

## ***ACTS 1: Introduction***

**Subject:** Acts is part of the unified story of God's message to all believers.

**Main Idea:** From the beginning, God has intended to reach each of us with His message.

**Principles:**

1. *God's love motivates Him to reach you and me!*
2. *God works through individuals to convey His message to mankind.*
3. *The Spirit of Jesus (the Holy Spirit) is actively continuing all that "Jesus began to do and to teach until He was taken up to Heaven" (Acts 1:1-2a).*

### **Introduction**

I'm doing my best to try to keep up with the new methods of communication made possible through technological developments and their applications. For a couple of years now, I've ignored the QR codes in Target, hoping we would move on to something new before I had to learn what to do with them, but in recent days, I've been forced to figure it out to access everything from restaurant menus to a doctor's office check-in process. It is staggering for me to think about how much methods of communication have changed in my lifetime! Before much longer, people like my elderly parents, with their simple flip phones, may not be able to shop, to bank, or even gain entrance into their church lobby!

It takes more than tech skill to communicate these days. The expectation of creativity is soaring. Consider the ways people announce the gender of an unborn baby or propose marriage! Five years ago, a mail carrier sought to deliver a political message by flying his gyrocopter, a flying bicycle/helicopter hybrid, onto the lawn of White House to convey a political message by means of 535 letters that he had carried with him.

However creative or advanced our methods, no one has ever gone or will go to a greater length to communicate their message than God. He is the ultimate communicator. *Before time began*, God knew my name and He knew your name, and He formed a plan to reach us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with His message. The book of Acts tells how that message spread from a small band of about 120 people in Jerusalem to the capital of the Roman Empire and beyond. The writer of the book states that what Jesus *began* to do and teach while on earth had been the focus of an earlier historical record (the book of Luke), and in Acts, he repeatedly illustrates how the Holy Spirit *continued* what Jesus began to do and teach through the venue of His people, the church. If Jesus' work and teachings had not continued, God's message would have been lost. But what God decides to do, He is able to do; long before we were born, He decided to reach you and me and many others with His message.

Therefore, it is not an accident that you are listening to these words today. The Spirit of Jesus (that is the Holy Spirit) has ensured that you and I have been on a collision course so that His message would reach you this very day. He has things to *teach* you and me and things He intends to *do* in and through us as a result of our participation in this study. I hope that you are as amazed as I am that God has gone to so much trouble to ensure His message has reached each of us personally!

## I. **The Story of the Bible:** The Bible contains God’s message.

**A. A Unified Story:** Despite the fact that the Bible’s 66 books were written over hundreds of years by more than 40 authors (all with different personalities, levels of education, and experiences), it tells a unified story from beginning to end. When our children were young, we sometimes played a game in which one person invented the beginning of a story and each family member added to it. The last person came up with an imaginary conclusion. But with the Bible, it is impossible that the writers could have each invented their part of the story. One proof is that many of them predicted events that were actually fulfilled in history hundreds of years after they wrote. The Bible is unified because God personally superintended the writing. He inspired it. It is His message to us. Although each book reflects the personality and style of the human writer, God ensured His message wasn’t compromised, even in the slightest detail.

### B. **The Old Testament**

- i. Genesis 1-11: The book of Genesis explains that God brought the universe into existence. It tells of the fall of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, from fellowship with Him and the death penalty that was imposed on Adam and his descendants as a result: immediate spiritual death and ultimate physical death. God promised He would eventually send someone to crush sin’s hold on us (Genesis 3:15). The impact of sin on the world became all the more evident as world population increased. To slow the effects of it, God sent a flood that took the lives of all living creatures, except the family of one righteous man, Noah. However, the flood did nothing to change the wickedness in people’s hearts. This is illustrated in their repopulation of the earth and refusal to scatter and “fill the earth” (Genesis (9:1), as God had commanded. Through these events, God shows the need for a permanent solution to sin, a way to reconcile mankind to Him.
- ii. Genesis 12-50: Thus, God chose to work through Abram’s descendants to bring about His redemptive plan and bless the world. Genesis 12-50 tells of the struggles of Abram (renamed “Abraham”) and several of his descendants to learn to trust God. As a result of a great famine, the Hebrews (the family of Abraham’ grandson Jacob) migrated from Palestine to Egypt. Over the next four hundred years, they multiplied so greatly that the Egyptians felt threatened and forced them into slavery.
- iii. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy tell how God made a covenant with the Hebrews, making them His representatives on earth. God delivered them from bondage in Egypt under Moses’ leadership and formed them into a nation with civil, ceremonial, and moral laws to govern them.

- iv. Joshua: The book of Joshua tells how God gave the newly formed nation of Israel a land of their own, the land of Canaan, in accordance with the promise He had made to Abraham. In so doing, God condemned to death the exceedingly wicked Canaanite people groups who had previously occupied Canaan.
- v. Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, and 1-2 Chronicles tell of the Israelites struggle with faithfulness to God over seven centuries. While a few individuals, like Samuel, King David, and King Hezekiah and King Josiah, served Him faithfully, the vast majority represented Him so poorly that He eventually handed Israel over to their enemies. The Assyrians exiled the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC and after that, the Biblical record ceases to trace them. The Babylonians exiled Israelites living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. During their captivity, the people of Judah began to be called Jews.
- vi. Esther is the story of God's protection of His people while they were in exile.
- vii. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return of a remnant of Jews to their homeland.
- viii. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are books of poetry written by Jews during their years in Canaan and after the exile.
- ix. The Writing Prophets: With the exception of Lamentations, which expresses grief at the exile of God's people), Isaiah through Malachi are books of prophecy. The Jewish prophets were God's mouthpieces. They warned Israel of the consequences of disobedience to God, but they also issued reminders of God's promise of eventual deliverance through a Messiah, a Deliverer. Although the Jews were largely focused on their desire for political freedom and the restoration of their kingdom, the prophets hint that God's plan was much greater. From the beginning, He had planned a spiritual deliverance that would restore fellowship between Him and His people and enable them to obey Him.

### C. The New Testament

- i. Gospels: The New Testament begins with four different accounts (Gospels) of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed to be God's promised Messiah and thus the only way we can reach God. Furthermore, He claimed to provide us with a revelation of God in that He claimed to *be* God. Jesus performed powerful miracles to prove His claims. Nevertheless, His claims were so radical that the majority of the Jews of His day rejected Him. Ultimately, they crucified Him. But according to all four Gospel accounts, the final proof of Jesus' authenticity was that He rose from the dead and returned to Heaven.

- ii. Acts: The book of Acts is a transitional book that gives the history of the early church of Jesus. This history provides the context for all the letters written by Jesus' apostles in the remainder of the New Testament.
- iii. Romans – Revelation: These books are letters (epistles) that were written to various churches or individuals. In them, the fuller meaning of Christ's person, life, and work is explained. They explain that Jesus came to earth to live the righteous life every other individual has been unable to live. He came to die the death we deserve, in order to free us from the obligation we owe God and restore our fellowship with Him. The epistles also explain the implication of such doctrines (teachings) to the believer's everyday life and elaborate on Jesus' promise to return again. Revelation is unique. It describes the apostle John's vision of future events, using apocalyptic language. Revelation concludes with words about the eternal, heavenly home of those who have been redeemed from sin by Jesus. The story of the Bible thus begins and ends with God in fellowship with His people.

**SUMMARY:** The book of Acts is part of the Bible's story of how God has acted to restore His relationship with those who receive and follow His Son Jesus.

What motivates people to go to such lengths to communicate creatively and efficiently? We can only speculate! But John 3:16 clearly tells us what motivated God to reach us with His message: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." Love motivated God to send His Son Jesus to earth to die on our behalf. Love is what motivated Him to reach us with His message.

**PRINCIPLE:** *God's love motivates Him to reach you and me.*

God *chose us* before the creation of the world. *In love*, He predestined us to be adopted as His children (Ephesians 1:4-5). Paul wrote, "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters *loved by the Lord*, because from the beginning God *chose you* to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Even before we were born, God's love for us motivated Him to reach us with His message.

**ILLUSTRATION:** For many years, I knew intellectually that God loved me. I had received Jesus as my Savior as a child, but as I grew to adulthood, I subconsciously feared that God was always looking for ways to make my life difficult in order to mature me. I acknowledged God's love with my head, but my heart had little sense of it. The day I became aware of the conflict (I was about thirty years old) was a marvelous day. I was finally able to see that because God loves me and wants what is best for me, I could fully trust Him.

I didn't need to be so anxious about difficulties that came my way or concerned about what the future would hold. I knew His love continually motivated Him to work all things together for my good and His glory (Romans 8:28).

**APPLICATION:** What difficulty challenges your confidence in God's love for you? He loves you enough to have ensured you would be reached with the Gospel, and He also loves you enough to work *everything* together for your good and His glory.

**TRANSITION:** One of the many specific things God has done out of love for us was to prompt an individual named Luke to pen the book of Acts.

## II. The Author of Acts

### A. Luke's Background

- i. An Anonymous Author: The books of Luke and Acts were originally two volumes of a single work. Together, they make up nearly one-third of the entire New Testament. During the late first or early second century, the second volume was separated, in order that the first could be placed alongside the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. The second volume was then named "Acts." Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1 state that the author wrote to the same individual, Theophilus. Although both volumes were written anonymously, the "we" references in the Book of Acts (16:10, etc.) indicate that the author was one of Paul's traveling companions. The second verse of Luke says that the author wrote of things passed down to him from eyewitnesses. Thus, he could not have been one of the apostles. The earliest of church traditions attest to the fact that the author is Luke. Luke may have just been too modest to mention himself by name.
- ii. Paul's Traveling Companion: Paul names Luke three times in his epistles (Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24). Some have suggested that Luke may have been one of Paul's converts. The indication in Acts is that Luke accompanied Paul on his second and third missionary journeys. Apparently, Luke also traveled later with Paul, for in Paul's very last epistle, he wrote from Rome saying, "only Luke is with me" (2 Timothy 4:11). In Colossians 4, Paul sends greetings from several of his companions, saying they are the only Jews among his co-workers. Immediately thereafter, he sent greetings from Justus, Epaphras, and Luke, implying they were Gentiles. If so, Luke is the only Gentile Biblical writer. In the same passage, Paul called Luke "the doctor" (4:14).

## B. Luke's Writing Style

- i. Luke the Historian: Luke's medical education would explain why scholars consider his Greek writing style the most excellent in all the New Testament. Luke's scholarship is also attested by his interest in recording accurate historical details. In the opening words of his Gospel, he said he had carefully investigated everything from the beginning in order to write an orderly account. One proof of his interest in historical accuracy is found in the number of lengthy speeches he recorded: six speeches of Peter, Stephen's lengthy speech preceding his stoning, James' speech at the Jerusalem council, and nine speeches of Paul. Additionally, Luke gave a careful record of Paul's three missionary journeys and recorded many details about Paul's life and trials, including three accounts of Paul's conversion.
- ii. Luke the Observer of People: Perhaps Luke's experience as a physician made him more aware of the emotional and psychological impact of the Gospel on people. No less than sixty-one times, he used terms like "utterly amazed," "perplexed," "cut to the heart," "filled with wonder," "greatly disturbed," "astonished," "afraid," "alarmed," and "filled with fear [or jealousy or joy]."
- iii. Luke the Spiritual Man: Luke was also a spiritual man with spiritual interests. He interrupts the narrative approximately twenty times to include commentaries on the early church, emphasizing the fellowship of believers, the attitude of their hearts, church growth, and other related facts.

**SUMMARY:** Luke is one of the forty human authors God has used to convey His word to us. Although God's written revelation is complete, He still uses *people* to bring His word to others.

**PRINCIPLE:** *God works through individuals to convey His message to mankind.*

In many ways, Luke was surely an ordinary person, like you and me. Yet just think how many people have been impacted because of Luke's faithfulness in passing on an account of what had been handed down to him (Luke 1:2)!

**ILLUSTRATION:** The story of the conversion of Billy Graham, the most impactful evangelist of the last century, exemplifies the potential impact one faithful individual can have. In April 1855, a Sunday school teacher named Edward Kimball had a conversation with a seventeen-year-old young boy named Dwight L. Moody about how much God loved him. The conversation led to Moody's conversion.<sup>i</sup> Moody became a powerful American evangelist and in the late 1870s, J. Wilbur Chapman attended one of Moody's meetings in Chicago. Afterwards, Chapman received personal counseling from Moody that helped him

receive certainty of his (Chapman's) salvation and Chapman later became Moody's co-worker. Sometime after that, Chapman had influence in the life of another evangelist, the former American baseball player Billy Sunday. The two also became co-workers. Then in 1924, Sunday held evangelistic meetings in Charlotte, North Carolina. Out of this campaign grew a Christian businessmen's club that invited a certain revivalist, Mordecai Ham, for its 1934 meetings. It was at those meetings, under Ham's preaching, that Billy Graham went forward and received Christ.<sup>ii</sup> Over the past eight decades, Billy Graham has preached the Gospel to more people in person than anyone in the history of Christianity. As of 2008, his lifetime audience, including radio and television broadcasts, exceeded 2.2 billion people! Although the influence of Edward Kimball on Billy Graham was indirect, this testimony nevertheless illustrates just how powerful the impact of one faithful Christian can be.

**APPLICATION:** God also plans to work through you and me to convey His message to others. However, we can refuse to cooperate. If we do, He can easily use someone else, to our eternal loss of reward. How will you demonstrate faithfulness this week in conveying God's message to others? The impact of your faithful witness may be incalculable!

**TRANSITION:** God's motive for reaching us is love. His method for reaching people is the faithful presentation of His word by individuals like Luke, and you, and me. But as we discover from the book of Acts itself, the Holy Spirit is the means by which His message is made impactful.

### III. The Book of Acts

- A. Acts' Unique Position in the New Testament:** As previously mentioned, early in church history the four Gospels were gathered to form one collection. They were circulated under the title, "The Gospel." As the New Testament epistles were written and began to be collected, they were circulated under the title, "The Apostle." Acts served to bridge these two collections. It is uniquely valuable as the only Biblical book that continues the history recorded in the Gospels and gives historical context to many of the epistles.
- B. Date:** The most reasonable dates that have been proposed for the writing of Luke/Acts are AD 60-62 or somewhere around AD 80, after Paul's death. The later date allows for the likelihood that Luke used the Gospel of Mark (dated at about AD 65) as a source for his own Gospel. However, those who favor the earlier dates point to the fact that Luke never mentions the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, Paul's death (which is traditionally dated between AD 66 and 68), or Nero's persecution of Christians (which began after the great fire of Rome in AD 64). Given Luke's interest in history, it would be strange indeed for Luke to have failed to mention these events if they had already occurred. Assuming he wrote earlier, it is supposed that he either wrote from Rome, just before Paul's release, or began writing during Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea and finished writing in Rome.

**C. Sources:** Luke was an eyewitness to some of the events he recorded, as the book of Acts indicates. As Paul’s travel companion, physician, and close personal friend, he surely also used Paul as a source of information. In addition, during his travels with Paul, Luke encountered many great men of the early church. These too would have served as sources of information.

**D. Outline:** Acts can be outlined in a variety of ways:

- i. Using Key Persons (Peter and Paul): The first twelve chapters highlight Peter as the key leader of the Jewish church. Although there is some overlap, chapters 13-28 highlight Paul as the key apostle to the Gentiles.
- ii. By the Geographical Expansion of the Gospel: In Acts 1:8, just before Jesus’ ascension, He commanded His followers to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and in the ends of the earth. Luke’s record shows how the Great Commission was fulfilled and the Gospel was spread in exactly the way that Jesus foretold.
- iii. According to the Seven Major “Progress Reports:” Some have used the progress reports contained in Acts 2:47, 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, and 28:30-31 to outline the book.
- iv. According to the Book’s Major Events: Yet another way to outline Acts is by summarizing the events.
  - a. *Chapters 1-6:* The first church was in Jerusalem and was comprised of Jews, since Jesus and His followers were Jewish. Chapters 1-6 show this young church joyfully experiencing power, fellowship, opposition, and growth with Peter as its leader.
  - b. *Chapters 7-8:* Chapters 7-8 tell of the spreading out of the church as a result of persecution following Stephen’s stoning. That diaspora resulted in the church expanding outside Jerusalem.
  - c. *Chapters 9-21:* Chapters 9-21 begin with Paul’s conversion and Peter’s vision. The result of these two events was the further expansion of the church and most specifically, the inclusion of Gentiles. As the “Apostle to the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:8), Paul’s three missionary journeys are described in these chapters.
  - d. *Chapters 21- 28:* The final chapters of Acts tell of Paul’s imprisonment and trials. Our *Acts 1* study covers the Book of Acts from its beginning through Paul’s three missionary journeys, ending in Acts 21. It also covers the letters of James and Galatians, which seem to fit into the chronology of the first half of Acts, and Paul’s five “journey epistles”: 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. The remaining epistles of the New Testament and the history of Paul’s arrest and trials, as recorded in Acts 21-28, and are covered in *Acts 2*, the final *GOD of the WORD* Bible study.

## E. Purpose

- i. To Record the Historical Expansion of Christianity: Certainly, one of Luke’s purposes in writing Acts was to show the expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome, the capital city of the great Empire. That this could occur in a mere thirty years is nothing short of miraculous! Additionally, in little more than ten years, Paul established the church in the four provinces of the Empire to which he made his missionary journeys. Before AD 47, there were no churches in those parts, but by AD 57, Paul spoke of his work as complete enough that he could plan to go to Rome, in the far west, without worrying that the churches he had founded would fall apart in his absence. The fact that Acts ends abruptly with the establishment of the Gospel in Rome, the capital of the world (as the apostles knew it), may prove that Luke’s purpose in describing the spread of the Gospel under God’s sovereign direction had been served.
- ii. To Give an Apologetic for Christianity: Another possible purpose for the writing of Acts was to explain the nature of Christianity. The book answers such questions as whether it is a sect of Judaism and if so, why Gentiles came into it. In the Roman Empire, only non-politically threatening religions were legal. Acts explains that the Kingdom Jesus claimed to establish was non-political. Acts also explains why it has nevertheless been historically opposed. Luke may have written his works as a legal defense of Christianity, perhaps prompted by Paul’s trials in Rome.<sup>iii</sup>
- iii. For the Benefit of Theophilus: Like the introduction to Luke, the Book of Acts begins by naming Theophilus as the one to whom Luke wrote. One possibility is that Theophilus was a high-ranking government official. He is called “excellent Theophilus” in Luke 1:3. Perhaps Luke wrote to persuade this individual not to persecute Christians in general or because Theophilus had influence in Paul’s trial. Another possibility is that “Theophilus may have been Luke’s patron who financed the writing of Luke and Acts.”<sup>iv</sup> In addition to these possibilities, we should consider the words of Luke 1:4, where Luke says he wrote so Theophilus might “know the certainty of the things [he had] been taught.” Since “Theophilus” means “lover of God,” some have suggested Theophilus was simply a believer (“lover of God”) who needed strengthening in his faith. If that was the case, Luke may not have been using the true name of the person to whom he wrote due to the dangers of persecution.

## F. Four Themes

- i. Witnesses (Sending): Jesus told His disciples in Acts 1:8 that they were to be His witnesses. The fulfilling of this commission is indicated by the repeated use of the terms “witness” and “testify” and the many occasions on which individuals were sent out for this purpose.
- ii. Prayer - Individuals or groups either pray or are said to have prayed thirty times in Acts.
- iii. God’s Sovereignty: While the sovereignty of God is unquestionably a major Biblical theme, Acts further emphasizes this theme. Speaking of Jesus’ death by crucifixion, Peter said, “This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge” (2:23). The numerical growth, geographical expansion, persecution, and power of the young church are all portrayed as sovereignly directed.
- iv. The Holy Spirit: Recall that Luke said he had written in a previous volume “about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up to Heaven.” In the Book of Acts, Luke shows that Jesus continued His work on earth *through His Spirit*, mentioning the Holy Spirit no less than 50 times, an average of nearly twice per chapter. Although the title of this book has appeared in ancient Greek manuscripts since the second century as “Acts,” “Acts of the Apostles,” and “Acts of the Holy Apostles,” it has been suggested that it could just as easily have been called “the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” As we study the Book of Acts and several New Testament epistles, we will learn much about the Holy Spirit’s activity.

**Summary Statement:** The Holy Spirit was not only behind the events recorded in the book of Acts; He is behind the events of the life of every believer today. He is ever guiding, instructing, comforting, and empowering us.

**PRINCIPLE:** *The Spirit of Jesus (the Holy Spirit) is actively continuing all that “Jesus began to do and to teach until He was taken up to Heaven” (Acts 1:1-2a).*

**APPLICATION:** Do you need a reminder today that *the Holy Spirit* is the means by which God’s message is made impactful? “It is the Gospel through the Holy Spirit that converts people.”<sup>v</sup> We cannot fulfill the Great Commission by means of our own gifts, talents, or experience, great as these may be. Our willingness and effort to live and to speak for God are required, but we are only as spiritually effective as we are Spirit-empowered.

## CONCLUSION

At various times and places in history, godless men have predicted that Christianity would become defunct. But that is impossible, since God has sovereignly purposed that all Jesus began to do and to teach *would continue* through His Spirit until it eventually reached you and me and the many others it will reach before Jesus returns.

One final question: How will the knowledge that God has acted to bring you here, at this time, on this day, to communicate *with you* through this *Acts 1* study, affect your commitment and the time you will invest in it? He has intended from the beginning to reach you and me with His message.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwight\\_L.\\_Moody](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwight_L._Moody)

<sup>ii</sup> Wheaton College Billy Graham Center Archives: [www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/faq/13.htm](http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/faq/13.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> Gempf, Conrad (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed.). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Toussaint, Stanley D. (1983, 2000). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Acts 1:1). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>v</sup> Qureshi, Nabeel (2014). *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (p. 317). Zondervan.