

The Half Hour That Changes the World

The Acts of the Apostles

Book 44

Basic Questions behind the book:

How did the followers of an executed religious leader turn their world upside down?

Summary of book:

Luke seeks to answer this question by picking up where his first book, "The Gospel according to Luke" finishes off, with the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples and teaching them over a 40 day period about life in his kingdom. Following his Ascension the bereft and small community of his followers wait until their sense of his ongoing presence and empowerment transforms them on the day of Pentecost with the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The first half of the book tells the story of the early years of apostolic preaching and teaching, focussed around the ministry of Peter particularly. Following the martyrdom of Stephen a new personality emerges, Saul of Tarsus, who eventually becomes the great apostle Paul, to whom Luke gives the bulk of his attention for the remainder of this unique book in the New Testament. It is the only book in the New Testament that goes beyond the story of the life and passion of the Lord Jesus Christ and seeks to tell something of the early church's pilgrimage in the first century. Luke's Second Volume isn't simply an historical account of the early church. For one thing, Luke is very selective, choosing as he does the ministries of Peter and Paul in the main to speak about. What of the other apostles and their escapades? No mention is made. Moreover, we become aware that Luke chooses particular stories to tell for theological reasons – there are things about God, about the nature of the Church, and the heart of the Gospel message that he wants to convey through the narratives. So the questions we must constantly ask are: Why did Luke include this story? And, what are the points he is trying to make through using them?

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To give an account of the birth and growth of the Christian Church.

Author: It is believed to be written by Doctor Luke, a Gentile physician, who sometimes writes in the first person, in the sense that he was there participating in the events. See the 'we' passages in the middle of the book (16:10-17; 20:5-21:18 & 27:1-28:16).

Recipients: Theophilus – a Christian patron of the early Church? All lovers of God?

Dating: Following his Gospel so most likely to be in the last quarter of the first century around AD 80.

Setting: The 30 year period after the Resurrection of Christ, starting in Jerusalem and ending in Rome with various trips in between. It finishes open ended: perhaps it is still being written...

Other Reflections:

In Acts, the Lord Jesus continues his work through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in partnership with the Church. The Church shows itself to be both an instrument of divine grace, pointing to the presence and activity of the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and also to be a flawed human organisation where human agents don't always get things right. We get glimpses of the earliest preaching of the infant Church. We also get glimpses of some of the tensions it lived with and the persecution that the emerging community had to contend with. Acts is a constant source of interest and inspiration to Christians in every generation calling us to be both Christ-centred, Spirit-filled, and mission-driven in each time and place.

"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." (1:8)