

Acts of the Apostles

Acts 1-3

The New Testament books of Luke and Acts were written by the same author and addressed to the same recipient. They amount to about 1/4 of the New Testament. The author's name is not mentioned in either book, but comes to us from ancient sources, namely Luke, Paul's physician friend and helper, who was of Greek heritage (Col 4:14). Acts begins in the interval between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, in about 30 AD, and closes with Paul as a prisoner in Rome, in 62 AD. Acts sketches out the first 30 years of the church, primarily focusing on the work of Peter among the Jews in the early years (chapters 1-12) and then Paul among the nations (13-28) as the message was spread abroad.

Acts 1:1 mentions the gospel of Luke, and Theophilus, the recipient. As Luke closed his gospel account with the ascension of Jesus, that's essentially where Acts begins.

The work of the Holy Spirit (v2, 5, 8) is a unifying theme of Acts.

40 days of appearances and interacting with his chosen apostles (see also Acts 10:40-41). Reminding us of the days of Noah, and of Moses on Mt Sinai, and Israel spying out the land, and Elijah traveling to Mt Sinai, and Jesus fasting and being tested by the devil. God chose certain features to connect the dots across the centuries. 40 days puts the ascension probably on Thursday, 6 weeks after Jesus' suffering had begun.

Jerusalem was to be the starting point for the proclamation of the unveiled kingdom, v4, Isaiah 2:1-5. The coming of the Holy Spirit on a never before seen scale was predicted by several prophets, including Joel 2:28ff, Zech. 12:10, and John the Baptist. Jesus told the disciples that outpouring was imminent, Acts 1:4-5, 8.

For the apostles in particular the baptism of the Holy Spirit included power to enable them to be Jesus' witnesses, from Jerusalem by stages to the end of the earth, the "great commission" of Matthew 28:18ff and Mark 16:15ff.

The disciples had a lifetime of misconceptions about the nature of God's kingdom on earth, and so there were still questions in 1:6 with an answer that deferred to God's will and their upcoming experience of the coming Holy Spirit.

The ascension riding a cloud the promise of his return harks back to Daniel 7:13 and Matthew 26:64.

Filling the void left by Judas was part of the Lord's plan, to have 12 leaders for the new kingdom of priests as there had been 12 patriarchs for Israel. This was a onetime event, the 12 apostles are foundational (see Revelation 21:14). The qualifications required a disciple who'd seen and heard it all. The prayer for selection in v24 must have been addressed to the Lord Jesus, because the selection of an apostle of the Lamb was his prerogative. The apostles often addressed Jesus as "Lord," as in Acts 1:6.

Acts 2

The Day of Pentecost was 7 sabbaths + 1 day after Passover, hence the name reflecting the counting of 50 days, or the older Jewish name, the feast of weeks. Pentecost was one of 3 pilgrimage holy days when Jewish men were to gather in Jerusalem (see Deut 16). Hence, there were Jews from all over the world at Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was poured out. This is the reversal of dividing the nations at Babel (Genesis 11, Deut 32).

The miracle of the tongues was just that, a miracle. More than a dozen nations are mentioned as hearing the mighty works of God in their own languages. The speakers were the apostles, based on 1:26-27 and 1:11 with 2:7 and 2:14.

There are always mockers.

The importance of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit as a watershed event for the kingdom cannot be overemphasized. This was crucial in the promises of the prophets for the New Covenant. The culmination of Jesus ministry in his death, burial and resurrection set the stage for this event (recall John 14-16) which is the crucial next step in God's plan for redemption. The work of the Spirit is crucial for new birth, redemption, and sanctification (consider Acts 2:38, Titus 3:5-7, Ephesians 1:13, 2:18-22, etc. Note the emphasis on the availability of the Spirit to all people in the

citation from Joel, v17-18, and the promise for all who repent and are baptized in 2:38.

There are dozens of hyperlinks to the Law and Prophets and Psalms in Acts 1-2, major and minor, including the very vocabulary Luke used. Note the 3,000 saved at Pentecost (2:41) as a reset from the 3,000 who died in the golden calf incident when the Law was given at Sinai (Exodus 32). The sharing and gladness in 2:42-47 is the very spirit of Pentecost (see Leviticus 23:15-22, note v22, and Deut 16:9-12). Pentecost was a harvest celebration and a time for sharing the bounty.

2:42 is an appropriate list of things for disciples to still be devoted to. The phrase “breaking of bread” in this context is ordinary words referring to the Lord’s table observance, as again in Acts 20:7.

Acts 3

The temple courts provided space for gatherings of disciples (2:46, 3:1) in Jerusalem. The encounter with the lame man in chapter 3 highlights the continuity of the work of the Spirit in the apostles and the work of Jesus. Note the invocation of Jesus’ name in an unmistakable identification of the Lord in 3:6. Just as with the miracles of Jesus, the result was instantaneous and complete. Just as the miracles of Jesus, the result was praising God, and filling people’s hearts with wonder and amazement.

Peter seized upon the opportunity of attention drawn by the healed beggar to proclaim redemption in Christ, with a brief review of the heritage of promises God had given to Abraham’s descendants, fulfilled in Jesus. The recent past of Jesus’ crucifixion and the empty tomb was certainly not forgotten in Jerusalem. When Peter spoke of those far off (2:39) and “all nations of the earth” (3:25) he himself did not yet apprehend the meaning of the words he spoke, that it was “first” to the Jews (3:26) but really for everyone.

Acts 4-6

Acts 4

Having healed a lame man, and then preached the resurrected Jesus to a crowd that gathered in the temple court, Peter and John and the healed

man were arrested by irritated temple authorities who were Sadducees (Jews who denied spirits and the very idea of resurrection of the dead). Meanwhile, the number of men who believed in Jesus had grown to about 5,000. The harvest festival continued.

When brought before the council the next morning Peter and John confounded the rulers with their composure and directness of the apostles, noting that they weren't trained teachers in the conventional sense, but were followers of Jesus. The message of v10-12 is a statement of the core theme of the Bible. One God, and one means of access to God, Jesus Christ.

The fact that an undeniable miracle had occurred in a very public venue tied the hands of the council, they didn't want to alienate the people, but in no way persuaded them to follow Jesus. The response of the apostles to the threats of the council in v19-20 again is core teaching, that God's people obey human authorities except when that would mean disobeying God. God's authority transcends all human authority. His had been displayed by Daniel and Jeremiah and other faithful followers of God in the past.

The prayer for boldness should be a model for believers in any generation facing challenges or threats of any kind. It's hard to go forward boldly when intimidated or frightened or uncertain, but God's power is sufficient. Note that the prayer in 1:24 was undoubtedly addressed to Jesus, "Lord," while his prayer to the "Sovereign Lord" (4:24) clearly is addressed to the Father who sent "your holy servant Jesus" to fulfill prophecy in the face of severe opposition. What the disciples prayed for, they proceeded to put into practice with divine assistance from the Holy Spirit. Note too the place of praise and scripture (citations of Psalm 2) incorporated in the prayer for help.

Amplifying the beatific description of Christian harmony and generosity in 2:42-47, we see the apostles continuing to preach and do signs and wonders, and the Christians continuing to share abundantly with one another. This was a tremendous time of nurturing for the first disciples, who would soon be called upon to take their faith with them to other places. The generosity of the brethren is connected with "great grace" in v33. Joseph Bar-nabas (son of encouragement) is introduced here with a character that will shine through repeatedly in Acts 9 and 13-15, as well as mentions by

Paul in 1 Corinthians and Galatians.

Acts 5

Ananias and Sapphira did not end the generous sharing of brother to brother in Jerusalem, but they point up in Acts 5 that those who came to Christ were not all faithful. The sin this couple conspired to commit wasn't keeping some funds that were their personal property, it was pretending to give all when they didn't. They craved recognition, but also wanted to keep a secret stash of funds. They set out to serve God and mammon. When they lied to the apostles for the sake of their own image, they lied to the Holy Spirit, they lied to God. Aside from the moral failure, note that Peter clearly identifies the Holy Spirit with God in his comments in v3 and 4. Their error, having seen mighty works (4:33), they had the audacity to try to deceive God, just as Achan had at Jericho in Joshua 6-7. That rebellion called for a demonstration of judgment. Some fear (5:11) is a good thing.

All through the first 5 chapters of Acts it is the apostles who preach to unbelievers, the apostles who teach the church, the apostles through whom signs and wonders are performed. And it is the apostles who are dragged into court by indignant rulers alarmed at their success. The Lord had not sent an angel to release Peter and John in chapter 4, but he did in 5:19, with instructions to directly defy the council by publicly preaching about Jesus in the temple courts, which they did first thing the next morning. Instances like this are what Jesus had warned them to expect, and told them not to try to have a prepared lesson but speak as the Spirit led them when the time arose.

The scene in 5:21-26 is comical, and the absurdity is intended to be apparent. The officers were afraid of the people but not afraid of the Lord who opened the prison doors without their noticing.

The trial before the council in v27-40 displays again the problem of being unwilling to listen or change. The apostles were unwavering about Jesus and about the men who violently opposed him. Gamaliel, who we later learn was rabbi to young Saul/Paul, seems reasonable, except that when all is said and done the one thing he doesn't do is follow through and become a disciple of Jesus.

The beating inflicted on the apostles was a foretaste of things to come for each of them, as Jesus had forewarned, and they were not daunted, but

rejoiced in the Lord. Note the places of preaching and teaching in 2:46 and 5:42.

Acts 6

Despite the many excellencies of grace experienced by those disciples in Jerusalem, some problems arose from the logistics of caring for thousands of people. Everything had been in the hands of the 12, and it had grown beyond their ability to manage. So in 6:1ff some people among them who were of the Greek speaking Jewish community saw their part of the church being neglected in the distribution of necessary goods. The abundance of supply was there, but the administration of supplies needed more time and attention than the apostles had to give. Consequently they chose 7 to “deacon” tables. The noun in 1 Timothy 3:8 denotes the person who does the work of the verb in Acts 6:2, to “serve” tables. To understand how to recognize men full of the Spirit and of wisdom, see Galatians 5:22-23 and James 3:17.

All 7 of the men selected by the disciples in v5 have Greek rather than Hebrew names. Stephen is noteworthy for his faith and obvious presence of the Spirit, Nicolaus because he was a Jewish convert, originally a gentile, and from Antioch which will be an important connection.

The apostles most likely laid hands on these men to commission them to the work of administering the resources for the good of the church, as Joshua was commissioned by Moses (Numbers 27:18). In the aftermath, we learn that these men too began to preach and teach and that signs and wonders were done by their hands, whereas before only the apostles had been mentioned as doing these things.

The tidbit in 6:7 about growth, including “a great many of the priests” is important. These are probably not the professional clergy who ran the temple, but those priests who served in rotation like Zechariah in Luke 1. They are choosing the real temple over the obsolete stone structure (consider 2 Chronicles 11:13-17). Following Jesus put them at odds with the rulers of the temple, which may have been costly in many ways.

Acts 6:8-8:3 focuses on Stephen and the impact of his preaching and teaching. Note the opponents of Stephen among the Greek speaking Jews in v9, and particularly some from Cilicia. We don’t have a diagram here, but

we learn later than a young man zealous for the Law named Saul was from Cilicia, and that he had a hand in Stephen's trial and murder. Most likely Saul himself tried without success to refute Stephen and was incensed at his failure, rationalizing unlawful methods to supposedly defend the Law. Notice the echoes of Jesus' mock trial before the high priest in the false witnesses and accusations brought against Stephen.

It's difficult to read v15 without thinking something miraculous was happening before the council. Moses's face had been radiant when he talked with God. Angels are described by Luke a couple of times as having a radiant glory (Luke 2:9, 24:4), and perhaps there is some glimmer of radiance in Stephen's face as he faces the council.

Note that none of the things Stephen was accused of, even by false witnesses, are actual crimes to be punished according to the Law of Moses.

Acts 7-8

Acts 7 continues the story of Stephen begun in chapter 6. He'd been appointed to deacon for the church, with the apostles laying hands on him and 6 other qualified brothers. He'd been speaking boldly about Jesus among Greek speaking Jews in the synagogues of Jerusalem. He'd been doing wonders and signs among the people and speaking with wisdom and the Spirit irrefutably, generating hostility that turned into a mock trial reminiscent of what happened to Jesus some months earlier. He was specifically accused of speaking against the temple as "this holy place" and the law. He was feared and hated as an agent of change. His "defense" in chapter 7 deals with the accusations against him by showing that God appeared to his people in Mesopotamia, Haran, Canaan, Egypt, the wilderness of Midian, and etc. To insist on the temple in Jerusalem as the "holy place" was to defy God's own history of work among his people. And so, v48-50. Not only that, he presents Joseph and Moses in particular as examples of chosen leaders God raised up who were rejected by their brethren, just as Jesus had been, in company with all the prophets. Jesus, in the same Spirit, had fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets and shared in their violent rejection by his own people (v52-53).

As a result of Stephen's defense of the good news of Jesus from the Scriptures, people's hearts were cut (v54, ESV "enraged" literally "cut to the

heart”), reminding us of the “pierced to the heart” in Acts 2:37. The same Spirit by the sword of the word impacts the soft heart of one in one way, and the hard heart of another differently.

We are introduced to Saul/Paul in Acts 7:58-8:3 as a virulent opponent of the good news of Jesus and all who accepted Him. Stephen in dying echoes two of the things Jesus said on the cross, but addressing them as appeals to the Lord Jesus, rather than to the Father (Luke 23:34, 23:46). The posture of the Lord seen by Stephen was standing, not sitting, as he was engaged with his disciple in that moment of crisis.

Acts 8 describes the dispersion of the church from Jerusalem noted by the later writers of letters to the churches (see James 1:1, 1 Peter 1:1). Violence against the disciples spurred scattering, but those who were scattered took the word with them and planted the seeds of the kingdom wherever they went. The inclusion of the Samaritans was a big deal, and so Philip’s preaching was followed up by a miraculous bestowal of the Spirit by the hands of Peter and John, affirming that it was the Lord’s will to include the Samaritans. We have affirmation here in v18 that the apostles had a unique gift in the bestowal of spiritual gifts, something Simon (who knew how to put on a show) promptly recognized as real power. Philip meanwhile went on to preach to an Ethiopian at the Spirit’s direction, baptizing him into Christ, and then all along what used to be Philistine territory on the coast, fulfilling prophecies all along the way, and ending up in Caesarea where we’ll see him again, still serving the Lord, in Acts 21.

Acts 9-10

Acts 9 picks up the story of Saul/Paul again from 8:3. Luke used strong words to describe Paul’s persecution of the church in 8:1, 3, and 9:1, but so does Paul in his own references to his behavior in those days. He was a vicious opponent of the truth of God in Christ.

While Paul was en route to Damascus to arrest Jewish believers in the synagogues there, he encountered Jesus as he approached the city, in an event that in some ways echoed God coming down on Mt. Sinai. Compare Acts 9:7 to Deuteronomy 4:12. Saul himself was in parallel with the Egyptians who experienced 3 days of darkness in that last plague, as he had persistently resisted Jesus. Jesus spoke directly to Saul/Paul, and Paul included his own personal encounter with Jesus in the list of resurrection

appearances verifying the fulfillment of scripture in 1 Corinthians 15:8-10.

Note that Paul's persecution of Christians is described directly as persecuting Jesus himself (9:5).

Three days of darkness, spent in prayer and fasting, were the prelude to brother Ananias declaring the gospel to Saul. Ananias was reasonably hesitant to go, knowing Saul's history, but obeyed the Lord and brought healing and filling with the Holy Spirit to Saul, who was promptly baptized. Other details of these events will turn up in Acts 22, 26, and Galatians 1.

As with the 12 it was Jesus himself who selected and appointed Saul to be his apostle.

In the vicinity of v18-232 Paul traveled from Damascus to Arabia and back again, altogether using up about 3 years, as mentioned in Galatians 1:17-18, before he went back to Jerusalem in v26. The hostility against him in 9:22-23 echoes the hostility he and his companions had against Stephen in Acts 6. Paul's retreat from Damascus rankled, as he noted in 2 Corinthians 11:30ff, and wasn't the last time he'd have to do the same.

In Jerusalem Saul had problems connecting with the apostles, noted here in 9:26-27, and mentioned in Galatians 1:18-19, where we learn that James the Lord's brother was by this time a leader in the church too. Barnabas the "son of encouragement" stepped in to help Saul connect with the brethren. Due once again to hostile opposition Paul soon left town, sent off to the town of his birth, Tarsus in Cilicia. For probably several years he would preach and build churches in Cilicia.

Acts 9:36 resumes the narrative with Peter as the focus of the expansion of the church, traveling to the coastal plains and doing wondrous deeds reminiscent of Jesus' ministry, including raising a dead woman to life. Joppa was to be the jumping off point for a great adventure as the gospel goes not only to the Jews but also to the nations.

Previously the gospel writers had mentioned Roman centurions who believed in Jesus on some level, one in Capernaum, another at the foot of the cross. In Cornelius, Acts 10, we have a centurion described as devout and God fearing. The Lord chose him to demonstrate his will that the gospel should go to the nations, not restricted to Jews or even Samaritans. Peter was not easily persuaded that a lifetime of learning that Gentiles were

inherently unclean was not God's will, but he was willing to do what the Lord sent him to do. Several times Peter had proclaimed that the good news of Jesus was for the nations, for all those far off, but it was still a daunting challenge for him to follow through on his own quotations of the prophets. Nevertheless he did.

Clearly the Lord chose Cornelius for a proof of the "new" policy, choosing Peter for the job, having witnesses, providing visions, sending the miraculous proof of the Holy Spirit. The Jewish Christians needed those various proofs to affirm that God's will was saving the nations by grace through faith in Christ, and not through conquest or submission to Jewish rituals. Peter's trip from Joppa to the Romans echoed a previous missionary assigned Jonah, to go to the Assyrians, but Jonah attempted to leave Joppa in the opposite direction, while Peter Bar-Jonah (Matthew 16:17) went where he was sent. Even so, Peter had to see it to believe it (Acts 10:34).

Acts 11-12

Acts 11 continues the story of Gentiles (the nations) being included in the Lord's church. After the Lord had sent Peter to the Roman Centurion, Cornelius, and unmistakably demonstrated his will with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, word spread quickly to other Jewish believers in the region. Peter was promptly criticized and had to defend his actions in Jerusalem. Peter recounted the events, highlighting the multiple proofs provided by the Lord along the way, and the brethren, to their credit, made the leap to embrace God's will to include the nations in his kingdom. Note 11:18, the reaction of the brethren and the assessment of the events.

The account of the early days of the church transitions from the Jerusalem focus to an Antioch focus from 11:19 through chapter 12. We don't have a chronology or time frame provided for the gospel going to the gentiles in Antioch, but Peter's introduction of God's will with Cornelius was essential for making the work at Antioch palatable to the circumcised believers.

Note that while we had Peter and John sent to Samaria by the apostles in Acts 8, this time it's Barnabas sent by the Jerusalem church in 11:22. As is mentioned in 11:30 the church at Jerusalem had elders by this time and was no longer being led directly or solely by the apostles as it had been in

the first 5 chapters.

Note the terms applied to member of the church in 11:26, 29. Collectively, “the church.” Individually, disciples and Christians and brothers (and sisters).

The sharing of goods in the early days of the Jerusalem church is extended here, by the same spirit, to sharing between churches to provide help for the brethren.

Saul/Paul had not been idle in Tarsus, he’d been preaching and starting churches in that region (see 16:41).

Acts 12 depicts the death of another major figure among the disciples, James the brother of John. He was the first of the apostles to die for Christ, but not the last. We have no records of his exploits in the service of Christ, but having been in the Lord’s innermost circle during Jesus’ ministry we can imagine he was a potent worker for the gospel. The Herod in this story is Herod Agrippa I, and the gruesome account of his death on account of arrogance and other sins is told in even more graphic detail by Josephus as well. The rescue of Peter from a prison cell by an angel has several humorous elements, but was a very sobering experience for him and the church. It became expedient for him to leave the area for a time.

John Mark’s mother is mentioned in the story of the prayers for Peter, hinting at some wealth in the family and introducing John himself obliquely into the story.

Surely the church prayed ardently for James when Herod seized him, but he died at Herod’s hands. The church also prayed fervently for Peter, and he was rescued by divine intervention. We can’t know what God’s will may be in challenges we face, but we can be sure prayer is part of God’s purpose for us.

Note the conclusion of the Herod-Peter story in v24, and the transition to Barnabas and Saul and Antioch in 12:25ff.

Acts 13-14

Acts 13-14 are generally described as “Paul’s first missionary journey.” That’s not an accurate description, as Paul had already traveled much for

the gospel and preached in many places. However, it is first in terms of the travels we have recorded in some detail by Luke in Acts.

Note that John Mark traveled to Antioch with Barnabas and Saul, and then joined them in their Spirit directed journey as a helper.

Note what the leaders of the church in Antioch were doing in 13:2. Note what they did after the Spirit gave them direction in v3.

The first destination for their journey was Cyprus, which was where Barnabas came from, and where some of the founders of the Antioch church were from.

The encounter with Elymas Bar-Jesus the sorcerer points up the spiritual battles that the apostles encountered over and over again, and the power of the Spirit of God over the spirits of the world.

John Mark abandoned the work and the workers after Cyprus for reasons never explained, but unacceptable to Paul. The transition from Saul to Paul in 13:9 is not a name change, it is Luke shifting from Paul's Hebrew name to his Roman name as the focus of the narrative shifts from circumcised believers in Judea to preaching among the Gentiles.

Paul's speech in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (13:16ff) like Stephen's speech in Acts 7 was loaded with scripture references from the Hebrew Bible. To the Jews, the case for Christ was made from the records and prophecies of the Old Testament.

Notice that while Peter in Jerusalem said several times "you killed the righteous one..." Paul made no similar accusation to the Jews in Pisidia. They weren't there in Jerusalem when Jesus died, they participated no more than the gentiles of the region (13:27-28). Responsibility is only justly imputed to those who are actually responsible.

The tension between the synagogue and the message to the nations comes up again and again, as in 13:45.

While the city on the whole rejected the evangelists, the believers in the community nevertheless were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit, 13:51.

Moving through the middle of what we know as Turkey, Paul and Barnabas went from Antioch of Pisidia to Iconium, and then eastward to Lystra, and lastly to Derbe before turning back to revisit each of the churches they'd planted. Repeatedly the preachers had to flee violence instigated against them.

At Lystra, 14:8ff, the miraculous healing of a lame man led to a great misunderstanding, confusing the apostles with Greek gods, that was overcome with difficulty. Afterward, some Jewish troublemakers from Antioch and Iconium caught up with them and instigated a mob to stone Paul. He seemed to be dead, yet arose and was able to walk to travel onward the next day.

Note that when talking to the pagans of Lystra, and there were few Jews in that city, Paul focused on nature and themes they could understand rather than the Hebrew Bible for his evidence.

Note the secondary work of the preachers, following up their work with the churches in 14:22, including setting elders in place to care for the congregations, 14:23, and spending time together in prayer and fasting.

Their journey completed, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch of Syria where their Spirit-led journey had begun, and they told the brethren all about what God had done with them. God's work, through doors God opened to them.

Acts 15-16

Acts 15 continues from 14:26 with Paul and Barnabas at Antioch. That flourishing church was challenged by teachers from Judea who insisted that being saved required keeping the Law of Moses. Explicitly circumcision, but really being bound to obedience to the Law. Paul and Barnabas could not allow that corruption of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in the resurrected Christ, and so they vigorously disagreed. The church at Antioch then sent Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to ascertain whether the teachers were in line with what was taught there. There certainly had to be a consensus about the Lord's will for salvation. Apparently, considering Galatians 2, Titus was among those who went from Antioch to Jerusalem, and he was an uncircumcised Christian.

When it became evident that there was a problem among some of the members, men bringing sectarianism into the church, 15:5, the apostles and elders of the church met together to affirm a common understanding of what the Lord had already revealed. Peter reviewed Acts 10, Barnabas and Paul (remember that Barnabas was well known and trusted in Jerusalem, Paul was not) reviewed what we read in Acts 13-14 as the Lord worked among the nations through them, and then James (the Lord's brother, the author of James, an elder in Jerusalem) closed the case with references to Simon Peter's dissertation and to the prophets. James's statement in v14 is a really important way of saying God accepted the Gentiles, using language that applies to the chosen people of God from Exodus onward. His recommendation of a letter to provide the conclusion that God had made his will clear, and they all would abide by the clear message of the Holy Spirit (15:28).

The letter Luke copied into Acts, 15:23-29, was copied and sent to all the churches they knew of. It is important to understand that the instructions in that letter are apostolic, and have the same weight of divine authority as the letters of Paul or Peter. Christians are not to engage in sexual immorality, not to eat blood or animal flesh that has not been bled, and not to eat food dedicated to idols (not to be careless about idolatry). All of these principles are at odds with the practices of the world/nations, and all of them are from the beginning, not at all unique to the Law of Moses. The commandment against eating blood goes all the way back to Noah, Genesis 9, when God permitted humans eating animal flesh. The sexual design of one man, one woman, joined in marriage to make a family, was established in the Garden of Eden. The warning against idols goes back to Genesis 3 and 6 and 11, all before the days of Moses.

Notice the human witnesses went to Antioch, 15:27, and their gifts and help to Antioch, 15:32. Note too that there were many engaged in preaching (to the lost) and teaching (in the church) in Acts 15:35. Antioch had numerous members who contributed to sharing the gospel and teaching the church, even when such capable men as Paul and Barnabas were in town.

After some time in Antioch, probably in the general time frame of Paul writing the letter to the Galatians, Paul and Barnabas parted company because of a strong disagreement about John Mark who'd previously cut short his travels with them and returned home. Paul didn't trust John Mark

(later he certainly did), and Barnabas wanted to give him another opportunity. Of course, Barnabas had once convinced the brethren in Jerusalem to give Paul a chance too. The 2 preachers did not part in hostility, but since Barnabas wanted to work with John Mark and Paul did not, they split the team and went in different directions to encourage the churches they'd previously established. Barnabas went to Cyprus, Paul to Syria and Cilicia (recall that he'd been in Cilicia from the end of Acts 9 til Barnabas sought him out to help in Antioch in Acts 11), and then on into the territory of the cities mentioned in Acts 13:13-14:23.

Note that at Lystra Paul and Silas picked up Timothy as a helper (16:1). Previously Paul and Barnabas had appointed elders in Lystra (14:21-23), and note that when Timothy was appointed to the work of an evangelist the elders of the church laid hands on him (1 Timothy 4:14) and apparently at the same time, so did Paul (2 Timothy 1:6). Timothy was nominally Jewish, because his mother was, but had a Greek father and had never been circumcised (Greeks considered circumcision a shameful mutilation). In order for Timothy to be more effective among the Jews Paul assisted him with circumcision, though he would have vigorously refuted any connection between circumcision and salvation in Christ.

Notice the traveling preachers carried copies of the letter from Jerusalem to distribute to the brethren along the way (16:4).

The Holy Spirit/Spirit of Jesus hadn't given the preachers a specific direction, and so for a time they searched for the right direction, until at Troas, apparently a city where the church already flourished, Paul had a vision suggesting a call to Macedonia. At that point in Troas the author began writing of "us" and "we" (16:10) instead of "they" and "them." Luke joined the travelers and went with them to Macedonia.

Luke's travel accounts are always accurate in every detail, the geography, the distances, the place names and regional variations in customs and language. His accounts have been checked and rechecked by believers and skeptics alike, and he was a scrupulous historian, careful to the last detail, thoroughly trustworthy.

Note that Philippi had a very small Jewish population, women meeting by the river indicates no synagogue. Lydia is described in terms consistent with Cornelius, probably a God-fearing gentile (16:14). Notice the

attribution of divine heart surgery in 16:14, reminiscent of Acts 2:37. Lydia's generous hospitality was evidence of her genuine faith in the Lord.

The young woman with a familiar spirit in v16-18 wasn't perhaps suffering as some of those confronted in the gospels were. Nevertheless, it was a spirit associated with idols (the word Luke used to describe the spirit is associated with the cult of the Greek deity Apollo and the Oracle at Delphi). The terminology of the spirit echoed some of the unclean spirits Jesus cast out, referring to "Most High God," a title used among the nations to distinguish the God of Israel from the pantheon of other gods. The Lord's power over spirits was evident in Philippi as it had been in Israel.

The beating of Paul and Silas was a serious breach of Roman law for citizens of Rome. The Lord opened the prison doors here in a different manner, but still consistent with releasing the apostles from jail in Jerusalem in Acts 5 and Peter in Acts 12.

The beauty of singing, as with prayer, is that it can be done anywhere, with anyone, in any circumstances. No special equipment or talent or accommodations required.

Notice the order reported in v32-34. They preached to the jailor and his household, he bathed their wounds, they baptized them, and they rejoiced in their believing.

Paul was generally willing to set aside his rights for the sake of advancing the gospel, but from time to time, as in Philippi, it was expedient to insist on his rights for the sake of the gospel and the church. Nevertheless, Paul and Silas did leave town, taking along Timothy, but leaving Luke behind.

Acts 17

Continuing the journey of Paul and Silas from Antioch in Acts 15:40, with young Timothy added to the party in Acts 16:3 from Lystra and then Luke joining the travelers in Troas, 16:10, Luke remained behind in Philippi while the other 3 went south to Thessalonica in 17:1ff.

At Thessalonica Paul visited the synagogue on the Sabbath day to preach the good news of Jesus, reasoning from the Scriptures, the Old

Testament of our Bible. He was very successful, until among some of the Jews and several of the god fearing non-Jews (people like Cornelius and Lydia). The success of the gospel led to jealousy and hostile resistance in the synagogue after 3 weeks. We don't know the time frame overall that led to actual violence against the Christians, but before long the Christians were under physical and financial assault and Paul with his fellow travelers was forced to leave town.

From Thessalonica the preachers continued south to Berea, where once again preaching from the scriptures in the synagogue was very successful, and a good spirit of truth seeking through actual study of the scriptures prevailed, with many converted to Christ, until the Jews from Thessalonica heard about it and traveled to Berea to agitate crowds into hostility against the Lord's truth and his ambassadors. This time, Paul left town with the assistance of the brethren, and Silas and Timothy stayed behind for a time. As we'll see in 1 Thessalonians, during this interval Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica, and also during this interval the church in Philippi sent assistance to Paul, indicating that Luke and the other travelers stayed in contact during those months.

Paul went on to Athens, a hundred miles or so further south, in the region of Achaia. At Athens his expressed intention was to wait for Silas and Timothy to wrap things up in Berea and Thessalonica, and join him. The indication is that Paul didn't stay in Athens with a plan to preach there, just to wait, but his heart was stirred by what he saw and he could not keep quiet, so he did begin to reason with the Jews in the synagogue and random encounters in the marketplace. His message of the resurrection was strange to the pagans. No religion in the world believed in bodily resurrection except Jews and Christians. Consequently, Paul was invited to address a gathering of philosophers meeting on a hilltop, the Areopagus. Note that while the scriptures had been central to Paul's teaching in the synagogues of Thessalonica and Berea, his message to the philosophers was instead rooted in creation and nature and the character of God. Even so, the message concluded that all mankind in every place is accountable to God and needs redemption in Jesus Christ to stand approved before God.

Paul's effect in Athens was somewhat successful, but the response in v32-33 reflects disappointment at the low response of people who thought themselves to be intellectually superior. Paul reflected on that outcome in 1

Thessalonians and also the Corinthian letters, speaking of the wisdom of God and the power of the gospel as opposed to the wisdom of men and fascination with eloquence and weighty words.

Acts 18-19

Paul had left Luke in Philippi while he, with Silas and Timothy, went south to Thessalonica, then to Berea, then by himself to Athens. From Athens Paul went on to Corinth, where he connected with fellow Jews Aquila and Priscilla, a married couple who shared his trade and apparently his faith in the Lord. They worked together for a time, until Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul, apparently bringing funds from Philippi (see Philippians 4:15-18), and after that Paul spent his efforts primarily in teaching the word. After rejection in the synagogue, Paul shook out his clothes, indicating he'd done all he could, and concentrated his efforts among the gentiles. While Corinth was a city with a bad reputation for its vices, Paul's preaching was very successful there and a thriving congregation was planted. Jewish opposition fell flat when they tried to use civic laws to settle religious issues. Paul continued in Corinth for some time and then headed back home to Antioch, sailing from the port across the isthmus at Cenchrea. He stopped briefly at Ephesus in Asia where the Lord had previously stopped him from preaching (16:6). Priscilla and Aquila traveled that far with Paul. Paul continued toward Syria, briefly stopping by Jerusalem to greet the church there (18:22, "going up" indicates Jerusalem). Then after some time at home in Antioch Paul set out again to encourage the churches he previously helped to establish.

While Paul was in Syria, Galatia, and Phrygia visiting the churches, a believer named Apollos came to Ephesus, where Aquila and Priscilla were working and meeting with some disciples. They also still had a connection to the synagogue and they encountered Apollos and heard his teaching, which was deficient with regard to Christ's baptism (and therefore the Holy Spirit). They spoke to him privately, filling out some areas of the gospel he hadn't understood, and once he'd understood better he wanted to go to Achaia, the area of Corinth, and with an introductory letter from the believers in Ephesus, including Priscilla and Aquila who were known to the church in Corinth, Apollos went there to encourage the brethren and promote the message of Jesus among the Jews from the scriptures.

In Acts 19 Paul returned to Ephesus, this time for a prolonged effort to

preach in that prominent city and the whole area around in Asia. Paul encountered disciples there who had some of the same shortcomings in their beliefs as Apollos had previously shown, not knowing about baptism into Christ and the promise of the Holy Spirit. Paul's teaching there, and laying hands on them, parallels the work of Peter and John among the Samaritans in Acts 8.

Paul's time preaching in synagogue at Ephesus was prolonged, and even when that was spoiled by stubborn unbelief among some of the Jews Paul continued to enjoy an open door of opportunity for about 2 years in that area. God was testifying to Paul's message with remarkable miracles, as had been happening in Jerusalem in the earliest days of the church by the hands of Peter and the other apostles. Hundreds of miles and years of time had not diluted the power of the Spirit or the impact of the word of God.

Seven men of Jewish priestly heritage, whose father was a prominent professional priest in Jerusalem, perhaps traveling as itinerant exorcists, attempted to invoke the name of Jesus to cast out demons, and that went badly for them, which proved to be another testimony in favor of the truth Paul preached. One impact of the failed invocation of Jesus' name was fear upon believers and unbelievers alike, a reminder of the atmosphere in Jerusalem when Ananias and Saphira lied to the Holy Spirit in Acts 5. Many who'd previously become believers but also held onto their expensive magical paraphernalia gave up and destroyed the magical items, amounting to a fortune devoted to the Lord.

By this time, Acts 19:21, Paul was working on the project mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:1ff, to take up a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (remember Galatians 2:10). He had visits to make both to encourage churches previously established and to forge a bond of generosity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Part of his preparation included sending messengers to Macedonia (Acts 19:22) who apparently returned before he left Ephesus (19:29, brothers from Macedonia where Paul had sent Timothy and Gaius were with Paul in Ephesus). Meanwhile, a uproar threatened Paul's life and the peace of the community largely because the rapid spread of Christian faith was impacting the income of those whose trade was dependent on worshipping idols. Paul's desire to address the hostile crowd (19:30) was consistent with his usual desire to persuade his opponents rather than run from them, but once again cooler heads

prevailed and Paul lived to preach another day. Part of the point of the story of the riot is that Paul and the Christians had done nothing wrong, neither morally nor under the law. Paul had enemies because of his successful preaching in Ephesus that would dog him repeatedly and ferociously in the months and years after this.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in the latter days of his work in Ephesus.
Acts 20-23

After the metal-workers' riot in Ephesus (19:23-41) Paul left for Macedonia. He'd already planned to do that (19:22) but perhaps his timetable was altered somewhat. From Ephesus he'd written 1 Corinthians, and while in Macedonia (20:1-2) wrote 2 Corinthians. That's probably when he wrote 1 Timothy as well, Timothy having returned to Ephesus and remained there to finish some things, including appointing elders, when Paul left for Macedonia. Then, while in Achaia/Greece (20:2b) he wrote Romans. Along the way, with travel plans altered by plots against his life, Paul picked up several traveling companions on the way to Jerusalem, in keeping with 2 Corinthians 8:19-23, carrying the generous gift from Achaia and Macedonia. Some of the men listed in 20:4 were evangelists, some were probably deacons, all were trustworthy Christian men sent as representatives of the churches. Luke ("us" and "we" in v5-6) joined the party as well. He'd previously stayed behind in Philippi when Paul and Silas left there (Acts 16:16/40, we/they).

Paul spent a week at Troas (20:6), apparently arriving Monday and departing Monday. The apparent reason for staying a week when Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem (20:16) was to be with the church when they came together to break bread on the first day of the week.

Paul's "speech" in 20:7 was, in the Greek text, a "dialegomai" in 20:9, which means "To speak back and forth or alternately, to converse with, reason, present intelligent discourse." (CWSB Dictionary) It's the Greek word from which we get "dialogue," which has the idea of interactive communication, not lecturing.

Eutychus wasn't the last person to fall asleep during a lesson, but his "fall" was noticed by all, with much consternation. Though understated in Luke's description of events, we should understand that a miracle happened that night.

It's worthwhile to look at a Bible map or atlas to appreciate the trail Luke lays out in the travelogue portion of Acts 20.

The arrangement to talk to the Ephesian elders (20:17-38) might reflect on the idea that Timothy had appointed elders after Paul left (see 1 Timothy 1:3 and 3:14-15), and, with alterations in travel plans, Paul hadn't been there and he wanted to, and didn't have time to visit at length.

The structure of 20:17-38 has Paul laying out his own life among the Ephesian Christians as an outline for what the elders should do and expect.

- 1) v18, you know how I lived; v28, keep watch over yourselves.
- 2) v20, I preached everything helpful to you; v28, keep watch over the flock
- 3) v22-23, compelled by the Spirit, warned by the Spirit; v3 the Holy Spirit has made you overseers
- 4) v23, prison and hardships await; v29 savage wolves will come...
- 5) v24, if only I may finish the race; v32; I commit you to God...

In 20:17, 28 we have elders as shepherds (pastors) and overseers (bishops).

20:35, words of Jesus recorded only here in the New Testament.

21:4, considering Paul was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem with a tight schedule (20:6, 16) it's likely that the 7 days in Tyre were again (as in Troas) so that Paul and company could be with the church on the first day of the week.

The warnings of the Spirit in 21:4, 11 are consistent with Paul's own statement in 20:23. The Spirit was not forbidding Paul going to Jerusalem (recall 16:6), but warning him and the brethren. The brethren though did try to dissuade Paul because of the warnings (21:12).

Philip (from 6:5, 8:5ff) was last mentioned going to Caesarea in 8:40. More than 20 years later his family was there (21:8-9) and he was still spreading the gospel, an evangelist, like Timothy and Titus and Apollos and others. His daughters with the gift of prophecy are consistent with Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:17-18) and it appears the apostles sometimes laid hands on both men and women (Acts 8:12, 17-19). Phillip's daughters must have prophesied in keeping with 1 Cor 11:1-16 and 14:33-34.

The hospitality of Christians is mentioned repeatedly in these chapters.

Arriving at Jerusalem with their generous gift (21:17) Paul and his traveling companions met with James (the Lord's brother) and all the elders. Note the "we" in v17, and "us" in v18. The whole group from the churches went to visit the elders with James as host. Most of the party was gentile Christians. The elders (they) told Paul of rumors and concerns, that he was already well aware of, and suggested a course of action consistent with his Jewish heritage that might show his respect for their heritage, and perhaps calm the furor. Paul agreed, that was in fact one of his hopes, to unify Jew and Gentile in Christ, in making the preparations and journey he did.

Most likely Paul's goal of being in Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16) had been met through a rigorous travel schedule, since there were Jews there from Asia (21:27, 29, Ephesus in particular) who were familiar with Paul and his traveling companion, Trophimus. They had a grudge against Paul and either made a mistake or intentionally lied to stir the animus of a crowd. Violently accosting Paul and shouting loudly they accused him of bringing gentiles into the temple (the courts where only Jews were permitted on pain of death). It wasn't true, but it was inflammatory.

After nearly being murdered by the mob (21:30-32) Paul was rescued from the tumult by Roman soldiers stationed in the nearby fortress immediately north of the temple. In the confusion Paul was allowed by the Roman commander to address the crowd, and speaking the local dialect of Hebrew he told of his own conversion to Christ, a testimony couched in language intended to provoke some in the crowd to believe in Jesus as the Christ (22:1-21). In his brief speech he told them everything they needed to know to be saved themselves, using himself as an example. Alluding to a previous attempt to kill him in Jerusalem (22:17-21) Paul stated that the Lord sent him to the nations, and that idea the mob would not listen to. Consequently, Paul was extracted into the fortress in the hands of the Roman soldiers. There, Paul asserted his Roman citizenship to avoid an illegal beating (22:25).

The Roman commander didn't understand the tumult, and so he called together the Jewish leaders to sort things out. Paul was promptly physically abused, on command from the sitting high priest Ananias, a villain by all

accounts. Paul responded with a imprecation of doom, which soon began to be fulfilled with the man removed from his position as high priest, and some years later his a assassination by Jewish rebels in the great revolt.

In the hearing, Paul asserted that the real issue was resurrection, which was a trigger topic for the mixed group of Pharisees and Sadducees, resulting in tumult that ended the hearing.

The decision of the inner circle of Jewish leaders was to support an assassination attempt (23:12ff). The sister and nephew of Paul mentioned in 23:16ff we know nothing more about, whether they were believers or not. Because of the plot against his life, which could have easily resulted in Roman soldiers dying as well, the commander sent a emergency expedition to Caesarea to deliver Paul to the governor. The forces and urgency involved suggest how volatile things had become in Jerusalem in those days, with the great revolt only a few years away.

And so began Paul's 2 year residency as a prisoner in Caesarea, where several days before he'd been a guest of Phillip.

Acts 24-26

Paul arrived as a prisoner in Caesarea at the end of Acts 23, with an enormous armed guard of Roman soldiers. The governor, Felix, took no great interest, but as arranged by the tribune in Jerusalem Felix heard the "charges" against Paul, from the high priest and his cohorts.

The accusers had a professional spokesman, apparently a man trained in public speaking for such occasions, and he opened with flattery of the governor that wasn't at all true. Felix was not admired by the Jews at all, and in fact was the target of Jewish complaints to the emperor for his incompetence and heavy handed self-indulgence, ultimately resulting in his removal and his own trial before Caesar 2 years after this episode.

Note the way Paul was described in 24:4. A plague or pestilence? Of course, there had been riots in places Paul had been, but not because he was a rabble rouser. And he didn't defile the temple or make any attempt to do so, nor were there any actual witnesses present to speak of what did happen that day in the temple, except Paul himself.

When Paul defended his beliefs and actions in 24:10-21, he skipped the flattery and went straight to his “apologia” (the word for defense or reason in Acts 22:1, 24:10, and 1 Peter 3:15; what Paul was doing in these accounts is what Christians are called to be ready to do).

Paul could speak directly to Felix about the Way (v14, a frequent description of the followers of Jesus from prophecy and Jesus’ own words), because Felix had been governor in Judea for several years and because his wife, Drusilla (v24) was nominally Jewish, the sister of Agrippa and Bernice (25:13). Felix had background and experience to know what Paul was talking about, though he showed no signs of being a believer or devout in any way (v22).

Felix knew that there was no basis for charging Paul or holding Paul, but he had political problems and used Paul as a pawn in his maneuvers to stave off imperial troubles over his mismanagement of the Jews in Judea (24:22-27), and at the same time indulged his own greed.

Note that when Paul spoke of faith in Jesus, v24, that message included themes of righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come, v25. Faith in Christ demands attention to these topics.

For two years Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea, no doubt sharing faith with all he encountered and probably assisting Luke with his writing project(s) and communicating through messengers and letters with scattered believers. Acts 25 moves from Felix to Festus as Roman governor. Unlike Felix, Festus had no particular familiarity with Judaism or the Way, which left him somewhat ill equipped to handle Paul’s case effectively.

When the Jewish leaders renewed the plan to assassinate Paul from 2 years previously, Festus didn’t seem to understand what he was dealing with, and seemed to be willing to go along with their plans. The vitriol against Paul didn’t make any sense to him. Paul’s defense in 25:8 is no doubt a short summary of what he did say, but when Festus maneuvered to make a good impression on the Jewish rulers (Ananias was no longer high priest by this time), Paul again cited his rights as a Roman citizen and requested a hearing before Caesar (Nero). Festus didn’t seem to understand the gravity of the situation he was dealing with, but concluded he had no choice but to send Paul to Caesar... except he had no idea what to write as an explanation of charges against him.

Agrippa and Bernice were brother and sister, children of the Herod mentioned in Acts 12 who executed James and arrested Peter and died horribly because of his blasphemies. Agrippa enjoyed a reasonably good reputation among the Jews, ruling over a portion of Galilee and Perea. He understood Judaism very well, and his official visit to welcome Festus provided an opportunity to answer both Festus's uncertainty about charges to write against Paul and Agrippa's own curiosity about Paul and the Nazarenes.

Acts 26 once again gives us a defense (apologia) of the Christian faith with Paul using his own story as a means to sketch fundamentals of the faith, this time to an audience of high officials and the rich and powerful. Paul truthfully considered himself fortunate (26:2) to make his case, a case for Christ, to Agrippa. As in chapter 22 when Paul made his defense before the mob he reviewed his own initial hostility toward Christians, and his conversion, the testimony of an eye witness of the resurrection of Jesus. Paul connected his own experiences and teaching to Moses, the Law, and the Prophets, knowing that Agrippa and perhaps others in the audience could follow those connections, though Festus didn't. Festus could readily perceive that Paul was educated and smart (just the opposite of Acts 4:13, but rejection just the same), but like the Athenian philosophers thought the resurrection message was crazy. Paul's response in v25, that his words were "true and reasonable" ought to be the case for any believer representing Christ to unbelievers.

And Paul again focused on Agrippa to try to bring him to conviction, which didn't happen but which Agrippa readily understood. Paul's identification with the word "Christian" in v28-29 ought to be the norm for believers everywhere with the appeal, "become such as I am..."

While we know nothing of any who heard Paul that day becoming Christians themselves, we are assured that they understood he was not guilty of anything, present tense, "doing nothing" deserving of death or imprisonment. Paul gave them pause to consider, and a strong personal example, even if they weren't persuaded. A bit like Pilate concluding Jesus was guiltless, but continuing in skepticism.

What the rulers didn't understand is that Paul had more than one reason to appeal to Caesar. Certainly his situation in Caesarea was

frustrating, but this appeal was also the one way he would have an opportunity to tell Caesar about the resurrected Lord.

Acts 27-28

Luke's travelogue in Acts 27-28 is on the one hand a classic example of Greek literature at its best, and on the other hand an accurate to the last detail recounting of geographical and historical information about experiences Luke shared first hand (note the "we" in 27:1 28:11, etc).

The story of the voyage, the storm, the shipwreck, the positive and negative glimpses of human nature, are themselves dramatic and compelling, and sometimes inspirational. On the whole, the experience, described in a way that centers on Paul and the Lord, not Luke himself, is a demonstration of divine providence, like the story of Joseph going into Egypt as a captive, and thus saving others by God's providence, or Daniel similarly going to Babylon and there ministering to the one who made him captive.

Don't overlook the potent human angst and God's message of hope and salvation by grace through faith that permeates the account. Paul's faith (and obedience to the heavenly vision) brought about not only his own "salvation" but that of everyone aboard the ship. God is faithful and wants all to be saved.

This was Paul's 4th shipwreck experience (remember 2 Corinthians 11:25, written more than 2 years earlier).

The fast in 27:9 refers to the Jewish Day of Atonement, late September or early October.

The storm named in 27:14 is a typhoon/hurricane type storm that occurs in the Mediterranean.

Paul's actions in 27:35 echoed Jesus feeding the crowds and with his disciples, and provide an encouragement to us to always give thanks for our food in public places.

There will always be people focused only on themselves in the moment like the sailors in 27:30-32 and the soldiers in 27:42-43.

The sign of the viper in 28:3ff is an example of what Jesus meant in Mark 16:17-18. Paul's experience on Malta, 28:8-9 echoed Jesus' ministry in Capernaum, Luke 4:38-41.

The brethren who traveled to meet Paul gave Paul renewed courage and thankfulness, 28:15.

Paul's 2 years in Rome (60-62 AD) awaiting a slot on Nero's calendar, 28:30-31, was not wasted. He worked at preaching and teaching there in Rome, and he wrote letters, including Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians, plus others we no longer have copies of.