

The Acts of the Apostles

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THE TITLE of the fifth book of the New Testament aptly describes its contents. It contains the wonderful works of preaching and miracle which the first-century apostles undertook in order to establish Christ's ecclesia in the Roman Empire, amongst the Jews first, and then amongst the Gentiles.

But the title is also something of a misnomer. Luke sets the agenda more precisely in the opening verses, in which he self-consciously makes the link back to Volume 1:

"The former treatise [that is, the Gospel of Luke] have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy [Spirit] had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen".

The things recorded in the Gospel, then, were only the *beginning* of Jesus' work. In the book of Acts he continues his work through his chosen apostles. Yes, the book describes the acts of the apostles. But in their acting they were working on behalf of their exalted Lord. True, the book describes the teaching of the apostles. But in their preaching they were speaking the words of the one who sent them. In a very real sense, this book describes the continued Acts of Jesus.

The work of the Spirit

Those first two verses also introduce the Holy Spirit. We noted previously that a theme in Luke's Gospel was the work of the Spirit,¹ so it is no surprise to find the theme continued here. Now that the Lord has ascended from them, the disciples need its presence to support them in their preaching, to give them recollection of what their Lord had said, to guide them in their missions, and to perform miracles to cement the establishment of the early church. The practical outworking of the Spirit in Acts chimes appropriately with what the Lord had said about the Comforter back in John 14–16.

Already, in the first chapter of Acts, Luke's interest in the work of the Spirit can be seen:

- Jesus gave commands to the apostles through the Holy Spirit (v. 2)

- After the ascension, the disciples were to await the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as promised by the Father (vv. 4,5)
- The Holy Spirit would come upon them and empower them in their role as Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth (v. 8)
- Luke quotes Peter's statement that the Holy Spirit had spoken through David about the failure of Judas, and of the need to appoint a witness of the resurrection to succeed him (vv. 16-22).

And what comes next? It is Pentecost, a long chapter about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, Peter's explanation of it and its implications, and the consequences of the extraordinary event. Note especially verses 4,17,18,33,38 and 43. From this springboard we could continue throughout the book, following through the Spirit theme (an exercise well worth undertaking).

From one centre to another

It is possible to read Acts both as a self-contained book that tells its own full and satisfying story, and as a part of the larger work Luke–Acts. There is merit in both approaches.

Looking at Acts stand-alone for a moment, we can observe that there are important links between the beginning and end of the book that provide important clues about the book's overarching purpose and themes. Consider the following sets of pairs, in which one reference is drawn from chapter 1 and the other from chapter 28:

- 1 In the days before his ascension, Jesus was "*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" (1:3). At the end of the book, Paul "*expounded and testified the kingdom of God*" (28:23). The very last verse describes his two years in his own hired house "*preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ*" (v. 31).
- 2 In 1:8 Jesus states that his disciples were to be "*witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in*

1. See "[Some themes of Luke's Gospel](#)", Apr. 2006, p. 123.

Panel 1. Concentric circles (a possible analysis of Acts)

Jerusalem 1:1 – 6:7

Conclusion: “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (6:7).

Palestine outside Jerusalem 6:8 – 9:31

Conclusion: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judæa and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy [Spirit], were multiplied” (9:31).

Palestine to Syrian Antioch 9:32 – 12:24

Conclusion: “But the word of God grew and multiplied” (12:24).

South Galatia 12:25 – 16:5

Conclusion: “And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily” (16:5).

Macedonia, Achaia, Asia 16:6 – 19:20

Conclusion: “So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (19:20).

Rome 19:21 – 28:31

Conclusion (notice especially the last clause): “And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching . . . and teaching . . . with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (28:30,31).

all Judæa, and in Samaria”. At the end of the book, Paul, in Rome, “testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus . . . from morning till evening” (28:23). The closing chapters of Acts have presented Paul as a *witness* or *defendant* in courtroom scenes. At the end, he faces the most momentous *trial* of all, before Caesar himself.

- 3 At the start of the book Jesus speaks of the apostles’ duty to carry the gospel message to “the uttermost part of the earth” (1:8). In 28:28 Paul turns to the Jews for the last time, and tells them, “the salvation of God is sent unto the *Gentiles* . . . they will hear it”. As he says this, he is sat in Rome, the capital of the world at that time. He is about to preach the gospel before the most important person in the world, Caesar himself. A momentous conclusion!

We find, then, that the book begins in Jerusalem, and works its way to Rome.² It charts a course from the religious centre of the world, if you will, to its economic and political centre. It marks a path from Jew to Gentile, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Putting Acts into Luke–Acts

Once we set the book of Acts into its wider context of Luke–Acts the foregoing stands in even sharper hue. In our earlier consideration of Luke³ we discovered that the narrative began in Jerusalem and

ended there. The Gospel contained a long travel narrative which charted Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem to sacrifice himself. The text was constantly focusing our attention upon Jerusalem and what the Lord would accomplish there.

In Acts the movement goes the other way. Instead of homing in on Jerusalem (the geographic frame getting ever narrower and more concentrated), the action begins in Jerusalem and spreads out from there in ever-widening circles. Like ripples spreading on a pond where a stone has struck, Acts begins with Jesus’ staggering commission and describes how the wonderful news of what happened at Jerusalem is carried through the Roman Empire to the capital itself. In [Panel 1](#) there is a list of passages which mark these concentric circles of the gospel’s reach. They stand like waymarks along the exciting journey the gospel message takes. They also provide a possible scheme for analysing the book.

If we look at the combined entity of Luke–Acts, we find more ties that bind them at beginning and end. It was prophesied by Simeon at the beginning of Luke that Jesus would be a light to the

2. Interestingly, Paul’s own path at the end of the book follows this pattern. He goes to Jerusalem (21:15, *cf.* vv. 12-14), and from there to Rome. He draws this point out explicitly in 28:17-19.
3. “[Bible background: the Gospel of Luke](#)”, Apr. 2006, p. 121.

Gentiles (2:32), and the fulfilment of this is found in Acts 28. Furthermore, according to Simeon's prophecy, Jesus was "set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel" (v. 34). In Acts 28:24-28 Paul divides the Jews into believers (those who would rise), and unbelievers (those who would fall). The Jews were thereby similarly divided into two camps; there would be no middle ground.

The speeches

In addition to charting the rapid and vigorous geographic and ethnic spread of early Christianity, Acts serves another vitally important purpose. It records the actual content of the apostles' teaching, and in many different settings. The speeches of the book of Acts are a defining feature.

There is a lot to be learned from examining the speeches. Sometimes there is a hook, a powerful lead-in which the apostle takes as a springboard for revealing the gospel's power and relevance to men and women. Almost always there is swift reference back to the Old Testament Scriptures to show the consistency and design of God's unfolding purpose. The speeches are direct and to the point; they are often short in length, but never short on vigour or conviction.

Panel 2. Main apostolic characters or speakers in Acts

1-5	Peter
6-7	Stephen
8	Philip (Peter also)
9	Paul and Peter
10-12	Peter
13-14	Paul
15	Paul (and Peter and James)
16-28	Paul

Nor are they short on content. If one takes a typical speech and simply lists how much doctrinal ground is covered in a short compass, the result is often staggering. All one has to do is to itemise the first principle doctrines that are either explicit or implicit in what is said. Most of the speeches contain most of the key doctrines that Christadelphians would profess today. Put them together as a collection, and practically every basic is covered. The speeches in Acts provide a wonderful and convincing summary of what the first-century apostles believed, which is what Christadelphians still believe today. They are powerful models for the modern-day preacher in content, design and execution.

The characters

A rough-and-ready survey of the main characters in Acts is given in [Panel 2](#). In the first twelve chapters the dominant character is Peter. From chapter 13 onwards the narrative is largely concerned with Paul. Certain other characters make their appearances (notably Stephen, Philip and James), but Peter and Paul predominate.

But they are unequal halves. Paul has considerably more space devoted to him, and the space is given almost without interruption once chapter 13 is reached (chapter 15 is the only exception, with Peter and James making key contributions along with Paul). In the Peter part of Acts there are major sections in which Peter is not present at all (large parts of chapters 6-8).

Since Acts is concerned with the *spread* of the gospel message, particularly through Gentile territory, this is no surprise. Paul was the Lord's prime mover in the mission to the Gentiles; Peter's ministry in Acts is to the Jews and the area in closer proximity to Jerusalem. Indeed, some of the key passages in which Peter does appear are concerned with bringing the gospel to the Gentiles (especially the Cornelius event). As Paul's travelling companion,⁴ it is also no surprise that Luke devotes more space to Paul.

Yet Acts is not biography. Luke is not interested in unpacking the *personality* of Peter or Paul, for instance. He is concerned with them only as ministers of the Lord Jesus, key figures only because of their part in the unfolding drama of the spreading gospel message.

The interface between the Peter and Paul parts of Acts (1-12 and 13-28) is important. After the introduction in chapter 1 (much of which builds bridges back to the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus), chapter 2 opens with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Following this 'baptism', for which Jesus had commanded them to wait, Peter presses forward with the preaching work. His long speech in chapter 2 inaugurates this public work; the mission of Peter is launched.

The second main part of Acts, the Paul section, is similarly marked with a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, as recorded in 13:1-4. And so the famous missionary journeys begin. Paul's mission, too, is launched, not by his own planning, but by the Holy Spirit.

4. The evidence for this comes from the famous 'we' passages in Acts, which let us know when Luke quietly joins or leaves Paul's party. The 'we' passages are 16:10-17 and 20:5 onwards.

Panel 3. Some parallels between Peter and Paul

- Both have two names, a 'before' and 'after' (Jno. 1:42; Acts 13:9)
- Both heal a lame man and get into trouble for it (ch. 3; ch. 14)
- Both are arrested in the temple and brought before the Sanhedrin (chs. 4, 5; 21, 23)
- Fear falls upon all (5:5,11; 19:17)
- Peter's shadow, Paul's skin (5:15,16; 19:11,12)
- Compare Gamaliel's words with Gallio's; a beating follows (5:34-40; 18:12-17)
- Peter denounces Simon Magus, Paul denounces Bar-jesus (8:20-23; 13:9-11)
- Compare the healings of Aeneas with Publius' father and Dorcas with Eutychus (9:32-42; 28:8 and 20:9,10)
- Both are offered and reject worship (10:25,26; 14:13-18)
- Peter is arrested by Agrippa I, Paul defends himself before Agrippa II (ch. 12; ch. 26)
- All sorts of details about Peter in chapter 12 are echoed in Paul's experience

But the two parts of Acts are not separate. Luke carefully integrates them. Peter reappears in chapter 15 to show that Paul has not somehow replaced him. And Paul first appears, not in chapter 13, but in chapters 7 and 9. The conversion of Paul is described in chapter 9, but he does not begin his mission proper until chapter 13. In between come three crucial chapters which are all about Peter. These chapters are the bridge. It is with Peter, the apostle to the Jews, that the active mission to the Gentiles begins, and it is Peter to whom the vision of the sheet with unclean animals is revealed. It is Peter who says, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized . . . ?" (10:47). As the Jews later respond, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (11:18). Paul will take up this work and thrust it forward more than any other figure since, but Luke is careful to show that the work is one and that Peter and Paul are fully in step in their direction and purpose. Thus we have an interlocking pattern:

nections, but these are but a taster from a whole set of links between the lives of the two apostles. So many of the things that happen to Peter happen to Paul as well. The life of the apostle to the Jews finds its counterpart in that of the apostle to the Gentiles. [Panel 3](#) presents a larger selection of these links, but it is still only a selection drawn from a much longer list.⁵

What is the purpose of this symmetry? At one level it illustrates a kind of harmony or pattern in the experiences of the apostles and the early church. The opposition and persecution Peter met, Paul met too; the joy of those they converted was equally revolutionary; the force of their respective missions and the power demonstrated by the Holy Spirit was mighty in each case.

But perhaps the real reason lies not in the similarities between Peter and Paul, but rather that both Peter and Paul have experiences that echo the experiences of one greater: their Lord and ours, the Lord Jesus Christ. They are both

Main Peter section (1–8)	Paul (9)	Remaining Peter (10–12)	Main Paul section (13–28)
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It is fascinating that Peter's vision about the sheet takes place at midday, involving a voice from heaven, and he sees a vision that is repeated three times (10:16). The story of Paul's conversion is told three times in the book of Acts (chapters 9, 22 and 26), and also takes place at midday and involves a voice from heaven. Both accounts form part of the catapult-machinery that the Lord uses to launch the mission to the Gentiles.

Shadows of their Lord

In conclusion, let us return to the connections between the two halves of the book and to Peter and Paul. We have already seen some close con-

arrested, tried and persecuted by the religious rulers of the Jews, but the point of this is surely that this is what happened to Jesus. They re-enact, in a lesser but significant way, the passion of the Lord. Their whole lives—in their fervour, in their miraculous works, in their journeyings, and in their sufferings—are modelled upon his. They are willing to suffer and to die with him as they spread his marvellous message, even as they are willing to share in his amazing victory.

5. A full survey is provided in R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Methuen, 1909), p. xlviii.