 19:1ff; Acts 5:12-16; 6; 8:4-8; 9:32ff; 12:12-17; 16:12-15; 18:24ff);
- **the fact that the gospel is for the world** (Luke 2:10, 32; 3:4-6; 10:30-37; 13:29; 17:16; 19:10; 24:46-47);

Acts 1:8; 2:17-21; 5:32; 9:15; 10:35, 45; 11:18; 13:39, 47; 14:1; 15; 17:24-31; 22:15-16, 21; 28:28).

There is a close similarity between the introductions of Luke and Acts (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2). In the introduction of Acts, the author refers to his 'former book' and both volumes are dedicated to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1).

The author of Acts refers to himself as a companion of Paul, locating himself in the narrative with 'we' references (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). Colossians 4:7-14 and Philemon 23-24 tell us who Paul's companions were during his imprisonment in Rome. In Colossians 4:14, Luke is referred to as 'dear friend' and 'doctor', suggesting that he was a long-term companion of Paul.

Similar introductions, style, interests, and the fact that the Acts narrative begins where the Gospel narrative concludes, all point to Acts as Volume 2 of Luke's work. In Volume 1 we find a record of 'all that Jesus began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1). In Acts we find the church proclaiming the salvation which is found in Christ. It records the continuation of the ministry of the now ascended Christ through his Holy Spirit, who brings people to the experience of salvation through hearing the gospel.

Acts as historical narrative

The book of Acts, like many Old Testament books such as Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, is an example of historical narrative. Though common in the Old Testament, Acts is the only pure example of this literary genre in the New Testament. Of course, the Gospels are narrative accounts of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, but they are not typical narrative. In the Gospels,

Jesus adds his authoritative, interpretive word to explain the events recorded.

In Acts, the narrator, Luke, is far less prominent. He leaves clues as to what he believes to be important, he passes comment, but he does so in far more subtle ways than by using the direct interpretive word.

In the history of the interpretation of Acts, some scholars have focused on Luke's sources, some have questioned the historicity of Acts and others have spent a good deal of time defending his historical integrity. There is a tendency to read Luke in the light of Paul and use Acts merely as background for Paul's letters. But in the New Testament, Luke has written as much as Paul, so it is good for us to be thinking specifically about Luke and his interests, and not just see him as a foil for Paul. F. Scott Spencer's, *A Literary-Cultural Reading of Acts*, is refreshing. He accepts the text of Acts in its final form as Luke's work, and draws conclusions about what is important to Luke from a close examination of the text itself, without paying undue attention to source and context. Similarly, Tannehill comments: 'I do not explore the possible sources of Acts and seldom comment on the historical events that may lie behind the story, for these interests would lead me away from my main concern with the significance of the narrative in its finished form. Past concern with sources and historical events has sometimes led to hypotheses that stretched beyond the available evidence' (Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts*, 1990, p. 4).

Structure and chronology

Luke aims to provide an *orderly* account for Theophilus, consistent with his stated purpose in Volume 1 (Luke 1:3).

In Acts 1:8 he reveals the structure that will shape the whole book: '... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' The narrative centres on Jerusalem and Judea in chapters 1-7; on Samaria in the transitional period (ch. 8-12); and then finally on the Gentile world, beginning in Asia and Europe, and ending up in Rome (ch. 13-28).

TABLE 1: THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF ACTS

Ref.	Region	Dominant Apostle	Evangelistic Target	Gentile focus
Ch. 1-7	Jerusalem and Judea	Peter	Jews	Ethiopian eunuch converted
Ch. 8-12	Samaria	Peter	Jews Samaritans God-fearers	Saul converted and commissioned as apostle to the Gentiles
Ch. 13-28	Gentile territory (Rome the destination)	Paul	Gentiles (but Jews first)	Antioch the sending church

In terms of chronology, my best efforts have come up with the following dates. There is a great deal of debate in the commentaries about these dates, but this may serve as a helpful general guide.

TABLE 2: THE CHRONOLOGY OF ACTS

A.D.	Event in Acts	Ref.
c. 33	Pentecost	2:1-11
33-34	Stephen's murder > dispersion Paul's conversion and commissioning Paul's period in Arabia	8:1 9:1-19 Gal. 1:17
35	Paul's first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem Antioch church established	9:26-28 11:19-21
43/44	James executed	12:1-2
46/47	Paul's second visit to Jerusalem	11:27-30
48	First missionary journey	Ch. 13-14
49	Council of Jerusalem	15:1-35
49-52	Second missionary journey (Paul in Corinth 50-52)	15:36-18:22
52-57	Third missionary journey (Paul in Ephesus 52-55)	18:23-20:38
57	Paul visits Jerusalem	Ch. 21-23

57-59	Paul imprisoned in Caesarea	Ch. 24-26
59-60	Paul's voyage to Rome	Ch. 27-28
65	Death of Paul in Rome	

Narrative flow

When preaching on narrative it is important to have an eye for movements. Normally, narrative preaching involves preaching on larger sections of text, so the ability to summarise is especially important. In many ways, the art of preaching is the art of summary.

In order to summarise a narrative, the preacher needs to isolate the steps in the development of the narrative and find the links between the steps. I find it helpful to draw up networking diagrams. The following diagrams serve as useful reference points for plotting your way through the book and, in particular, mapping the geographical spread of the gospel from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria, into

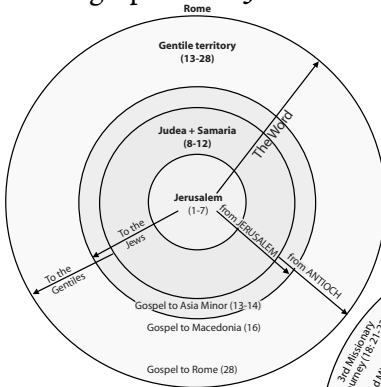
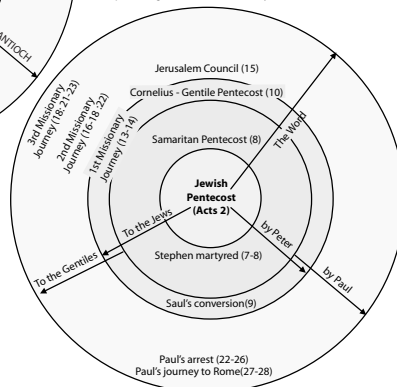


FIGURE 1:
THE GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD OF
THE GOSPEL IN ACTS

FIGURE 2:
KEY EVENTS FOR THE SPREAD
OF THE GOSPEL IN ACTS
PAUL PREACHING IN ROME
'UNHINDEREDLY' (28:30-31)



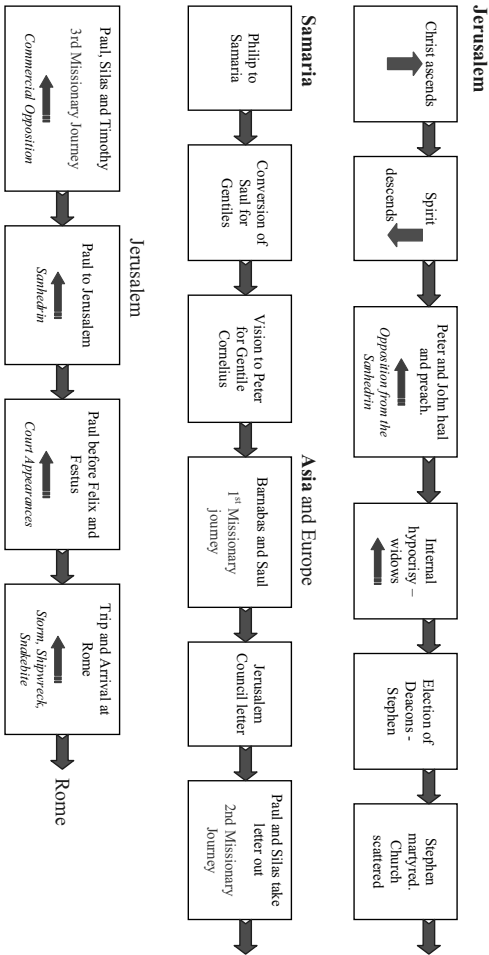


FIGURE 3:
NARRATIVE FLOW OF ACTS

Gentile territory, and finally to Rome (and, by implication, to the ends of the earth).

Throughout the text, Luke includes markers indicating the expansion of the Church. These are included in the narrative at significant points of growth or at key points of transition. Markers take various forms: statistics, repeated phrases, geographical references etc. The following table summarises.

TABLE 3: KEY GROWTH MARKERS

Ref.	Event in Acts
2:41, 47	<i>'Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.'</i> <i>'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'</i> The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, enabling faithful witness.
4:4	<i>'But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.'</i> As a result of their preaching, Peter and John are imprisoned, but many are converted.
6:7	<i>'So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.'</i> The apostles give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. As a result, the word of God spreads.
9:31	<i>'Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.'</i> This follows the conversion of Saul, who is to become the main instrument of Gentile mission outside of Judea and Samaria.
11:21	<i>'The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.'</i> The beginning of witness in Antioch.
12:24	<i>'But the word of God continued to increase and spread.'</i> This statement follows Herod's persecution of the church (and his death!), ending the transitional period from Jerusalem to Antioch and ushering in the great age of mission.
13:43-44, 49	<i>'When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.'</i> <i>'The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.'</i> Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch.
14:21	<i>'They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples.'</i> Paul and Barnabas in Derbe.
16:5	<i>'So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.'</i> This follows the Jerusalem Council's settlement of the issue of gospel purity, validating Gentile inclusion and the ongoing Gentile mission.
19:20	<i>'In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.'</i> This signals the end of Paul's pioneer missionary activity. Ephesus was his last church plant; the word would continue to spread but no longer through Paul in this pioneering way.
28:23, 30	<i>'They... came in even larger numbers to the place where [Paul] was staying... For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.'</i> This signals the end of the work recorded in Acts.

Narrative characteristics

The text of Acts embodies a number of narrative characteristics, which act as cues to the reader, revealing Luke's purpose. These include the use of repetition, key words, statistics and allocation of space. An overall focus of the narrative can also be discerned. Some brief comments on each.

(1) *Repetition*

Repetition is used to signal key events and identify major turning points. Examples are:

(i) *The coming of the Holy Spirit (chs. 2, 8, 10)*

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the church to empower its bold witness is so significant it is recorded three times. In chapter 2 the Spirit comes on the Jewish church at Pentecost. In chapter 8, through Peter and John, the Spirit comes on the church in Samaria. In chapter 10, once again through Peter, the Spirit comes on the Gentile, Cornelius, and his family and close friends.

Luke records the Spirit's coming three times to show that the Samaritan and Gentile churches are in no way inferior to the church in Jerusalem. It also shows that each church is to boldly witness and that such bold witness has its source in the baptism of the Spirit in the believer's life.

(ii) *The conversion of Saul (chs. 9, 22, 26)*

Saul's conversion and commissioning as the Apostle to the Gentiles is recorded fully in chapter 9, repeated in its entirety in chapter 22 to the crowd in Jerusalem, and then again in chapter 26 to Festus and King Agrippa. Luke could have referred the reader in chapters 22 and 26 to his earlier

account of Saul's conversion, but chooses not to. He repeats the full account in the narrative. The repetition emphasises the centrality of this event in the gospel's movement from Jerusalem to Rome.

(iii) *The Gentile mission (ch. 10, 11, 15)*

The gospel's reach to the Gentile world is recorded in God's dealing with Peter and Cornelius in chapter 10. This is then repeated to the Jerusalem apostles and brethren in chapter 11 and again referred to before the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15. Remember that before God's dealings with Peter in chapter 10, he and the other Jewish believers would have understood Luke 24:47 to read: '...and repentance and baptism of sins will be preached in his name to [*the Jews of*] all nations beginning at Jerusalem'. Luke shows that God's purpose is expansion 'to all nations' (Luke 24:47), i.e. 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

(iv) *The terms of Gentile inclusion in the church (ch. 15 [twice], 21)*

The Jerusalem Council is such an important event in the narrative: here the church must decide whether Christianity is merely a new sect of Judaism or stands as a unique revelation. Does the gospel need to include circumcision, so that a Gentile must become a Jew first by circumcision before becoming a Christian? This is so vital that Luke records the letter of decision of the Council in Acts 15:19-21; again in Acts 15:23-29, and then records the Jerusalem leaders' reference to it in 21:25.

(v) *'The word of the Lord spread' (chs. 6, 12, 13, 19)*

As discussed above, the phrase 'the word of the Lord spread', or similar, is used by Luke in Acts 6:7; 12:24, 13:49 and

19:20 to mark the key milestones in the spread of the gospel through Judea, Samaria, and into Gentile territory.

(2) *Key words*

Luke uses key words in his narrative to highlight where his emphasis lies. Examples are:

- the use of the *dei* ('it must happen') [this word is used over forty times in Luke/Acts (e.g. Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 17:25; 19:5; 21:9; 24:44; Acts 1:16; 3:21; 9:16; 17:3; 19:21; 23:11; 27:24)];
- the directional elements in chapter 1 (up, down, out);
- the direct words of God, the majority of which urge the church out to the next mission field (Acts 8:26; 9:6, 15; 10:19-20; 13:2; 16:9; 18:9-10; 20:22; 23:11; 27:24).

(3) *Statistics*

As indicated in Table 3 above, Luke uses statistics to emphasise the growth of the church.

(4) *Allocation of space*

Luke's allocation of space in his narrative reveals his relative interest. Two examples illustrate: the first, at the macro level, the second at the micro level.

Luke devotes one-third of his narrative (chapters 21-28) to Paul's torments and trials, indicating that, allied to the gospel's progress, is the inevitability of suffering and opposition. We read of the troubles Paul encountered in Jerusalem, in his trial before the Sanhedrin, before Felix and Festus, as well as his shipwreck and snakebite.

At the micro level, it is interesting to note the relative space devoted to the martyrdom of Stephen and James. Seventy-

five verses are allocated to Stephen's martyrdom, with only one verse on James'. Why is this? Stephen's martyrdom was the catalyst for the gospel to spread out of Judea and led to the beginning of the Gentile mission; James' martyrdom had no discernable effect on the spread of the gospel.

(5) Overall focus of the narrative

Typical of Luke's Gospel account is that his interest is not primarily on the human characters involved. If Luke were the director of a television series you would sometimes want the camera to be elsewhere. For example, wouldn't you love to follow the demoniac from the region of the Gerasenes home to be reunited with his family (Luke 8:39), or to have been at home with the family of the little girl raised from the dead as they sat for their first family meal following her death and resurrection (Luke 8:53-55)? But Luke's focus is relentlessly on Jesus. Different characters cross his path, are changed profoundly, and move on, but the camera remains on Jesus!

The same is true of Acts. We would love to go home with the Ethiopian treasurer, to see how differently he now administers the treasury. We want to see how the families of Cornelius, or the Philippian jailer, develop after their conversions. We are intrigued as to how Sergius Paulus will operate as a Christian proconsul. But again, Luke is relentlessly focused on the gospel. It comes via the human messenger, touches people profoundly and then moves on to its next encounter.

Luke's purpose is to show the gospel reaching out, carried by Spirit-empowered messengers, under God's superintendence, to Jew, Samaritan and Gentile. This is the melody of Acts: the fulfilment of God's plan to gather in his people from the far reaches of the earth. Christ is ascended,

but he continues to direct his church and empower it through his Spirit. This is why the book of Acts has been a great encouragement to gospel-bearers through the centuries.

Purpose of Acts

For good reason the book of Acts has been called a fertile seedbed of schism. Much dissension arises from differences in opinion over Luke's purpose in writing Acts. Did Luke write in order to justify some experience of the Holy Spirit in salvation? Did he write to provide a model of church government through the ages? Or was it to provide a Biblical foundation for some views of water baptism? In other words, does Luke write to provide us with a church manual?

Luke was an historian. In Luke 1:1-4 he makes it clear that his purpose is to provide an orderly account, based on careful investigation. He records facts like the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But this is no dry history! He engages our emotions. There is humour in the angelic kick to the body of the snoozing Peter (12:7) and in Rhoda's excited neglect of Peter's knocking at the door of Mary's house (12:14). We are moved by the tears of the Ephesian elders as they bid farewell to Paul for the last time (20:36-38). We are angered by the underhand ways of the envious opponents, the Jews, who would rather leave pagans in paganism than see them come to Christ (14:19). We are appalled at the miserable Felix waiting for his bribe, leaving Paul to suffer in prison (24:26). And our hearts are warmed at every mention of the encourager, Barnabas (4:36; 9:27; 11:25; 15:36-39). But while Luke involves his readers emotionally, his key interest is in showing us why things happened the way they did.

(1) *Fulfilment of God's plans*

God is the sovereign Lord of history. He is the faithful God. Things happen in fulfilment of God's plan. Central here is Luke 24:46-47 and Acts 1:8. These are the bridging verses connecting volumes 1 and 2.

Verse 46 is a good summary of Luke's Gospel, while verse 47 is a good summary of Acts. It is helpful to quote the verses in full here, since this is such an important point:

LUKE: 'He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.."' (Luke 24:46)

ACTS: "...and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

Verse 47 is as much the purpose of God as verse 46. To take one without the other makes no sense. The plan of God is the salvation of the nations. Jesus is the one to carry out this plan through his birth, death and resurrection, and then by his Holy Spirit empowering the church to reach the nations from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:7-8: 'He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."'

(2) *God at work*

God is clearly at work right from the outset in Acts. He accredited Jesus (2:22-23). He made this Jesus both Lord

and Christ (2:36). He calls his people to salvation (2:39). Jesus is active, speaking to Paul on the Damascus Road (9:4-5), disallowing Paul from entering Bithynia (16:7) and encouraging Paul in Corinth (18:9-10). The Holy Spirit is active, baptizing the believers in chapter 2, filling them again in 4:31, coming on the Gentiles in 10:44-45 and setting apart the missionaries in 13:2.

God is actively bringing about the fulfilment of his plan. And because it is God's plan, it will be fulfilled! It is an unstoppable gospel, despite:

- ✦ external religious opposition (4:1ff; 5:17ff; 6:8ff);
- ✦ economic opposition (16:16ff; 19:23ff);
- ✦ internal hypocrisy (5:1ff);
- ✦ church friction (6:1-7; 15:36-41);
- ✦ persecution (5:17ff; 8:1ff; 12:1ff; 13:49-52; 14:19-20; 17:1ff; 21:27ff);
- ✦ martyrdom (7:54-8:4; 12:1-4);
- ✦ storms and shipwrecks (27:13ff);
- ✦ courts (4:5ff; 18:12-17; 24:1ff; 25:1ff);
- ✦ imprisonment (12:5ff; 16:16ff);
- ✦ orthodox religious tradition (15:1ff).

God will see his plan through! Christ will bring his people to salvation! Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations! The gospel will reach the ends of the earth! It is written!

(3) *Focus on Jesus*

The gospel is all about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1:1; 2:36, 38; 4:8-12; 5:42; 8:12, 35; 10:36; 11:20-21; 13:38-39; 15:11; 16:31; 18:5, 28; 19:4; 20:24; 24:24; 28:31).

Luke also makes it clear what it's not about:

- ✦ It's not about Judaism (15:10).
- ✦ It's not about spiritism (16:18).

- ✦ It's not about politics (17:7).
- ✦ It's not about philosophy (17:18).

It is the broadcast of this gospel about Jesus Christ which God uses to bring about the fulfilment of his purpose. And therefore, the focus of preaching in Acts is Jesus:

- ✦ At Pentecost Peter preaches about Jesus (2:14-39).
- ✦ At the healing of the lame man, Peter preaches about Jesus (3:6).
- ✦ To the God-fearing, Peter preaches Jesus (10:34-48).
- ✦ To conservative Jews, the apostles preach Jesus (14:3).
- ✦ To sophisticated Greeks, Paul preaches Jesus (17:31).
- ✦ To disciples of John the Baptist, Paul preaches Jesus (19:4).
- ✦ Jesus is preached as the Christ (2:31, 36, 38; 3:6, 18, 20; 4:10; 5:42; 8:5; 9:22; 10:36; 16:18; 17:3; 18:5, 28; 26:23; 28:31), son of David (2:25-36; 4:25-26; 13:33-34), Son of Man (7:56), Lord (1:6; 2:21, 36; 7:59-60; 9:5; 10:36), author of life (3:15), leader and Saviour (5:31; 13:23), prophet like Moses (3:22; 7:37), holy and righteous one (2:27; 3:14; 7:52; 22:14).

(4) Jesus and his Church

Luke is also concerned to show the continuity between Jesus in Luke and his church in Acts. For example, there are clear parallels between the prophetic voices of Simeon and Anna at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:25-38) and Peter's reference to the prophetic fulfilment of Joel (Acts 2:17-21) at the birth of the church. The flow of the gospel in Luke is Christ towards Jerusalem. In Acts, it is from Jerusalem out

to the world. Each volume begins with a similar introduction to Theophilus, a period of waiting and prayer (1:1-14; cf. Luke 1:1-56) and then the coming of the Spirit (on Jesus at his baptism, and upon his church at Pentecost).

(5) *Jesus and Paul*

There are also clear parallels between the Lord Jesus and Paul:

- Both come to Jerusalem and after a good initial reception are rejected by the people (Luke 19:37-40; Acts 21:17-20).
- Both visit the temple (Luke 19:45-47; Acts 21:26).
- Both are opposed by the Sadducees (Luke 20:27ff; Acts 23:6-8).
- Both are seized by the mob (Luke 22:47-54; Acts 21:30-36).
- Both are struck by the High Priest's officials (John 18:22; Acts 23:2).
- Both experience four trials (Luke 22:66; 23:1, 7, 13; Acts 22:30; 24:1; 25:1ff, 23).

Applying Acts today

We must apply Acts in a way that is consistent with Luke's purpose. Our task is to focus on what is important to him.

(1) *God's mission heart*

The character of God will be central, and in particular, his heart for the lost. Moreover, God is instrumental in directing his people in mission. For example, he deals with Peter's reluctance to go to Cornelius' house. He oversees the sensitive appointment of Barnabas to Antioch. He guides James at the Jerusalem Council. He superintends the scattering of believers to Samaria following Stephen's

death. He urges the setting apart of Barnabas and Saul for missionary work. He sends the vision of the man of Macedonia to Paul, and thus brings the gospel to Europe.

(2) Gospel progress

The progress of the gospel is inevitable, despite many obstacles. The gospel messenger is not promised an easy road. Jesus' messiahship involved him taking up a cross. And the pattern for the disciple, whether the apostle Paul, or you and me, is cross-bearing. For every Christian, the life of discipleship is cross-shaped.

(3) The empowering Spirit

The presence of the empowering Holy Spirit in the life of the church is emphasised. All that is accomplished is due to his direct involvement in transforming those who were once self-centred and insecure into outgoing, courageous and sacrificial servants of the gospel. All forms of ministry are affirmed: the preacher, the one-to-one evangelist, the ministry of table service, the discipler of new believers leading them to a better grasp of the truth, and those who make clothes for the poor. Moreover, both men and women are affirmed in their gospel ministry.

All these issues, close to Luke's heart, are fertile grounds for application to the church of the twenty-first century, as it battles to maintain its integrity in a secular, Godless world.

(4) God's sovereignty in a hostile world

The proclamation of the gospel in a society which enshrines tolerance above all else, makes persecution inevitable. Despite the persecution, however, God is sovereign,

directing the progress of the gospel and protecting his people. God will *inevitably* bring his purposes to fulfilment. Consider these verses:

- ♦ ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’ (11:18).
- ♦ ‘... and all who were appointed for eternal life believed’ (13:48).
- ♦ ‘The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message’ (16:14).
- ♦ ‘For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city’ (18:10).

The obvious hope for society, then as now, is that the Word of the gospel is preached. Luke shows how this gospel transforms lives from Jerusalem to Rome. God constantly exhorts the church in this vital task of proclamation. Of the twenty-two direct words of divine speech in Acts (i.e. where Jesus, the Lord, the Holy Spirit, a voice, or an angel speak) sixteen are reminders to the church of the need to keep reaching out to the ends of the earth. Reflecting on this in his commentary, Blaiklock comments: ‘...to press outward from the fringe is always sound policy, provided it is done with vigour and devotion’ (*Tyndale Commentary*, E.M. Blaiklock, 1967, p. 50).

Pastoral impact

Luke’s pastoral interest is seen in his concern that Theophilus and others should have ‘certainty’ of what they have been taught (Luke 1:4). Doubt paralyses and Acts is an antidote to doubt. Invariably, doubt springs from unrealistic expectations, and so the book of Acts delivers a healthy dose of reality to believers. This is why Dr Lloyd-Jones said:

'Live in that book, I exhort you; it is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know of in the realm of the Spirit' (Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Warfare* (Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 274).

My daughter and son-in-law are missionaries in Mongolia. In 1992, Mongolia became independent of the Soviet Union, and with religious freedom, the church has flourished. Mongolians don't give their trust easily. For over seventy years as part of the USSR no one knew who could be trusted. The big issue for the believer in Mongolia is whether or not God can be trusted to deliver on his promises. One of the threats to the young Mongolian church is prosperity preachers from the West who tell converts they can expect health and wealth from God. While God can be trusted absolutely, he cannot be trusted to deliver on a promise he has never made.

Luke, therefore, is careful to deliver his readers from the anxiety that arises from false pessimism as well as the unreal excitement that arises from false optimism. There is no false triumphalism here. Gospel workers can expect a difficult time. As already noted, one-third of Acts (chs. 21-28) covers Paul's troubles. In fact, whatever speech or event, the inevitable pattern in Acts is a divided response. "The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles' (14:4). 'When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ... A few men became followers of Paul and believed ...' (17:32-34).

Acts has sobering words for advocates of a prosperity gospel. 'I will show him how much he must suffer for my name' (9:16). "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). 'I only know that in every

city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me' (20:23).

Remember the words of the Lord Jesus in John 16:33, 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' His guarantee is that we can expect trouble in this world, but also peace in the midst of it. This is the experience of those who rest in Christ. Acts, therefore, is a great encouragement to keep going, as we seek to communicate the gospel faithfully in a hostile world. The gospel is the world's only hope, and we must not be silenced. No matter how tough things are, the gospel will not be overcome. 'God buries his workmen, but carries on his work' (John Wesley).

Luke chooses his last words well! In Luke 1:4 (the end of the introduction to Luke-Acts) the last word in the Greek text is 'certainty'. In Acts 28:31 the last word is (literally) 'unhinderedly', a dynamic adverb modifying the participles 'preaching' and 'teaching'. In other words, Acts is the end of the beginning. The God of mission lives. He empowers his people now as then. The unconverted are converted through the preaching of the gospel. *Dei* – 'It must happen!' Acts shows us the triumph of God's purpose.

To be apostolic today is to see the world and to respond to it as the apostles did. It is to imitate the apostolic character, to preach the apostolic gospel and to follow Jesus as part of God's plan and kingdom. To be committed to that plan and its fulfilment is always the mandate of the apostolic church. The extent to which a church commits itself to this missionary task is the extent to which it could be said to be Christian. Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth remains our mandate!



2

PLANNING A SERIES ON ACTS

A suggested series

Acts could be divided into three major series of sermons around these three main movements:

- ✦ Chapters 1-7, The gospel at work in Jerusalem and Judea.
- ✦ Chapters 8-12, The gospel at work in Samaria.
- ✦ Chapters 13-28, The gospel at work in Gentile territory.

Series I. A Great Tonic! (Acts 1:1-6:7)

Week 1	Introductory Sermon: 'Tonic For Your Soul: Why This Will Be Good For You'	Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:3-8
Week 2	'Will Things Be Different? Yes And No!'	Acts 1:1-26
Week 3	'How To Be Fully And Forever Equipped'	Acts 2:1-13; 8:14-17
Week 4	'It's All About Jesus'	Acts 2:14-47
Week 5	'The Triumphant Indicative'	Acts 3
Week 6	'Handling Hostility' 'Who Pulls The Strings And Who Speaks The Truth'	Acts 4:1-31; 5:17-42
Week 7	'Telling Lies To God'	Acts 4:32-5:11
Week 8	'So The Word Of God Spread'	Acts 6:1-7



Series 2. The Word Spreads! (Acts 6:8-13:3)

Week 1	'The Church's First Martyr'	Acts 6:8-8:1
Week 2	'The Story Of One: Expansion To Samaria'	Acts 8:26-40
Week 3	'A Surprising Conversion'	Acts 9:1-20; 22:1-22; 26:1-32
Week 4	'God's Expansive Purposes'	Acts 10:1-11:18
Week 5	'The Hidden Hand At Work'	Acts 12:1-25
Week 6	'Our Mother Church'	Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

Series 3. The Unstoppable Gospel! (Acts 13:4-28:31)

Week 1	'What's In A Name?'	Acts 13:4-14:28
Week 2	'Things Which Go Without Saying'	Acts 15:1-16:5
Week 3	'The Five City Tour'	Acts 16:6-18:22
Week 4	'A Model Ministry'	Acts 18:23-20:38
Week 5	'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem'	Acts 21:1-23:24
Week 6	'Trial Upon Trial'	Acts 23:25-26:32
Week 7	'Through Many Dangers, Toils And Snares'	Acts 27:1-28:10
Week 8	'Unhinderedly'	Acts 28:11-31

These series might be preached consecutively, or as separate series with a break in between. If they are tackled separately, it would be useful to recap on the material in the introductory sermon (Series 1) at the start of Series 2 and 3.

Structure of the chapters which follow
This suggested structure forms the basis of the chapters which follow. A separate chapter is devoted to each sermon/ Bible study.

Individual chapters follow a consistent structure or methodology, specifically geared to help you get to grips with the text, in order to teach it: 'listening to the text,' 'from text to teaching' and 'proclaiming the message.' Some brief comments on this methodology will be helpful by way of navigation.

(1) *Listening to the text*

Listening to the text is the right kind of engagement with biblical text. It is a careful and methodical activity, but never a forensic exercise! In his book, *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson reminds us that we approach the inspired Word of God, not as cool analysts, but as passionate hearers! The former approach will have us taking a tool kit to the text; the latter (and right approach) will first find us prayerfully meditating on the text (Ps. 1) and then, appropriately and sensitively, picking up our analytical tools. In human interaction, we learn most by asking the right questions and listening patiently to the answers. The careful reader of Scripture will ask questions like:

- ✦ What is the author saying?
- ✦ Why does he say it like this?
- ✦ Why does he say it like this in this context?
- ✦ What did it mean to the first readers?
- ✦ What does it mean now?
- ✦ What should I do about it?
- ✦ What pictures is he using?

All these are useful questions to guide reflection. Your own personal discoveries will lead to a more passionate presentation and a renewed freshness in your preaching.

The saying is true:

- ✦ A truth taught is interesting.
- ✦ A truth caught is exciting and challenging.
- ✦ A truth discovered is life-changing.

In the chapters that follow, the content of the section 'listening to the text', will vary according to the nature and dynamics of the particular passage being studied.

Having engaged with the text in this way, it would then be appropriate to consult the commentaries.

(2) From text to teaching

By the end of step (1) we should have got to grips with the essentials of the passage. As we sit at our desk, we have a 'text to explain'. If that is the end point, however, our preaching will sound like a lecture or commentary. To preach or teach a passage we must move beyond a 'text to explain' to having a 'message to proclaim'. It's good to keep the logic of this discipline clear in our working week. By Thursday we should have a 'text to explain', but by Sunday we must have a 'message to proclaim'. This is a simplistic illustration, I know, but it makes an important point!

A number of steps can be identified in this movement from text to teaching. Again, these are not prescriptive, but simply a template or guide to the kind of process we should be working through.

(i) Get the message clear

Our concern here is to nail down the essential message of the text. If you like, it is to separate the boulder from the rocks and pebbles in a passage. A helpful way to get the message clear is to identify the big idea and then conceptualize that idea as a question or questions. The terms 'theme' (theme sentence) and 'aim' (aim sentence) are often used, but personally I find 'idea' and 'question' easier to work with. If our preaching is to be engaging then all our sermons must answer a question and it must be the question answered by the passage. I try to state the big idea of the passage in one succinct sentence. The big question takes the statement of the big idea and turns it into a question. The preacher will then spend the early part of the sermon showing why the big question is important and relevant for his listeners.

For example, if I were preaching on Matthew 6:24, the big idea would be: 'The citizen of the Kingdom must follow God not wealth, not God and wealth.' Appropriate questions would be:

- Why not worship wealth?
- Who is truly God?
- Why follow God?
- How do we avoid divided allegiance?

In determining the big question or questions, each one should be tested against the passage in order to determine whether it is being answered by the passage. If I set a big question which is not obviously answered by the passage, then it will lead to confusion!

(ii) Engage the hearer

Two issues are of central relevance here: what I call 'point of contact' and 'dominant picture(s)' / illustration(s).

By point of contact (sometimes called 'hook'), my intention is to immediately connect the passage into the lives of the listeners. I think of my sermon as a 747 jumbo jet! It requires maximum thrust to get it off the ground and maximum thrust to land. I give a lot of attention to both the introduction and conclusion of the sermon. I always begin with life, never the Bible, and then bring the life situation to the Bible. To repeat what others have said: to get to first century Palestine, I start my listeners at Sydney airport and get them back (always a return ticket, never one-way!). In terms of an appropriate point of contact, a helpful gauge is to think whether it connects with the big question.

It is always helpful to use illustrations in sermons or Bible studies, but only if they are good illustrations! Too often, the connection with the point being illustrated is

tenuous. Illustrations must never be used for their own sake, but only if they clarify the point. A good way to work on illustration is first to determine the dominant picture(s) in a passage and then work on illustration by filling out that picture.

(iii) Work on application

As I noted in the Preface, issues of application are always difficult! Application, however, is vitally important. Fundamentally, our confidence is in the living inspired Word. Scripture necessarily implicates the passage in the life of the hearer and implicates the life of the hearer in the passage. It's not our job to make the passage applied, but to apply the passage!

I work on application at three levels. The first is the **necessary application** - how the passage must apply to all hearers at all times. This is the authoritative application, calling on people to repent of some specific attitude or action and to trust in Christ in a specific way.

The opposite of the necessary is the **impossible application** (the second level of application) i.e. how the passage cannot possibly apply. I assume that over half of my listeners are living consistently with the impossible application of the passage! Therefore I try to confront the impossible application directly and refute it. For example, in Matthew 6:24 Jesus begins: 'No one can' and concludes 'You can not' serve both God and wealth. Twice in the one verse he stresses that we cannot serve two masters, God and wealth. The necessary application is to recognise that God is God, repent of our service of wealth and follow him. We must not substitute wealth for God. The impossible application of that verse is to think that we are the exception, and that

we *can* serve two masters. In my experience, it is always good for the preacher to point out how the passage cannot be understood. It's a great way of exposing what people are really thinking!

The third level is the **possible application**. How might the teaching of this passage work out personally? How might the passage apply, at some time and in some circumstances, to some people? By showing how the passage applies for himself or others, the preacher is suggesting ways of practical application. For example, financial generosity is one way of showing God's Lordship over wealth. Some people look on a tithe (ten percent of income) as a good guide to giving. Some look on a tithe as the equivalent of paying taxes, and giving starts after the 10 percent. The preacher must be careful not to push the possible application up to the level of the necessary application and therefore make his insights (rather than the truths explicitly taught in the text) the basis of a call for repentance. The tithe must not become the necessary application of this passage.

(3) Proclaiming the message

The third section in each chapter is 'proclaiming the message'. I have included a suggested preaching outline and format for leading a Bible study. These, of course, are simply my suggestions - make use of them as you think best. The Bible study works through four logical steps, which I have found helpful as a general format.

- ✦ Step 1: Introduce the issues
- ✦ Step 2: Study the passage
- ✦ Step 3: Think it through
- ✦ Step 4: Live it out