

Theme. The theme of the book of Acts is the gospel, more pointedly, the spread of the gospel. Good news, as the gospel means, travels quickly. We want to hear good news, and we like to share good news, too. The world has too much bad news in it. Give us a little good news, please. Indeed, give us a lot of good news, or better yet, some very, very good news. Good news carries power. It buoys hope, adds a pep to the step, and renews one's energy. Good news lifts burdens, causes a smile, even makes one more generous and caring for others. The book of Acts documents the swift spread of the very good news of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, after Jesus's resurrection. Acts 1:8 records the resurrected Jesus telling his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, which it did shortly after at Pentecost, and that they would then be Jesus's witnesses to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts shows that good-news prophecy carried out.

Author. The physician Luke wrote the book of Acts for his benefactor Theophilus, just as he wrote the gospel book carrying his name. Acts 1:1 refers to that former book and benefactor, and then promptly resumes the narrative of the resurrected Jesus addressing the disciples. The book quickly makes clear that it records the acts of the apostles as the Spirit guided them around the region, as far away as Rome. The book's chronological narrative ends with the apostle Paul under arrest again, awaiting his appeal to Caesar in Rome. Because the book does not mention Paul's death, which occurred somewhere between 64 and 68 A.D., nor Nero's persecution of Christians beginning in 64 A.D., Luke probably completed the book between 60 and 62 A.D., about twenty-five to thirty years after Jesus's resurrection.

Context. In recording the apostles' movement and challenges around the region, the book of Acts supplies some of its own political context. Rome still occupied Jerusalem and governed the entire region. Jews still lived and worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem, under religious leaders who maintained an uneasy alliance with the Roman governor and his occupying forces. The apostles, still gathering in Jerusalem to chart their missionary outreaches, had to beware of both the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders. As they traveled about the region, well north of Israel's borders, up into Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and west into Greece toward Rome, they had to beware of local rulers worshipping various deities, who were also under Roman authority, though more loosely governed than the Romans governed the troublesome Jerusalem. The Romans had not yet destroyed Jerusalem's temple in response to Jewish uprisings, by the time the book of Acts closes.

Structure. Though the book at times reads like a helter-skelter travelogue of the Great (Mediterranean) Sea's eastern perimeter, Acts has both two-part and

three-part structures. Its two-part structure divides the narrative between the first twelve chapters focusing on the apostle Peter's ministry to the Jews and the rest of the book focusing on the apostle Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Acts three-part structure has to do with the church's growing reach, never mind the gospel's Jewish or Gentile audience. Chapters one through seven show how the Spirit-guided apostles defended and established the church, centered in Jerusalem. Chapters eight through twelve show the church enlarged in reach and influence through Judea and Samaria. Chapters thirteen through twenty-eight show the church expanding all the way to Rome, figuratively to the ends of the known earth. That the Spirit could, in just twenty-five years, from a tiny band of eleven scared disciples, establish, enlarge, and expand the church to such an extent is a profound achievement, ministry that the Spirit continues today through the lives of well over a billion Christ followers.

Key Events. Following Acts 1:9-11's record of Jesus's ascension, Acts 2:1-13 records another key event, indeed the key event for the entire growth of the gospel through Christ's church, which was the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost. Jesus had told the disciples to wait for the Spirit's power, and indeed, immediately following the Spirit's descent, Peter preached to a great crowd, resulting in the baptism of about three thousand. The tiny band of disciples instantly had a substantial church. In following chapters, Acts records Peter's miracles, bravery, and preaching, and the administration of the Jerusalem church. Acts 7 records the Jewish leaders' resistance to the church, resulting in the martyring of Stephen, supported by a young Jew Saul, and dispersion of the church. Acts 9 records Saul's conversion in a dramatic encounter with Jesus. Acts 10-11 describe Peter's encounter with the Gentile Cornelius, from which Peter helped open the church leadership to accepting Gentiles. Most of the rest of Acts centers on the travels of Saul, renamed Paul, and other apostles, north and then west toward Rome, on long missionary journeys. The narrative stops at points, indicating that the Spirit urged or prevented certain actions. The final narrative begins with Paul's arrest back in Rome, his trial before Roman governors, his appeal to Caesar in Rome, and his hazardous Great Sea crossing, finally reaching Rome, where the book ends with Paul awaiting his appeal hearing. Acts' exhausting itineraries, including shipwrecks, beatings, stoning, and floggings, accentuate the Spirit's power under which the apostles proceeded.

Key Locations. Acts has too many locations to list in this brief writing. Jerusalem, though, was certainly a key location where the Holy Spirit descended, Peter stood trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jews stoned Stephen after his Sanhedrin trial, and Peter made a miraculous prison escape. Roads supplied other key locations, as with Saul's dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus,

where Saul planned further Christian persecution, and Philip's evangelizing and baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza. Regions to the north and then west, beginning with Syria, Cilicia, Pamphylia, and Lycia, and then further west to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, became increasingly critical locations as the gospel spread to growing churches there, toward and into Europe. Paul made four missionary journeys through those areas. Paul suffered shipwreck on Malta, a Great Sea island well off Italy's southern coast, where he performed miracle healings, before resuming his sea crossing to Rome. Excepting Rome, the great center of military and political power throughout the whole region, and Jerusalem, the many locations Acts names are less important for their history than as demonstration of the gospel's spread.

Revelation of Christ. Acts opens with Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit and his ascension, both profound revelations of Christ as the world's sinless Savior. Every subsequent act of the apostles, whether miracle healings, courageous preaching, or miraculous escapes, and especially every subsequent conversion of Jew or Gentile to belief in the risen Lord Jesus, reveal the Spirit's power in pursuit of the glory of Jesus Christ. Acts does not focus on Jesus, not his teachings, healings, nor nature. Rather, Acts displays the apostles doing as Jesus would have done, healing, raising the dead, preaching, teaching, braving hostile leaders and crowds, and preparing hearts to receive him. Acts need not show Jesus directly, whether through his own words and acts or through prophecies, types, and figures, because his followers now revealed Jesus, as the Spirit guided and empowered them.

Application. The compelling application of the book of Acts is to accept the Spirit's power and guidance, as the apostles accepted the Spirit, so that we, too, may care, love, serve, and witness bravely in the name of Christ. The apostles worried little over their hearers' reactions. Indeed, they appeared to expect violent opposition. Yet they persisted with excitement and joy, even singing from prison. We, too, should have such attitudes toward sharing the good news that we hold so dear ourselves. News is for sharing, not for concealing. Good news of Jesus's salvation especially warrants sharing, when we know that nothing has greater value than that which Jesus offers. Wherever you are, share Jesus. Wherever you go, share Jesus. And let the Spirit of Christ be your comfort, power, companion, and guide.

Memory Verses. 1:8: "*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.*" 2:1: "*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*" 2:4: "*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*" 2:38: "*Repent and be baptized,*

every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” 2:42: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 4:12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” 17:30: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” 20:28: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”