

for All Its Worth

Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Why Acts?

Why have a separate lesson for a stand-alone book, especially when it is a historical narrative like many other books of the Bible? The book of Acts is immensely important to understand where we are in time right now, the New Testament age. Acts stands unique among the books of the New Testament and other historical narratives because in many ways, we are trying to imitate its practices today. Many distinctions among denominations and even between local congregations within the same denomination can be traced back to how Acts is interpreted. It will be helpful for us to step back and give some serious consideration to how we are interpreting this book, to make sure that it is reasonable, and that we are applying these principles consistently.

All about Acts

Author & Date

Acts was likely written in the late 50's or early 60's by Luke, the physician who often traveled with the Apostle Paul. Paul was probably still alive when this book was written and had not yet written many of his epistles or been imprisoned a second time.

Purpose

What was Luke's intention in writing Acts? Let me ask this question a different way, what was God's purpose in recording the Acts of the Apostles for us? Why do we still have it today? There are many events and issues covered in Acts and plenty that was left out. There are thousands of conversions that are not mentioned or just briefly addressed, yet some are recorded in great detail (e.g. the Apostle Paul). Although the book is formally titled, "The Acts of the Apostles," it only focuses on two: Peter and Paul. Christian history indicates that all of the apostles had active and fruitful ministries in various parts of the world.

To decipher this purpose, we should start with the text and develop a tentative framework from the content of the book that reflects any clear statements of intent. Luke begins Acts by referencing his prior writing (the Gospel of Luke) and the ascension of Jesus. This was the conclusion to his gospel, but the introduction to Acts. Read Acts 1:1-11 and look for indication of the purpose of this narrative work.

It is readily agreed that Acts traces the church from its beginnings in Jerusalem through its spread into Judea, Samaria, and into the rest of the world. The entire book of Acts covers a period of around 30 years! It records the realization of Jesus' prophecy and sets the stage for its continued realization in our day.

Yet it is important to recognize that Acts does not broadly cover the history of the early church. It starts with a focus on the Church at Jerusalem and the ministry of the Apostle Peter, the early leader among the Apostles and Elders (Chapters 1-12). The book then transitions to the ministry of the Apostle Paul and his various missionary journeys (Chapters 13-28) that allowed the gospel to eventually make its way to Rome, the capital of the civilized world. There are no doubt thousands of conversions that are not mentioned and many local congregations established during the first 30 years of church history that are not recorded for us.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

The authors of How to Read the Bible for All its Worth suggest that there is a repeated theme throughout Acts that divides the book into six sections. Each of these sections is distinguished by presenting various challenges the early church (or the later churches) faced followed by a time of unhindered (or less hindered) spiritual prosperity. Note the six key passages that conclude these sections below. Identify the conflicts and events preceding each passage and the key characters that were the focus of Luke's writing.

Acts 6:7 – *“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.”*

Conflicts/Events:

Key Characters:

Acts 9:31 – *“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.”*

Conflicts/Events:

Key Characters:

Acts 12:24 – *“But the word of God grew and multiplied.”*

Conflicts/Events:

Key Characters:

Acts 16:4-5 – *“And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.”*

Conflicts/Events:

Key Characters:

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Acts 19:20 – *“So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”*

Conflicts/Events:

Key Characters:

Acts 28:30-31 – *“And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”*

Conflicts/Events:

Key Characters:

What are your thoughts regarding this method of organizing Acts?

What are some other options for organizing Acts?

Main Character

At first glance, it appears that the main characters change throughout Acts. We begin with a general focus on the apostles that narrows to Peter, then to Stephen and Philip, and eventually to Saul/Paul. However, one character remains central throughout the entire text. Identify this character and discuss their role in Acts.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Purpose: Take Two

You will notice that we did not definitively determine the purpose of Acts in the last section. We will refrain from dogmatism in this section as well, but we do want to narrow down the possibilities and suggest a purpose that may help you to make more sense of this important book. Let's proceed by asking some questions about Luke's (or the Holy Spirit's) intent?

Was it biographical?

Was it historical?

Was it intended to standardize church practice?

Was it intended to be a model for the church?

Based on this study, I see Acts serving as a model for the continuous movement of the gospel forward to fulfill the Great Commission given by Christ. Through the main character, the Holy Spirit, we sense a pull of spiritual gravity towards the spread of the gospel that is not withstood by forces internal or external to the church. This book serves as an example and source of encouragement to churches throughout Christian history, regardless of their cultural circumstances. The Lord has established His church, given her a Commission, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Principles for Interpreting and Applying Acts

The question we must answer when approaching Acts is whether *what happened* reflects what *should happen* in the future, meaning that it represents a norm or standard for churches of all ages. Biblical history in general records many events that describe what happened but do not intend to suggest that we follow suit. For example, Abraham lied twice about his relationship to Sarah (Genesis 13 and 20). This is what Abraham did, but it is not intended for us to imitate. Let's consider an example from Acts.

Read Acts 2:37-47. Does this passage teach us to sell our possessions when we become Christians or does it teach us something else? See also 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

There are some occasions however, in which it is appropriate to derive instruction from historical descriptions. The authors of How to Read the Bible for All its Worth provide six principles for interpreting biblical precedents from Acts. I have somewhat reorganized, condensed, and modified these principles based on my convictions and for the sake of clarity. Examples are provided of each principle.

1. The word of God in Acts that may be regarded as a command for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative intended to teach.

Example: What is a primary purpose of the account of Ananias and Saphiras lying to the Church at Jerusalem (see Acts 5:1-11)? What are we being taught?

2. Details that are incidental to the primary purpose of a text must not become primary as we seek to apply the narrative today.

Example: We see how God judged Ananias and Saphiras immediately by striking them dead in Acts 5:1-11. Is this the primary teaching purpose of the passage (i.e. God will immediately kill anyone who lies to the church) or an incidental detail?

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

3. It is probably never valid to use a single, stand-alone Biblical precedent as giving Biblical authority for present-day actions.

Example: Does Paul's rebuke and curse upon Barjesus the sorcerer in Acts 13:6-11 teach us that we should do the same when we encounter a scorner who interferes with our evangelism.

4. Biblical precedent must be interpreted by clear New Testament teaching, rather than the other way around.

Example: The selection and ordination of the seven Greek Christians in the Church at Jerusalem is often considered to be the ordination of the first deacons (see Acts 6:1-6). Should the standard used by the Apostles for selection of the seven take priority over Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 3:8-13?

5. For Biblical precedent to be a standard for today:
 - a. It must be related to the clear intent of the passage.
 - b. Occurrences of similar events must be represented consistently throughout Acts or if they are represented differently, there must be clear explanation as to WHY they are different.
 - c. Other Scriptures should either support or not contradict the practice or doctrine you are recognizing as a standard.

Example: We see at least two ordination services occur in Acts 6:6 and 13:3. In both ceremonies, the apostles or elders prayed and laid hands upon the candidates. Should this be considered a standard practice for all ordination services today? See also 1 Timothy 4:14 and 5:22.

6. Although application of a Biblical precedent may not have been the author's primary intent (and therefore it would not qualify as a standard), these narratives do have value as illustrations of Biblical truths and as a pattern that could be followed today. Biblical patterns are especially useful if the principle behind the pattern is clearly taught somewhere in Scripture.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson Six – Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

Example: In the account of the ordination of the seven Greek Christians in Acts 6:1-7, we find that there was a need that presented itself to the congregation which resulted in their ordination. Should a need in the congregation be the reason for the ordination of deacons today or should we ordain deacons as a matter of habit or duty?

7. In matters of Christian practice, a Biblical precedent may provide a useful pattern, but still not be recognized as a mandatory standard of Scripture.

Example: As we see Paul go on repeated missionary journeys, he always appeared to have at least one other missionary laboring with him (e.g. Acts 13:2, 15:40, 20:4-5). Is this a useful pattern that should be repeated whenever possible or is it a biblical standard that requires that two or more missionaries labor together for mission work to be scripturally valid?