

Bi134 Acts

Lesson Bi134-1 Introducing the Book of Acts

The year was 1909. The place was the coastal city of Valparaiso, Chile, in South America. The members of the First Methodist Church had gathered for their weekly Sunday school class. Their pastor, Willis Hoover, was teaching them from the Book of Acts. One of the members asked him, “What prevents our being a church like the early church?”

“Nothing,” Dr. Hoover answered, “except something within ourselves.” Thus challenged, the congregation started praying for an outpouring of the Spirit upon their church and upon their country. Soon a Pentecostal revival broke out. Hundreds of church members were baptized in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. The revival continues until today.

Today, the Pentecostal Methodist Church, which sprang from that revival, is the largest Protestant denomination in Chile, with more than 1.5 million members in more than 3,000 congregations. Pentecostals in Chile make up 15 percent of the total population. The Chilean revival is a clear example of what can happen when a people take seriously the book of Acts. That’s what we intend to do in this course.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the same thing happened in our churches right here in this country?

Acts is one of the most exciting books in the Bible. It tells the story of the beginning of the church. In Acts we learn that the church did not begin timidly, or apologetically. It began with a mighty explosion of God’s power and grace. The book is filled with thrilling stories of true commitment and courage. As we move through this study, we will be looking at those stories.

It has often been said that the title, “The Acts of the Apostles,” is not the best name for the book. I agree. A better name might be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” This is because he is the central character and champion of the entire book. As the story of Acts progresses, the human characters change. For instance some stories feature Peter; others feature Stephen, and others Paul or someone else. But the leading character of the book, the Holy Spirit, remains constant. Throughout Acts he takes center stage, filling, empowering, enabling, and directing the work.

In Acts the Holy Spirit is revealed as the Spirit of Missions. ‘Missions’ is, in fact, a central theme of both Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts. A question we must each ask ourselves is, “Have I allowed the Holy Spirit to take the center stage in my own life?” We must ensure that we allow him to have his proper place in our lives and ministries.

Some read Acts only as history. They say, “Wasn’t it wonderful how the Spirit worked in the book of Acts?” However, they do not expect the Holy Spirit to work in the same manner today. Others ask, “Why not today? Why can’t the twenty-first century church receive the same

Spirit in the same way and thus experience the same power, glory, and guidance as did the early church?” I believe that it can, and should.

Before plunging into the text of Acts, it is important that we take time to ask and answer two important questions. First, “Why should we study Acts?” and second, “Who wrote the book of Acts?”

We should study Acts for at least three reasons. First, a proper understanding of Acts will help us to understand the rest of the New Testament. Acts serves an important bridge between the Gospels and the New Testament epistles. Just think, if there were no Book of Acts, we would be left wondering who Paul was, and where the churches to which he wrote came from. There would be many gaps in our knowledge of the church, and our understanding of the rest of the New Testament books would be greatly diminished.

Second, we study Acts because it helps us to see what the early church looked like, and it gives us a model of what the church should look like today.

Finally, we study Acts because it gives us a divinely-inspired strategy for missionary outreach. It is, in fact, a training manual for twenty-first century Christians. The writer intended for the Book of Acts to be a lasting model of how the kingdom of God would advance until Jesus comes again.

Who wrote the book of Acts? We know that the Holy Spirit is the author of the entire Bible. Therefore, he is the author of Acts. But which human author did the Holy Spirit inspire to write Acts? The book of Acts was written by Luke. This is the same Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke. In Acts we learn that Luke traveled and ministered with Paul during some of his missionary journeys. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul called Luke his “dear friend” and identified him as a medical doctor (Col. 4:14).

Why did Luke write the book of Acts? Certainly, Luke wrote to let his readers know about the beginnings of the church and its spread from Jerusalem to Rome. His primary reason for writing, however, was not simply to record history. Luke wrote to call the church back to its Pentecostal and missionary roots. By telling these believers the story of how the church began, and how in the power of the Holy Spirit it advanced in the face of strong opposition, he hoped to encourage them to do the same. Luke wanted them to know that the same thing could happen to them if they, like those first disciples, would understand the purpose of the church and the necessity of being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Luke further wrote to teach his readers that the empowering presence of the Spirit comes from a powerful spiritual experience called the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16). In Acts Luke shows that that experience is separate from salvation and is accompanied by speaking in tongues. Its purpose is to empower believers for effective witness.

Understanding Acts 1:8 is the key to understanding the entire book of Acts. We will talk about this more in the next lesson. Right now, it is important that you commit this verse to memory. It says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will

be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NIV). These are Jesus’ final words before he went back to heaven. They help us to understand the Book of Acts in two powerful ways.

First, Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8 introduce an important repeated pattern in the book. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses.” This pattern “receiving power results in witness,” will be repeated again and again throughout Acts. As we go through these lessons we will see the Holy Spirit coming upon disciples. And each time he comes upon them, he fills them, and they become powerful witnesses for Christ.

The same thing can happen to you today. Why not pause right now and ask the Holy Spirit to come upon you, fill you, and empower you to be Christ’s witness to the lost? When the Holy Spirit comes upon believers, they receive power to witness to their lost family and friends.

Secondly, not only do Jesus’ words reveal an “empowering-results-in-witnessing” pattern in Acts, they also provide the organizing structure for the book. Jesus said that his followers would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Using this statement we can outline the book of Acts as follows: first, the church’s witness in Jerusalem; second, their witness in Judea and Samaria; and third, the church’s mission to “the ends of the earth.” These ideas will become clear as we proceed through this course.

This lesson is **important** because it emphasizes the necessity for believers today to experience the same power and guidance that were given to the first century church.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God wants to empower the church for witnessing. He has given us the Book of Acts as a lasting model of how the kingdom of God will advance until Jesus comes again.

Let’s **review** some of the significant things you have now learned about the book of Acts.

1. What was the reason Luke wrote the Book of Acts?
A. [Pause] If you said, “Luke wrote to teach more than history; he wrote to inspire the church to do missions in the power of the Holy Spirit,” you are right.
2. We also learned about the key verse of the book of Acts. What was that verse?
A. [Pause] If you said the key verse of the book is Acts 1:8, you are correct.
3. What pattern does that verse introduce?
A. [Pause] If you responded that it introduces an “empowering-results-in-witnessing” pattern in Acts, you are right.

Your **assignments** for this lesson are to repeat Acts 1:8 several times until you have memorized it perfectly. Then, find someone, quote the verse to them, and explain to them the importance of this verse in understanding the book of Acts. If they are willing, pray with them, asking the Holy Spirit to fill them and empower them as Christ’s witness to reach the lost in their community.