

THE  
WORD  
SPREADS

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## The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, Editor

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Adult Bible Study Student Book

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# Preface

Christ told His disciples He would build His church. Acts is a record of the beginning of Christ's building progress. His church spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. It grew despite strong, aggressive opposition that included threats, persecutions, and even executions.

The message of Acts is clear: nothing can stop the spread of the Word. Christ was the mastermind and the Spirit was the power as the apostles and the early church carried the gospel with them throughout the world.

Christ is still the mastermind behind His building project. And the Spirit is still indwelling and empowering believers today. It is exciting to be part of Christ's work nearly two thousand years later.

As you study this course, consider the connection between Acts and today. The gospel is still spreading. You have a personal responsibility to pick up where Acts leaves off. Be part of spreading the seed of the Word so it might grow where you live. Endeavor to be active for Christ with a dependence on the Holy Spirit.



# The Message of Acts

## Scripture Focus

Various passages in Acts

## Theme

God's program of redemption will always move forward.

## Memory Verse

*"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).*

## GETTING STARTED

Every spring the ivy reemerges along the outfield wall of the Cub's Wrigley Field. In 1937, then Cubs General Manager Bill Veeck planted the ivy to beautify the stadium. Over the decades, groundskeepers have faithfully cared for the ivy, cutting back any ends that stop growing and die off. Their job is to make sure the ivy spreads to fill the entire outfield wall. Bare spots are unsightly and unacceptable!

The cover of this course shows vibrantly growing ivy as a symbol of the spread of God's Word. The spreading started with the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. And God is still orchestrating the growth of His Word today.

1. God wants to spread His Word through you. Is your section of His *wall* bare? Why, or why not?

2. Do you view the spread of God’s Word as an important role in your life? Explain.

## SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

This lesson will give you an overview of the book of Acts, including the key emphases in the book.

### **Luke, the Writer**

Luke’s name appears in only three places in the Bible (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). But that doesn’t mean he was not an important New Testament figure. Luke wrote 27 percent of the New Testament (Luke and Acts). That’s more than Paul (23 percent) and John (20 percent) wrote. Luke referred to himself throughout the book of Acts, though not by name. He used first-person pronouns to indicate he was an eyewitness to many of the events in the book (e.g., Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18).

Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14) and therefore sensitive to people’s physical needs. He grew to have a heightened sensitivity to their spiritual needs too. Later in his life, he ministered to Paul in a way that Paul held dear.

3. Read 2 Timothy 4:9–11. Compare Demas to Luke. How would you describe their responses to the opportunity to spread the gospel?
  
4. Read Philemon 24. What clue do you get from this verse about what was important to Luke?

Luke understood that spreading the Word is more important than anything else on earth. He made himself available to God, and God used him in tremendous ways.

## Overview of Acts

Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, so he did not witness many events in the Gospels and some in Acts. But under the Spirit's guidance, Luke used careful skills of observation and research to produce his writing.

5. Read Acts 1:1–4 and Luke 1:1–4. How are these passages related?

Luke mentioned Theophilus in the opening of both his books. Theophilus was most likely Greek. His name means *lover of God*. His mention is a clue that Luke probably had in mind Gentile Christians as his readership. Additional clues include the Greco-Roman style preface and the clear indication of salvation to those outside the Jewish commonwealth.

Luke probably wrote Acts in AD 62 or 63. The omission of Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 strongly suggests that Luke wrote the book before that event. Also, Luke does not mention the severe persecution under the Roman emperor Nero that occurred from AD 64 to 68. And Luke did not record the outcome of Paul's Roman imprisonment. Paul's release happened in AD 62 or 63. It is likely that Luke wrote Acts before Paul's release.

## Literary Nature

Acts is a narrative; it tells a true story. That means it has literary features that are typical of narratives. Literary features evident in Acts include repetition, comparison, structure, and symmetry. Identifying the literary features in Acts helps us understand the book.

Luke used **repetition** in his updates on the progress of the early church.

6. Read Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20. What did Luke repeat in these verses?

Luke's updates about the growth of the church serve as the main markers in his narrative. The markers show that Acts is all about Christ's work to build His church through the power of the Spirit. Nothing could stop Christ from accomplishing His work.

Luke used **comparison** to indicate the transition from Peter's leadership to Paul's leadership. He recorded a select number of Peter's miracles throughout the first half of Acts. In the last half of the book he recorded similar miracles done by Paul. For instance, Peter healed a lame man (3:1–10) and raised a woman from the dead (9:36–41). Paul healed a crippled man (14:8–10) and raised a man from the dead (20:9–12). Luke's purposeful comparison validated Paul as a true messenger from God even though Paul was not one of the initial twelve apostles.

Luke used **structure** to record the geographical expansion of the church. The church was a new component to God's program. It was born on Pentecost in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7). As persecution increased, the church grew beyond Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31) and eventually throughout the entire Mediterranean area (9:32–28:31). This geographical movement indicates that the church erupted in Jerusalem and then grew throughout the known world.

**Symmetry** means balance. Two narratives are symmetrical when the main plot points in one account is reflected in the other account. Luke employed symmetry in his record of Ananias's interaction with Saul (9:1–30) and Peter's interaction with Cornelius (10:1–11:18). The Holy Spirit prepared the hearts of Ananias and Peter to receive new information about God's program for the church. God asked Ananias to visit Saul, a former enemy. He asked Ananias to visit Cornelius, a Gentile. The Holy Spirit gave direction to both Saul and Cornelius to alert them of the arrivals of Ananias and Peter. After hesitating, both Ananias and Peter agree to go against conventional wisdom and obey God. In both accounts, the new information about God's work through the church was defended before the church in Jerusalem. This symmetry communicated to the early church that Christ directed their ministry and selected their ministers. Today, Christ is still building His church in His way and by His people.

## **Purpose**

There are multiple purposes for Acts. First, the book outlined the beginning and growth of the church. Luke established that the church was born on Pentecost and that nothing could impede its growth. As mentioned in the previous section, the book is dotted with statements about the onward movement of the Word and the church. The birth and growth of the church directly fulfilled Jesus' statement in Mathew 16:18, when He

said, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Some people today view the church as a place for believers to retreat and form a type of defensive huddle. But Jesus’ commission and the book of Acts show otherwise.

7. Read Matthew 28:19, 20 and Acts 1:8. How would you summarize Christ’s call to the church?

Second, Acts legitimized taking the gospel to the Gentiles. The early church struggled with the idea that the gospel was for Gentiles as much as it was for Jews. Acts established that God not only intended the gospel for the Gentiles, but that God also appointed Paul to be His apostle to the Gentiles.

Third, Acts proved that the church was the new vehicle through which God would accomplish His purpose. Starting with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the early church was the new arm of God. This is an important theological distinction. The church was a new entity and should not be understood as a permanent replacement for the nation of Israel. Paul clearly argued in Romans 11:25–32 that the nation of Israel will yet inherit and fulfill the promises of the Old Testament.

Generally, Acts should not be understood as a paradigm for modern Christian missions, church growth, or normal Christian experience. Acts is a historical description of what happened, not necessarily an authoritative prescription of what should happen today. In fact, the book records many events that occurred as part of the transition from Old Testament to New Testament, including the Ascension of Jesus (1:9–11), the Holy Spirit’s coming on the Day of Pentecost (2:1–4), apostolic witness and miracles (4:33), and the immediate, supernatural death of erring church members (5:1–11).

Fittingly, Luke used Jesus’ parting promise to the disciples as the outline for Acts. He covered God’s witness in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7), Samaria (6:8–9:31), and the rest of the Gentile world (9:32–28:31).

In Luke’s account we find conversions, confrontations, confessions, conflicts—and more. In all the miracles and messages and other events, one theme remains central: Jesus Christ is building His church through the spread of the Word.

## Chronology

Acts 1:1–6:3 records the ascension of Jesus, the birth of the church, and the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem. Peter was the key personality as he preached the gospel and focused on the resurrection of Christ. As the gospel spread to Judea and Samaria, the Christian Jews faced questions regarding the use of the law and how circumcision, dietary laws, and so forth relate to the gospel. Many scholars believe that the book of James was written during this time (AD 42).

Acts 9 records Paul's conversion. Acts 13 and 14 record Paul's first missionary journey. On or shortly after his first missionary journey, Paul wrote Galatians. After his first journey, Paul met with church leaders to discuss if Gentile believers are bound to obey Jewish feasts and ceremonies. As recorded in Acts 15, the council firmly stated that Gentiles do not have to become Jewish. Thus the council endorsed Paul and his message of grace.

Acts 15:36–18:22 records Paul's second missionary journey. During this second journey, Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Luke recorded Paul's third missionary journey in 18:23–21:16, after which Paul was imprisoned for preaching the gospel.

During Paul's third missionary journey, Paul wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans. In Acts 21:17–28:31 Luke recorded Paul's defense of himself before various Roman and Jewish authorities. Paul continued to defend the grace gospel and was sent to Rome to argue his case. Paul spent two years imprisoned in Rome, during which time he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. Paul wrote the rest of his epistles after Luke concluded the Acts narrative.

8. Why is it important to know the historical background of the epistles?

## Key Emphases

Three key truths are emphasized in the book of Acts. The first emphasis is that Jesus is alive.

9. Read Acts 1:1–5; 7:55, 56; and 9:4, 5. What must you conclude about Jesus from these verses?

Luke stressed the importance of Jesus' resurrection by mentioning it right away (1:3). He also stressed the ongoing ministries of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not abandon His church. He sent the Holy Spirit as the church's helper. Indeed, the Spirit's coming at Pentecost was a fulfillment of Jesus' words in John 7:38 and 39 and 14:15–20.

Secondly, Luke emphasized that all believers have the Holy Spirit and that all believers share a oneness with Jesus. For example, when Ananias lied to Peter in Acts 5:1–11, Peter said that Ananias had lied to the Holy Spirit.

10. Read Acts 9:1–5. How do you see the oneness and unity of Jesus and His church in this passage?

11. What is the benefit of unity between Jesus and the church?

United in Christ, the disciples immediately began to meet together for worship and fellowship (2:42–47). Jesus prayed in John 17:21 that the church would be one as He and the Father are one. The early church manifested the oneness of Christ and the Father.

Thirdly, Luke showed that the Spirit uses the gospel to transform lives. On the Day of Pentecost over three thousand souls were saved and transformed (2:41). Jesus' disciples had incredible boldness as they spoke forth the gospel in spite of persecution. Both Samaritans and Gentiles came to Christ (14:27). Even Saul, the most dangerous man to threaten the early church, trusted in Jesus for salvation (22:6–15). Men, women, and children of all ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds responded to the power of the gospel. Luke's narrative illustrates Paul's comments in Romans 1:16 about the gospel of Jesus Christ: *It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*

12. How would you respond to the notion that the power of the gospel has diminished since the time of Acts?

13. How should the reality of the power of the gospel affect the church today?
  
14. When have you witnessed the power of the gospel?

## MAKING IT PERSONAL

15. Why is a study of Acts useful, and even valuable, to you?
  
16. Why is it valuable to your church?
  
17. What are problems, issues, cares, or concerns your church might face that a study of Acts could address?
  
18. What needs to change in your life so that you might be an active part of spreading the Word?
  
19. To whom might you spread the Word?