

Acts 1

1. *Before reading the passage:*
 - a) Imagine the NT without Acts. What would be missing, and what questions left unanswered?
 - b) How do you find the 21st century church different from the church described in Acts?
 - c) What is your gut reaction to these differences? (a) Acts makes me skeptical; (b) I find it inspiring; (c) it is intimidating—they make few mistakes and everything goes their way; (c) it feels irrelevant; (d) _____ .
2. Because Luke 24 has narrative overlap with Acts 1, we can use Luke to decode some of the cryptic verses of Acts 1. In each of the following, what is the Luke 24 version of the text in bold from Acts?
 - a) Acts 1:3: “After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many **convincing proofs**” — see Luke 24:36-43
 - b) Acts 1:3: “...appearing to them during forty days and **speaking about the kingdom of God**” —see Luke 24:44-47
 - c) Acts 1:5: “...you will be **baptized with the Holy Spirit** not many days from now” —see Luke 24:49
3. Jesus tells his followers (1:8), ...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Ajith Fernando writes (emphasis added),

None of us can be witnesses in the same sense as the apostles were, for we have not seen the risen Lord as they did. Yet even their preparation to be witnesses would not be complete until they received the Holy Spirit. On our part, when we believe their witness regarding what they have seen and heard and entrust ourselves to Christ based on that belief, we too can experience the risen Lord through the indwelling Holy Spirit. As the book of Acts unfolds, we see that not only the apostles but also the other Christians were active in witness (8:1, 4). In the same way, we too must witness for him. **Yet for our witness to be effective, it must be witness; that is, it must come out of a first-hand knowledge of the risen Christ.**” (Acts 4:20). [Acts, p. 57]

What would you say to a friend interested in Jesus if you were to limit yourself to what you yourself have *seen and heard*?

4. In Luke, angels are known to appear at pivotal moments to ensure no misunderstanding of the events, as at the birth of Jesus (1:26+, 2:9-10, 13-15), in some accounts of the garden (22:43), and to the women after the resurrection (24:4+, 23). What point are they making here, or misstep/misunderstanding are they preventing?



Fun fact: “As a matter of physical expediency, ancient authors divided their lengthy works into ‘books,’ each of which fit on one papyrus roll... In size, [Acts and Luke] are roughly equivalent, the Gospel with about 19,400 words, Acts with approximately 18,400 words, so that they would have required papyrus rolls of about the same length.” (DLNTD).

Fun quote: In 1:6 the apostles ask when the kingdom will be restored. Calvin wryly comments on this verse, “there are as many errors in the question as words.”

ABBREVIATED BACKGROUND ON ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

- **Author:**
 - Co-authorship with Luke's gospel is well accepted on the basis of connections between the two texts
 - Observation of the "we" sections of Luke suggests the author is the "Luke" of that text, likely the same individual mentioned in Phil 1:24; 2 Tim 4:11; Col 4:14.
 - The author, *Loukas* in the Greek, is a physician (Col 4:14) and possibly a slave: "it has been noticed that proper names contracted to an ending *-as* were common among slaves. This may have been Luke's background, since slaves were sometimes trained as physicians" (Stott, *Acts*, 3).
- **Date:** The date is either in the 60s (argued based on the ending, which doesn't reflect significant events after that period) or later, e.g. the 70-80s or later (supported ending theories, and dating of Mark, a source for Luke's gospel).
- **Sampling of parallels with Luke's gospel (DLNTD):**
 - Both narratives begin in Jerusalem
 - The Gospel ends and Acts begins with commission narratives associated with reports of Jesus' ascension
 - The time span covered by each volume is approximately 30 years
 - Luke's narration of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem and of Paul's arrest, trials and arrival in Rome each occupy 25% of their respective books
 - Luke has regularly developed parallels between the Gospel of Luke and his disciples in Acts
- **Style, and notable content elements:**
 - **Large vocabulary** (looking at you, Gospel of John) and polished Greek, even tailored to the topic (e.g. the Jerusalem sections reflect a more Semitic style)
 - **Colorful historical detail** and attention to detail¹ and **drama**—Luke is willing to relate a dramatic account without requiring that every element has a theological message
 - **Speeches:** Acts is arranged around a number of crucial speeches, so much so that "of approximately 1,000 verses in Acts, 365 are found in major and minor speeches and dialogues, with direct address responsible for more than half of the book" (Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments).
 - **Humor:** "A maid is so overjoyed when Peter escapes from prison that she runs to tell everyone, leaving him on the doorstep, a wanted man, banging on the door to get in. Paul speaks to a group late into the night, going on so long that a young man falls asleep and tumbles out of an upstairs window; he is allowed to go home, but the others are brought back upstairs—Paul isn't done yet. Some non-Christian exorcists decided that if the 'name of Jesus' works for Paul, maybe it will work for them [with exciting results]." (Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 191)
- **Themes**
 - **God's control of the church and history**—much like a very different genre, apocalyptic, Acts shows God in control
 - **The role of Jesus and the Spirit in the spread of the gospel**
 - **Mission and the spread of the gospel**, and church and/against society
- **Summary:** Acts occupies a unique position in the canon in covering an otherwise silent, but crucial, period. It challenges the modern church in that, despite missteps, the empowerment of the early church feels at times (perhaps often) well beyond the modern church.

¹ Ajith Fernando's commentary describes in detail the experience of the Oxford's Sir William Ramsay, Scottish classicist and archaeologist of the late 19th and 20th century, who set out to explore the Asia Minor of the NT period. He expected, consistent with the popular view of his day, to find Acts riddled with history errors, but found just the opposite; in Ramsay's words, "You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's, and they always stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment, provided always that the critic knows the subject and does not go beyond the limits of science and justice." In the 20th century many other historians and classicists have joined him in defending Acts' historicity. (See Fernando, 25-26.)

Additional questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus told the disciples to wait before leaving Jerusalem? What would have happened if they had left Jerusalem before Pentecost to spread the gospel?
2. The early church is famous for its growth and spiritual fireworks. Yet Acts begins not with fireworks but with waiting, for them an unknown period of time (1:5) after Jesus' unexpected departure. When in your life have you waited for God before taking action?
3. The ascension is often seen as something of an embarrassment to modern readers since it appears to cater to an ancient cosmology which views heaven as literally above earth. We grimace and worry that Luke invented this event, genuinely believing this is how it would appear for Jesus to return to the Father. To this, some observations are helpful: First, this would not be the first action taken by Jesus which has symbolic significance (cf. also the Fig Tree, and many of the "signs" in John). Second, this event is the last of several parallels between Jesus and Elijah. Third, it is worth asking what mode of departure would have made *more* sense. Until this point in the 40 days, Jesus has departed by simply vanishing from view. What is left? Ascending not only drew the obvious parallel with Elijah but drew distinction with previous departures.

To address this point in discussion, this can be turned into a question as follows:

The ascension is often seen as something of an embarrassment to modern readers since it appears to cater to an ancient cosmology which views heaven as literally above earth. We grimace and worry that Luke invented this event, genuinely believing this is how it would appear for Jesus to return to the Father. Until this point in the 40 days, Jesus has departed by simply vanishing from view. Why might it have been important for Jesus to depart in a different way? Assuming Jesus' death and resurrection had occurred in 2022, how might his departure have been different?

Finally, some **possible answers to Question 1 (a)**, *How would the NT be different without Acts, and what questions would remain unanswered*: Some possible answers: Paul's identity; Paul's history; how Peter got awesome and became a church leader; how the church became Gentile-majority; how the church spread to Samaria, Asia Minor, and even Rome; why the epistles appear more concerned with soteriology than the kingdom of God; the demonstrated role of the Holy Spirit; how the church got big; how it faced persecution and by whom; strategies for living under Rome; etc.