

Acts of the Apostles: The Beginning of the Church

By Steve Ray

Being seasick is terrible. I experienced it earlier this year while fishing all night on the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen and travelers in the first century were often nauseated while bobbing up and down on the seas of the Roman Empire. St. Paul's most faithful of friends was writing the life of Christ and the first history of the Church and we can imagine him keeping notes and recording memories as he sat on the bow of the ship as it cut through the water with Paul on his later journeys. Writing quills and parchment were primitive means of writing by our modern standards, yet Luke wrote one of the most important and well-written documents known to the modern world. His writings have certainly proven seaworthy.

Luke's history, written mostly from acquired tradition and only briefly from first hand experience with the Apostle Paul (cp. "we" sections in Acts 16:10–17; 20:5-15; 21:1–18, and 27:1—28:16), has come down to us as the *Acts of the Apostles*. Somewhat of an unusual title considering it tells us nothing of the apostolates of Thomas, Andrew, Philip, Matthew or the others. In fact, it only relays bits and pieces from the lives of Peter, John, and Paul. Alternate titles have been proposed such as *Acts of the Holy Spirit*, but the accepted title is from the earliest centuries, quoted in the Fathers and recognized early as an inspired text. It is not a complete history of the early Church, just bare facts, but rather an outline of crucial events and turning points in the early Christian community. This is theology, history, and eternal truth woven by a master into a beautiful tapestry.

As we begin reading *Acts*, full of anticipation to see what happened after Christ ascended into the clouds of heaven, we find that this is not Luke's first document. The opening words begin, "The first account I composed, Theophilus". Luke had written an earlier history, again told like a master weaver full of eternal truths and a deep understanding of the life and gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This of course is the *Gospel of St. Luke* written about AD 62 or thereabouts, just before *Acts*. The recipient of both, Theophilus, was probably a Roman dignitary interested in the full story of this new "religion".

Luke alone provides the account of Jesus' ascension of Jesus into heaven (Lk 24:51; Acts 1:2, 9–11). He also gives us the outline not only for the *Acts of the Apostles* but the expansion of the whole Church from the first century until today. Before disappearing into the clouds, Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in *Jerusalem*, and in all *Judea* and *Samaria*, and even to the *remotest part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8, emphasis mine). This is exactly what happened, as we shall see.

One hundred and twenty disciples were huddled in Jerusalem, waiting for the power of God to descend *or* for armed soldiers to break down the doors (Acts 1:12ff.). The Pentecost fire fell—tongues of fire leaped from each one's head, and the gift of tongues was given. The first full-fledged gospel sermon was preached with power by St. Peter concluding with the words "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"

(Acts 2:38). Notice Peter does not reduce the gospel to “faith alone”, but to a full obedience to Christ, holiness, and the sacraments of the Church. The new king, Jesus, has given his Steward the keys of the kingdom (cp. Is 22). Peter had taken his stand, exercising the authority of the keys delegated by Jesus (Mt 16:18–19).

Only Jews believed on that first Christian Pentecost. For about the first decade of the Church, no Gentiles were included. What an amazing fact—the first years of the Church were exclusively Jewish! The first step, *Jerusalem* in the outline of expansion was being accomplished. But it took a bitter persecution, involving the vicious actions of Saul-soon-to-be-Paul, to move the first Christians beyond the confines of Jerusalem and Judea. Samaria was evangelized soon after the martyrdom of Stephen whose lengthy sermon set the stage for the broader inclusiveness of the Gospel. Philip the deacon reached further with the gospel to *Samaria* and gathered a great harvest. The apostles were called down to confirm the new believers (Acts 8:14–17). The great persecutor Saul is converted and joins the others in spreading the good news of Christ. The plan was in full bloom now: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and now the remotest parts of the earth—Peter, Paul, and the other apostles fanned out to preach and establish the Church. In Acts 13 the exciting expansion of the Church begins beyond the lands of Israel. Acts gives very little information about the others, but zooms in on the life and apostolate of St. Paul. We know something of the others from snippets in the New Testament and from historical records and tradition.

Actually, the book of *Acts* can also be divided into two broad sections: the ministry of Peter (Acts 1–12) and the ministry of Paul (Acts 13–28) with a very important reappearance of Peter and other apostles in Acts 15. This marvelous chapter is the pinnacle of the whole historical account and should be held precious by all Gentiles Christians, for here it was that Peter stood and again exercised the authority of the keys over the Church to proclaim that the Gentiles could be included in the full life of Christ and the Church *without* first being circumcised and obeying the Mosaic laws and ceremonies. The Gentiles—the “dogs”, the unclean “goyim” —could now partake of the fullness of God and the blessings of Abraham. Without such we Gentiles we had “no hope and without God in the world” (cp. Eph 2:12) Read Ephesians 2 and 3. Even though the first Gentile convert, Cornelius and his household, had been filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized at the hands of Peter (Acts 10), this new development needed to be explained and defined by the Church. And it was! This first general council of the Church, presided over by Peter, the Apostles, and the elders, resulted in an authoritative decree of the Church, which was binding upon all believers. Precedent was set for future Ecumenical Councils.

The depth of Luke’s thought and the profound interrelationship of the New Testament with the Old can be graphically demonstrated in *Acts*. Though Luke is the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible, yet he demonstrates a penetrating understanding of the Old Testament and the covenants of God. The first Pentecost took place at Mount Sinai fifty days after the Passover in Egypt. The lambs’ blood had been shed and the people were free from bondage. Fifty days later (from which we get the word *Pentecost*, from “fifty”), God came down in fire upon the mountain of stone with the Law. The Jews rejected God

by building an idol, the golden calf, and calling it their “god”. As a result 3,000 fell that day at the hand of their own countrymen (Ex 32:28) and after forty years that perverse generation was destroyed for refusing to believe and obey (Acts 7:38ff., Num 32:13).

What does Luke show us? With the brilliance and perception of a prophet he shows us a direct parallel between the Old Covenant and the New—the new Passover and Pentecost. Again, the Lamb’s blood has been shed, this time Jesus’ on the cross and a way has been made through water to leave the bondage of sin and Satan—the way to eternal life. Again God comes down in fire, this time not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of their hearts (2 Cor 3:3) and while the first flame was fearsome, impersonal and far off on the mountaintop, this new fire coming down from God is very personal, hovering over each individual head. And because many believed, God added three thousand that day; at the new Pentecost, fifty days after the Cross, he gives back what had been taken at the first Pentecost.

But the nation of Israel as a whole rejected Jesus, and like the Israelites of old, this generation was destroyed forty years later when Jerusalem was leveled by the troops of Titus marching from Rome in AD 70. Forty years after each of these Pentecosts each generation of rebellious Jews were destroyed. No wonder Peter stood up and warned the Jews in Jerusalem to “Be saved from this *perverse generation!*” (Acts 2:40). This was the same term Moses used of his generation who were destroyed in the wilderness due to their unbelief (Deut 32:20). This charge by Peter was not referring to salvation of their souls, primarily, but a warning that destruction was coming on this generation of Jews for its unbelief as it had come on their fathers. The New is a mirror image of the Old and Luke paints the portrait with great precision and epic proportions.

But the book has a very unsatisfactory ending—in the sense that there *is* no ending. It just stops in mid-stream. What happens to Paul? Where has Peter ended up? What about their final journeys and ministries? Come on, what happens next? I think Luke ended without an ending because the story is by its nature, a never ending story. The Holy Spirit is still at work in and through his church and the Apostolic Succession. Who would presume to say that the soul of the Church, the Holy Spirit, and his work stopped at the end of *Acts*? Has the story of the Holy Spirit in the Church ended? No, of course not. Luke is letting us know the Great Commission’s first chapter had been written, but the lives of the saints, bishops, martyrs, evangelists, laymen, in short the whole Church is on a epic journey and the story will not end until Christ returns in the clouds just as he left—as the story began. Then we will have the whole story from beginning to ending.

Steve Ray has tapes on the [Acts of the Apostles](#) available for purchase.