

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

## Intro to Acts: No Other Name

Acts:1:1

Go ahead and take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of Acts. We're starting a new series today entitled "No Other Name." And we are going to be working through this book of the NT verse by verse over the next few months.

And just so you know, the book of Acts has a special place in my heart. Besides being one of my favorite NT books, it is the book of the Bible that I was teaching through twenty-five years ago when I first met my wife.

Sanja and I met through unusual circumstances. I came to her house on a dare by one of my friends. This friend dared me to go up to Sanja's house and pretend to be a Jehovah's Witness. And so, I did it. I was the worst Jehovah's Witness in the history of Jehovah's Witnesses. But it worked out great for me because I met my future wife.

Sanja and I hit it off right away. We became friends. And before we even began dating formally, I asked Sanja to come help me mentor some of the kids in our youth group. I was a youth pastor at the time. And we had a number of young ladies in our group that needed a mentor. So I asked Sanja to come and help me with my group. And she said, "Yes."

Well when Sanja started coming to that youth group twenty-five years ago, I was teaching through the book of Acts. And it was there that I learned how much Sanja cared about the Lord and cared about his Word. So we studied Acts together. We ministered together in the church. And we started to fall in love with each other. And I said, "I could use about sixty years of this." So we got married.

Some people fall in love reading poetry together. Some people fall in love reading novels or watching movies. Sanja and I fell in love studying the book of Acts together and serving in the local church. So for that reason and others, this book has a special place in my heart.

Now don't get any crazy ideas, church! I'm not preaching the book of Acts so that we can hear more wedding bells here at Verse By Verse Fellowship. That's not a great reason to preach through the book of Acts.

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"So what is a good reason, Pastor Tony?" Good question.<sup>1</sup> I'll give you seven answers to that question today. Write these down.

### Why Study the Book of Acts?

1) To **glorify** God by honoring his inspired, inerrant Word

This is a general principle here for any section of the Bible. This first statement applies not just to the book of Acts, but to all of Scripture. That's because all Scripture is "breathed out by God." According to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." All of Scripture... i.e. the 66 books of the OT and NT, written by 40 different authors, over a period of 1,500 years ... all of it is God-breathed. And it's all profitable for us for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training and righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 21: "Any Christian wanting to know how to be a disciple of Christ in this world should turn to Acts to know how the first Christians lived."

Why do we come to church on Sunday mornings? We come to meet with God. We come to worship God. And part of that worship involves studying his Word. **2 Peter 1:21** says, “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

**When it comes to church, I’m personally not that fussy about *where* pastors choose from to preach in God’s Word. I’m fussy about *whether* or not they choose to preach from God’s Word. Here at VBVF, it’s a priority for us to glorify God every Sunday by honoring and studying his inspired, inerrant Word.**

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## **Secondly. Write this down as #2. Why study Acts?**

2. To **transform** our lives by the power of Scripture

The first point has a vertical focus. This second point has a horizontal focus. As we glorify God through the study of his Word, his Word begins to seep into our souls and transform us. There’s an ongoing metamorphosis that takes place in our lives.

**Hebrew 4:12** says, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” **Romans 12:2** says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

**How are we going to be transformed? How are our minds going to be renewed? Is that accomplished by getting into a lotus position and contemplating our naval? No. Is that accomplished by the power of positive thinking? No! We are transformed through engagement with God and his Word. The author of Hebrews compares God’s Word to a sword. It pierces into the deepest part of our being and discerns sin and error and motives and false beliefs. And it brings change.**

I heard John Piper say once that the Christian life is all about change. He said, “**I live for change. Who wants to stay the same?**” I don’t! I live for *transformation*. I live for *metamorphosis*. I don’t want to stay the same.

**When I come to church on Sunday, I want God’s Word to take me apart. I want God’s Word to take me apart and put me back together in a way that is whole and healthy and stable.**

**I *don’t* want to come to church and hear about how awesome I am in my flesh. That’s not true. I want to be reminded about God’s grace. But the grace of God has a transformative effect in the life of the believer. And so, resting secure in God’s grace, I pursue change. I want to become more like my Savior. And God’s Word helps me in that process.**

And that’s a joyful thing for me. **Jeremiah 15:16** says, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.” **Psalms 119:9** says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” **Psalms 119:105** says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path...” **So God’s Word gives us joy. And God’s Word gives us direction.**

All of that is to say this—there is immense value in what we do here on Sundays as we study God’s Word together. **As I’ve said before nothing has benefited my life more... not conferences, not books, not doctors, not movies, not education, not positive thinking, not relationships, not family, not work... nothing has been of more benefit to my life and has brought about more transformation than daily engagement with God and his Word.** And so when I see people who leave their Bibles on the shelves collecting dust, or when I see churches offer lame-brain preacher pep-talks instead of God’s Word, it grieves me. The sheep are starving for God’s Word. **Not in this church, God help us!**

**And I’m going to try by God’s grace to do my part and faithfully proclaim what God’s Word says. You need to do your part. You need to hear and heed and apply what God’s Word says to your own life. Are you willing to do that?**

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**So, we want to glorify God by honoring his inspired, inerrant Word. We want to transform our lives by the power of Scripture. Write this down as #3. These next few points are more particular to the book of Acts itself. Why study the Book of Acts?**

3. To **ground** our faith historically and theologically

The book of **Acts**, in case you didn't know, is history.<sup>2</sup> The author of this book records the events of the early church that took place between Jesus's ascension and the imprisonment of Paul in Rome thirty years later.<sup>3</sup> This book is grounded in historical reality. These aren't fairy tales.<sup>4</sup> These aren't fables that somebody cooked up. People lost their lives defending the truth of the gospel, and Luke, the author of this book, as a faithful historian, recorded these events.<sup>5</sup>

**In fact, more than a hundred years ago, there was a Scottish scholar named William Ramsey who set out to disprove Luke's authorship of this book and its historicity. But the more he studied this book and looked into its details, and checked with archaeology and other sources, he actually was converted. And he became one of the most ardent supporters of the historicity of the book of Acts.**<sup>6</sup>

So this book is history; but it's more than history. Let's be clear about this. Luke has an agenda with his writing of history. **Don't ever think for a moment that history-writers don't have an agenda. All historians have an agenda.** Their choice of which historical details to relay to their readers is part of their agenda. And that's true of Luke.<sup>7</sup>

Luke's agenda is theological, and it's evangelistic. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke writes in such a way that we will know God and experience his power.<sup>8</sup> He relays the historical details of Jesus's life in the **Gospel of Luke** and the historical details of the early church in **Acts** so that you will be moved by those details, and so that you will embrace Christ as your Savior and grow as a Christian.<sup>9</sup>

The book of **Acts** isn't just history; it's theology! To say it is one without the other is a false dichotomy.<sup>10</sup> In fact, some of the best theology in the Bible is conveyed through historical narrative. See the book of **Genesis** for more on that!<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 20: "Luke has been esteemed as the most accurate historian of the ancient world. He enjoys a higher reputation than Suetonius, Herodotus, Tacitus, Pliny, Josephus, or any of the rest. His work has been checked more carefully than anybody else's."

<sup>3</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, ed. Christiane K. Jurik, First Edition., Ariel's Bible Commentary (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries, 2020), 18: "This period begins with the rule of Emperor Tiberius (A.D. 14–37) and includes Gaius/Caligula (A.D. 37–41). Claudius (A.D. 41–54) is mentioned in Acts 18:2. The period ends with Nero (A.D. 54–68), under whom both Peter and Paul were martyred. Acts also deals with other Roman rulers, such as Pontius Pilate, Agrippa I, Felix, Festus, and Agrippa II."

<sup>4</sup> See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 7: "Acts serves as the background for ten of Paul's thirteen Epistles: Romans (Acts 19:21–22); I Corinthians (Acts 18:1–16); II Corinthians (Acts 18:1–16); Galatians (Acts 13:14–14:28); Ephesians (Acts 19:1–20:35); Philippians (Acts 16:11–40); Colossians (Acts 19:1–20:35); I Thessalonians (Acts 17:1–9); II Thessalonians (Acts 17:1–9); and Philemon (Acts 28:30–31). It also shows the geographical order of the presentation of the gospel (Acts 1:8) and teaches valuable lessons on how to respond to persecution."

<sup>6</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 20. See also Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 24–26.

<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *Acts 1–12*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 5: "Luke did not write a complete account of the first three decades of the church. He selectively chose those events and persons that suited his inspired purpose."

<sup>8</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 23: "It is clear that Luke had a theological aim along with a historical one in his choice of material. For example, though the ministry in Derbe yielded 'a large number of disciples' (14:21), there is only a single sentence about Paul's ministry there. The ministry in Athens yields a correspondingly less number of converts—only 'a few' (17:34)—but it occupies nineteen verses (17:16–34). This contrast suggests that Luke chose the material he stressed in his account depending on the subject matter rather than merely using earthly indicators of success. He selected certain events because of the value they had in communicating the truths he wanted to emphasize."

<sup>9</sup> Brian J. Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, ESVEC (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 319: "Every aspect of the theology of Acts flows from the death, burial, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus."

<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 1 makes this mistake although he states, "Acts nevertheless emphasizes the doctrinal truths concerning salvation." Similarly Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 8 states: "It must be remembered that Luke did not develop doctrine, but recorded history. There is a distinction between what is prescriptive and what is descriptive. Prescriptive statements contain doctrinal truth. Descriptive passages merely record historical events. Doctrine must not be developed from historical incidents in the book of Acts, but from actual propositional statements. The historical elements can then be used as illustrations of the actual doctrinal points." But then he later admits: "The second purpose of Acts is a theological one. The book is to authenticate the new faith in Messiah Yeshua as the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5–8; 2:1–47; 5:1–42; 6:5; 8:14–17; 10:44–47; 13:1–4; 19:1–7)." How theology and doctrinal formation are differentiated isn't clarified. The issue of prescriptive versus descriptive is a well-established hermeneutical principle. But surely some narrative texts can still be labeled prescriptive in an applicational sense. In other words, not all history-writing and Biblical narrative should be relegated to the descriptive category. Fruchtenbaum illustrates this by saying, "The

Some people get into these inane arguments about whether the book of **Acts** is history or theology. Is it history or theology? It's both!<sup>12</sup> Luke is a historian and a theologian.<sup>13</sup>

Some people want to turn **Acts** into stylized history-writing that only reflects a small semblance of historical reality. Don't fall for that! Even Christians sometimes fall for that! God's Word is inerrant in every historical detail.<sup>14</sup>

And to fill out this introduction to the book of **Acts** a little more, let me give you some "Fast facts on the book of Acts."

**First of all,**

- **This book was written by Luke to Theophilus as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke.**

**So look with me at Acts 1:1.**

<sup>1</sup> *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,*

What's the "first book" that Luke is referring to? It's the **Gospel of Luke**, the third book in the NT. It's actually the longest book in the NT. It's an account of all the pertinent details of Jesus's life and teaching that led up to his death and resurrection.<sup>15</sup>

**Just look up on the screen for a second. In Luke 1:1–4, here's what Luke writes.**

<sup>1</sup> *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

So Luke is someone who has "carefully investigated everything from the beginning." And he wrote an "orderly account" for this guy, Theophilus. Theophilus is mentioned in both **Luke** and **Acts**. Luke wrote down the facts of the life of Jesus in his gospel. And then subsequently, he wrote the events of the post-resurrection church in the book of **Acts**.

Now you might ask this question: "**Who's Theophilus?**" We don't know. His name means "lover of God." He may have been an unbeliever that Luke was evangelizing. He may have been a disciple of Luke's. He may have even been a benefactor of Luke and Paul. He's called "most excellent Theophilus" in the **Gospel of Luke**, so this is not a reference to all people who are "lovers of God."<sup>16</sup> No, this is a real person. And whoever

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book of Acts demonstrates the principle that the gospel must go out to the Jew first by affirming it through Paul's activities. Although Paul was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles, he is seen as being very careful to go to the Jew first (13:5, 14; 14:1; 16:11–13; 17:1–2, 10, 16–17; 18:1–4, 19; 19:8; 28:17)." I agree with this principle in theory—that narrative texts can be prescriptive. But I disagree on this particular point that going to the Jew first is prescriptive for the church or for evangelism.

<sup>11</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 318: "As with all biblical narrative, Acts is written at the crossroads of theology and history. Luke is a historian who records historical people, events, conversations, teaching, and speeches basically in chronological order... Luke is not only writing a story (not even a historical one); he is also writing theology." Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 28: "Acts has thirty-two speeches (excluding short statements), which make up 25 percent of the narrative."

<sup>12</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 319: "If Acts is theological, then Luke is a theologian. He writes history from a theological perspective, with a theological purpose. From that perspective he interprets the events he records, revealing their theological significance. Just as importantly, Luke's theological perspective is not just a matter of explanations about, or observations on, the things that happened (like one might find in a commentary on a biblical book). Instead, he is actively writing theology shaped by the worldview and teaching of the OT, the traditions he knows about Jesus, and what he learned from Paul."

<sup>13</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 327: "When reading narrative we must come with the assumption that narrative has as much to teach us as an epistle; it is merely going to teach us in a different way."

<sup>14</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 22–3: "The pluralistic mood that is prevalent today, with its radically new understanding of the gospel as being on equal footing with other ideologies, can be sustained by 'Christians' only if they deny the historical reliability of the New Testament records."

<sup>15</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 2–3: "The Greek vocabulary used in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts is unique in that about 700 words occur only in these writings and not in any other New Testament Scriptures. However, 90% of these words also appear in the Septuagint... Luke made about eighty geographic references in the book of Acts. As to biographical notations, he mentioned over one hundred people by name and recorded 24 messages." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 6: "Of the 5,436 hapax terms in the NT, 2,038 occur in Acts."

<sup>16</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 19: "Many have believed that the book is not addressed to one specific person but to all who are beloved of God or lovers of God. The case against that, however, is the addition in Luke's prologue of the title 'most excellent.' That is significant because, in the ancient world, often major publications were dedicated to members of the nobility, and members of the nobility were

he was, he needs to know what happened! He needs to know what happened with Jesus, his death and resurrection. And he needs to know how the church got started. And so Luke writes an orderly account of what happened.

Some of you might be asking a more basic question, and that is “**Who is Luke?**” “**Who’s this guy who wrote the book of Acts?**” Well technically speaking, these books are anonymous. But church history and details in the NT would confirm that Luke was in fact the author. Luke, according to **Colossians 4:14**, was Paul’s “beloved physician.” So Luke was a doctor. When Paul was in prison at the end of his life and everyone else had deserted him, Paul says “Only Luke is with me” (**2 Tim 4:11**). And so he was a loyal friend and co-laborer of Paul’s (see **Phlm 24**). He traveled with Paul. At times in the book of **Acts** the pronouns switch from “they” to “we” implying that Luke was there with them traveling and doing ministry with Paul and others.<sup>17</sup> Who better to write “an orderly account” of the life of Jesus and also the early church than this guy Luke who travelled with Paul and the other Apostles!<sup>18</sup>

Actually Luke did the church a profound service. He wrote the longest book in the NT—the **Gospel of Luke**.<sup>19</sup> And these two books, **Luke** and **Acts**, make up roughly 25% of the NT. Most scholars believe that Luke was the only Gentile to write Scripture. There are sixty-six books by forty different authors in the Bible, and only one of those authors was a Gentile.<sup>20</sup> And what better book than **Acts** to be written by a Gentile! It’s a book of the Bible that describes the explosion of the church into the Gentile world. Jews and Gentiles both coming into the church and embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

**Here are some other fast facts for this book.**

- **Written before the death of Paul (approximately AD 62–64).**

Best evidence suggests that **Acts** was written shortly before the death of Paul, sometime between AD 62 and 64.<sup>22</sup> Some people think that it was written later than that. But **Acts** clearly ends its narrative before Paul’s death and before his execution by Emperor Nero at the end of the AD 60s.<sup>23</sup> And there’s no mention of the destruction of the temple in AD 70.<sup>24</sup> So I’m comfortable with this dating.<sup>25</sup>

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often addressed with gracious titles such as ‘most excellent.’ Since Luke’s Gospel is addressed not to just any Theophilus but to the most excellent Theophilus, many come to the conclusion that the book is ascribed to perhaps a Christian in high places in antiquity who was as devout as his name suggests.”

<sup>17</sup> According to Fernando, 22, there are ninety-seven verses where the “they” switches to “we” in Acts.

<sup>18</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 15: “For Luke, Acts is his volume two. It flows naturally and irresistibly out of the gospel. It follows the accomplishment of redemption with the concrete application of redemption.”

<sup>19</sup> Although Acts and Matthew have 28 chapters compared to Luke’s 24 chapters, Luke is the longest by way of word count. Luke is the twelfth largest book in the Bible with 19,482 words. Acts is fifteenth with 18,450 words. Matthew is sixteenth with 18,346 words. They are all significantly smaller than the largest books in the Bible (e.g. Jeremiah is largest with 33,002 words). See the details given by Jeffrey Kranz, 05-29-14: <https://overviewbible.com/word-counts-books-of-bible/>

<sup>20</sup> For arguments supporting Luke’s identity as a Gentile, see Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 22–23. Schnabel also puts forth the evidence for Luke as a Gentile convert to Judaism (a “God-fearer”) before his conversion to Christianity. For arguments supporting Luke’s Jewishness, see Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 19: “Luke, the beloved physician, was an educated man. His Greek is one of the highest in terms of literary quality to be found in the New Testament.”

<sup>22</sup> Vickers, “Acts” in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 316: “The best early estimate is that Luke completed Acts c. AD 62, when Paul was still in prison in Rome, which accounts for the ending at chapter 28. The events of Paul’s life after AD 62 are not certain, and scholars hold various views regarding a possible second Roman imprisonment and the possibility that Paul eventually made it as far as Spain. In any case, regardless of what happened after 62, it is reasonable to conclude that Luke simply finished his narrative while in Rome with Paul. Even if he waited until later in the 60s to write the book, however, there is no material impact on the interpretation of Acts if one holds to either an early or a late 60s date for the writing of the book.”

<sup>23</sup> See Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 25–27.

<sup>24</sup> Vickers, “Acts” in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 315: “The temple in Jerusalem was overrun by the Romans in AD 70. It would be curious, to say the least, for Luke to leave out such a dramatic event that would serve to underscore one of the core themes in the book—God does not reside in temples of any kind, including the one in Jerusalem, but is revealed once and for all in Jesus. If the Jerusalem temple were gone, why leave out such a big piece of circumstantial evidence?” See MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 3–4 for seven reasons why Luke wrote Acts during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment.

<sup>25</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 28: “Irenaeus and Eusebius assert that Luke-Acts was written in Rome, which is a good possibility, particularly in view of the historical considerations connected with the date of Acts, but certainty is not possible in this matter.”

**Also Acts,**

- Follows the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the world (Acts 1:8).

Jesus says in the very first chapter of this book: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” These are the last recorded words of Jesus before his ascension.<sup>26</sup> And then Jesus just takes off! **It’s like he wants us to be his witnesses or something!**<sup>27</sup>

And these words encapsulate the structure of the book.<sup>28</sup> The book of Acts moves in concentric circles from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

**Also, here’s another fact.**

- Acts records “The Acts of the Apostles” or “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

The formal title of the book from the mid-second century onward was “The Acts of the Apostles” (ΠΡΑΞΕΙΣ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΩΝ [*Praxeis Apostolōn*]).<sup>29</sup> But I think that’s a misnomer. This book is primarily about the work of the Holy Spirit in the local church.<sup>30</sup> And the narrative follows the work of the Holy Spirit through Peter and other Apostles around Jerusalem until about Acts 13. Then it switches to Paul and his companions for the rest of the book.<sup>31</sup>

**In terms of emphases and themes, let me give you three.**

- Acts emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit and his work in the church.
- Acts emphasizes the importance of bold witness and bold preaching of the gospel (No Other Name!).

The theme verse that we are using for this series is Acts 4:12, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” I memorized it in the King James Version when I was just a little tyke, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (4:12, KJV).<sup>32</sup>

**Another emphasis is this one. And this is difficult for us as American Christians to reckon with. Acts has a lot of suffering in it.**

- Acts emphasizes God’s sovereignty in our world and the importance of pressing on through persecution.

**People who advocate for the prosperity gospel in our day, have they ever read the book of Acts?**<sup>33</sup>

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**Write this down as #4 in your notes. Here’s another reason why we want to study the book of Acts.**

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<sup>26</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), Kindle Edition, chapter 1 :“These were Jesus’ final earthly words. It has been 2,000 years, and Jesus has not during that time planted his feet on *terra firma* and audibly addressed his followers. Perhaps that silence is intended to prevent anything from obscuring Jesus’ last words, so they will continue to reverberate in the Church’s ears.”

<sup>27</sup> Vickers, “Acts” in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 318–9: “At its core, Acts is the historical account of how the apostles received and carried out Jesus’ commission to reach the world with the gospel (1:8). Thus Acts is a special sort of history: it is not a blow-by-blow account of general events but a specialized account of the apostles’ carrying out of a specific task. Luke’s history, like all historical writing, is selective and structured, and the included content fits the purpose of his writing.”

<sup>28</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: “[Acts 1:8} is the key verse of the entire book of Acts. Chapters 1–7 tell of the witness ‘in Jerusalem,’ chapters 8–11 the witness ‘in all Judea and Samaria,’ and chapters 12–28 the witness ‘to the ends of the earth.’”

<sup>29</sup> See Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 18 suggests, “The History of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” or even “The Autobiography of the Holy Spirit.” MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 1 suggests, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.”

<sup>31</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 29: “If Peter indeed died as a martyr in the city of Rome during Nero’s persecution in AD 67, he must have been an active leader in the Christian movement for twenty-five years after his departure from Jerusalem – a fact that is reflected in Peter’s role during the Apostles’ Council in AD 48 (15:7–11). But Luke tells us nothing about Peter’s travel plans when he left Jerusalem in AD 42, nor does he inform us about his missionary work in the subsequent years. Luke relates events of Peter’s ministry for the years AD 30–42 (Acts 1–12) but is silent about the period AD 42–64.”

<sup>32</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 38 states the theme of Acts succinctly: “The theme of the book of Acts is *Ye shall be my witnesses* (Acts 1:8).”

<sup>33</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 31: “Allied to the emphasis on suffering is the underlying theme that God is working out his sovereign purposes even through suffering. This is the dominant theme of the passage that describes the church’s reaction to the first experience of suffering (4:23–31).”

4. To **glimpse** the work and the power of the Holy Spirit<sup>34</sup>

Look with me again at **Acts 1:1**.

<sup>1</sup> *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach*

Jesus is the central character in **Luke**. But the Holy Spirit was active too. And his activity was even foreshadowed at times throughout the Gospels (see e.g. **John 16:1–15**).

Look at **verse 2**.

<sup>2</sup> *until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.* <sup>3</sup> *He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.* <sup>4</sup> *And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me;”* <sup>5</sup> *for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

Notice the Trinitarian framing of this. The promise of the Father was the Holy Spirit spoken of through Jesus! Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. He gave them explicit orders to wait for the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. And when the Holy Spirit does show up in **Acts 2**, look out! It’s an awesome thing to behold.

Now I think it’s a little simplistic to say that the book of **Luke** is about Jesus and the book of **Acts** is about the Holy Spirit. That’s too crude a description of those books. But I will say this, I think the book of **Luke** should be viewed as God the Son’s coming out party. God the Son existed since eternity past, and he appeared even in shadowy ways in the OT. But the revelation of his being and essence... the revelation of his purpose culminates in the **Gospel of Luke**. God the Son, Jesus Christ, who the world has been anticipation for centuries, is here. And he has provided salvation not just to Jews, but to the entire world.

Likewise, I think that **Acts** is the coming out party for the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup> He also has existed in eternity past. He also shows up in shadowy ways in the OT. But his purpose and essence culminates in the book of **Acts**. In fact, like I said already, I would argue that the primary character in the book of **Acts** is the Holy Spirit.

These aren’t the Acts of the Apostles or the Acts of the Church. These are the Acts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> The apostles are interchangeable throughout the narrative. First it’s Peter and John. Then it’s Stephen. Then it’s Paul and Barnabas. Then it’s Paul and Silas. It’s not about them, ultimately, it’s about the Holy Spirit and what he’s doing in the first century, post-resurrection era.

**And his activity continues in the twenty-first century. And we would be wise to read the book of Acts and see what the Holy Spirit did in these Scriptures and entreat him to move powerfully in our own day too.**

I heard a pastor say once that a lot of Christians think that the Holy Trinity is “**the Father, the Son, and the Holy Bible**.” That’s a very cheeky statement. What did he mean by that? I think he meant that many Christians are ignorant of, or even a little fearful of, the Holy Spirit. Some of that fear is justifiable because there are a lot of false teachers and kooks out there who do crazy things in the name of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>34</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 2: “The book of Acts also teaches much about the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned more than fifty times. He regenerates, baptizes, fills, and sanctifies believers. The holy Spirit is seen choosing missionaries (13:2) and directing their operations (8:29). He presided at the first church council (15:28) and, in short, directed and controlled all operations of the church.” Fernando, *Acts*. NIVAC, 21: “Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who calls [Acts] ‘that most lyrical of books,’ writes: ‘Live in that book, I exhort you: it is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know in the realm of the Spirit.’”

<sup>35</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: “In the Gospels the Son of Man offered his life; in Acts the Son of God offered his power. In the Gospels we see the original seeds of Christianity; in Acts we see the continual growth of the Church. The Gospels tell us of Christ crucified and risen; Acts speaks of Christ ascended and exalted. The Gospels model the Christian life as lived by the perfect Man; Acts models it as lived out by imperfect men.”

<sup>36</sup> Maybe I’m pressing this distinction too much. Vickers, “Acts” in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 314 states, “Ultimately there is no real distinction between the acts of Jesus and the acts of the apostles. They are all equally the works of God and a witness to his purposes in the world. Making a sharp distinction between the work of Jesus and that of the apostles is akin to claiming the red letters in the Gospels (in a red-letter edition) are God’s but the words in black are man’s. We should also recall how Jesus accuses Saul of persecuting *him*, even though Saul has been persecuting the *church*—there is an organic connection between Christ and his followers.” Essentially the acts of the apostles are the acts of Jesus are the acts of the Holy Spirit are the acts of the church. No need to get bogged down in semantics.

But somewhere between the crazy excesses of those kooks and the fearful reluctance of timid Christians is where the book of **Acts** lands. And we see here God's dramatic work in the life of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. **And we as God's church don't want to fabricate the work of the Spirit. But we don't want to fear him either. We embrace the work of the Spirit. And we ask God to move mightily by his Spirit in our church. I think the book of Acts will help us with this.**

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**Write this down as #5. Here's another reason why we want to study the book of Acts.**

5. To **get in touch** with our roots as a church

If the primary character in the book of **Acts** is God the Holy Spirit, then the secondary character is the church. **If the Holy Spirit was up for Best Actor nominee in the book of Acts, then the Best Supporting Actor nominee would be the church.** Not Peter or Paul or Stephen or Barnabas! But collectively the church.

I said a moment ago that **Acts** is the coming out party for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit pre-existed the book of **Acts** and even time itself. But the church was *birthed* in the book of **Acts**.<sup>37</sup> We're going to see a baby born in the book of **Acts**.<sup>38</sup> It's very exciting!

And some of the most fundamental questions that we can ask as the twenty-first century continuation of the first century church are answered in **Acts**. Questions like: Where did we come from? Why do we do the things we do? Why do we have baptisms? Why do we study the Bible? Why do we take communion? Why do we have elders leading the church? Why do we gather on Sundays to worship instead of Saturdays (the Sabbath)? Why do we pray so much? How should we pray? Why are Christians hated by the world? Why is there so much opposition to Christianity? Etc. Etc. Etc. I can't answer all these questions right now. And that would spoil the fun of discovering them together in the months ahead. We'll answer these together as we journey through this book. And we will get in touch with our roots as a church.

Let me just bust a few myths, though. **I love myth-busting, so let's do that now.** There's a myth that circulates from time to time that we need to get back to the practice of the early church because the early church was pure and perfect and untainted unlike the church today!<sup>39</sup> Well we'll find out rather quickly that the early church was not perfect, and they made some mistakes along the way, just like us.<sup>40</sup>

Also I would say, be careful what you wish for too. If you want to get back to the practices of the early church, consider this. In the early church, we see two liars named Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5** who dropped dead instantly after lying to the Lord. Do we want to go back to that type of arrangement in the church? That's why I say to be careful what you wish for.

I believe personally that Ananias and Sapphira are used in the book of **Acts** as a cautionary tale for all churches everywhere to take deceit seriously and don't tolerate it in the church. But I don't think that killing sinners on the spot is normative for all churches everywhere for the last 2,000 years. How could it be? If that were the case then none of us would have made it to church today. God would have struck us dead before we even got here. I wouldn't have made it.

Listen, the early church was not perfect. And our goal is not to get back to the early church. It's to learn from the book of **Acts** how a church can be faithful to the Lord and healthy spiritually.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: "It is also a book with a splendid theme, tracing the work of the Holy Spirit through the birth, infancy, and adolescence of the Church."

<sup>38</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 18: "There is a transition in the program of God from focusing on Israel to focusing on the church."

<sup>39</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 15: "Acts does not present a perfect church, pristine and pure. No, it is an infant church, a nascent community. It is inspired, but not fully developed."

<sup>40</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John-Acts*, ESVEC, 326: "Centuries of 'restoration' movements have attempted to build a church based on a so-called golden era, which usually means the era of the church at Jerusalem. As I make clear later, the era of the Jerusalem church was no more a golden era than was any other era in Acts or elsewhere. Of course, we can and should learn from that era, but this does not mean we must always copy it."

<sup>41</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 22: "We must go back to the foundation of the Christian church, to the purity of the gospel as it was set forth by the Apostles, so that we can study the apostolic doctrine in that location. That is what Luke was doing, giving us an account of the obedience to the commandments of the Apostles whom Christ had chosen."

Here's another myth. It's related, and it goes like this, "**The events of the book of Acts have to be normative in a church today in order for that church to be legit or authentic.**" Let me just blow that myth up right now. There are things in the book of **Acts** that are normative, and there are things that are *not* normative. There are things that are descriptive and there are things that are prescriptive. And discerning those things is very difficult and is hotly debated throughout Christendom.<sup>42</sup>

Some of those debates include the role of the apostles, the frequency of miracles and signs and wonders, the use of "sign gifts," the explosive growth of the church, etc. We'll tackle these difficult, debated issues along the way. But let me just say at the outset that I do not believe that the incredible events in the book of **Acts** have to be normative in our churches today to legitimize the church. I don't believe that.

Now I don't want to say that those things can't happen in our day. That's a mistake too. And so normative is a key word for me in **Acts**. And you'll hear me say it and explain it a lot.

Also the difference between descriptive and prescriptive is important. And I'll try to explain throughout our study those things in God's Word that are descriptive (i.e. just describing something that happened in history) and those things that are prescriptive (i.e. those things that are prescribed for us to do as the church of Jesus Christ).

For instance, Peter at one point in the book of **Acts** fixed his gaze on a crippled man and heals him instantly. Luke describes it as an incredible miracle, done by an Apostle. But does that mean that we as the church are called to go about to every crippled person and fix our gaze on them and heal them? No. Can God do that in this era? Yes, I think he can. Is it normative? I don't think so. It's descriptive in **Acts** not prescriptive.

Baptism on the other hand is prescriptive. Jesus himself gave us that command, "Go baptize" (see **Matt 28:18–20**). Prayer is prescriptive. Communion is prescriptive. Establishing elders as leaders of the church, like Paul did with his church plants, is prescriptive. I'll try to unpack that a little more as we work through the book of **Acts**.<sup>43</sup>

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### Sixthly. Why study the book of Acts?

6. To **marvel** at the power of the gospel

In the book of **Acts** we are going to see Jews converted, Gentiles converted, men converted, women converted, rich people converted, poor people converted. We're going to see murderers get saved. We're going to see sorcerers get saved. We're going to see Pharisees get saved. We're going to see heathens get saved. We're going to see young and old, wise and foolish, religious and irreligious people respond to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. And we're going to marvel at it.

"**What's the gospel again, Pastor Tony?**" I'm so glad you asked. The gospel is the good news that was preached 2,000 years ago and is still preached today.<sup>44</sup> It's this—we are all sinners separated from God. We all are born with the wrath of God residing upon us. But Jesus Christ took on human flesh and died a gruesome death upon the cross as an atonement for our sin. And if you admit your sinfulness and believe in Jesus Christ as

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<sup>42</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 325: "One of the greatest challenges in interpreting the book of Acts, one with which every reader must wrestle, is in determining whether the narrative portions of the book are descriptive or prescriptive. That is, is Luke merely describing what took place but not implying or showing that the event or action is meant to be repeated, or is he prescribing continued expectation, practice, or repetition of the events described? A prescriptive narrative will always be descriptive, but a descriptive text does not have to be prescriptive. The careful reader must consider what might be intended as a model or response even when no exact prescription (or command) is given."

<sup>43</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 326: "Even when a particular action or event is not prescribed, we nevertheless must seek to understand what underlying principle or instruction for the Christian life might be involved... In other words, we must be careful that we do not use the label "descriptive" to reduce a text down to simple historical or theological information."

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: "To be a witness for Christ is to bring a message that is a marvel of simplicity: Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh; he died to pay for our sins; he was resurrected; now he is exalted in Heaven; he calls us to believe in him and so receive forgiveness of sins. This is good news. There is nothing to join, no system to climb — just a person to receive and, in him, eternal life."

Messiah, as Savior, you can have your sins forgiven, and you can be reconciled to God. And that forgiveness allows you to live for eternity with him.<sup>45</sup>

**That's the gospel.** Forgiveness of our sins through faith in Christ... That's the gospel. The gospel is marvelous, and as we work through the book of **Acts** we will marvel at it together.

In addition to the gospel, in the book of **Acts** we're going to see miracles and healings and supernatural wonders that will boggle the mind. We're going to see shipwrecks and snakebites and stonings and swash-buckling adventures. We're going to see near-death experiences and post-death resurrections and people rescued from spiritual death. We're going to see rioters and ruffians and ragamuffins, all kinds of people battling for and against the gospel.

We're going to see human opposition to the gospel, spiritual opposition to the gospel, and divine proliferation of the gospel. And we're going to see the world transformed by the testimony of an obscure Jewish Rabbi born in the backwaters of the Roman Empire, and brutally slain by his own people who were in cahoots with the Roman Empire. And we're going to see the world turned upside down in about a thirty year period by the power of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of people who were wholeheartedly sold-out for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**If the book of Acts were a movie the main word used to describe the trailer for this movie is the word "Epic."** What God does in this book in the first century of post-resurrection human history is, in a word, EPIC! **And if you can't get excited about what happens in the book of Acts in the next few months then check your pulse. You might not have one.**

**And if you can't get excited about what God has done in our world before and what he can still do in our world today than wake up, Christian. May God light a fire under us as we study the book of Acts together. May we marvel together at the power of the gospel.**

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**And one final reason why we're going to study the book of Acts. Why study the book of Acts?**

7. To **awaken** hearts for gospel proclamation

I said it last Wednesday, let me say it again—If a church doesn't evangelize, it'll fossilize.<sup>46</sup> If a church doesn't evangelize, it'll tribalize. It'll turn against each other and start arguing over secondary and tertiary issues. It's worse than that even. A church that doesn't get excited about the gospel starts to cannibalize itself. It starts fighting over the color of the carpet and how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. **One thing that I'm praying for is that God would awaken our hearts to the power of the gospel and then motivate us for gospel proclamation.**<sup>47</sup>

Think about it for a second. Think about the book of **Acts**. God used a group of 12 men, and then later 120 men and women to transform the world forever. Men and women both were gathering to pray and worship God when the Holy Spirit was poured out. And that set about a chain of events that turned the world upside down. Right now, in this room, there are more than 120 people. God used a group of people smaller than the number of people gathered right now to transform the world forever.

And the city of Jerusalem, by the way, wasn't a city of millions of people like Chicago or New York or Hong Kong. The population of Jerusalem in that day was somewhere around 100,000 people. It would swell significantly larger than that during holidays and feasts. But it wasn't a metropolis by modern standards.

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<sup>45</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John-Acts*, ESVEC, 321: "Many years ago, C. H. Dodd identified what he determined to be the fundamental content in the preaching of the apostles. According to Dodd, their basic message has six parts: (1) the time of fulfillment promised in the OT has come; (2) that time has come in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth; (3) Jesus is now enthroned as king because of his resurrection from the dead; (4) now that Jesus is enthroned, the Spirit is his power at work in the world; (5) Jesus will return and bring this age to its end; and (6) hearers must repent and be forgiven in response to gospel preaching."

<sup>46</sup> I heard Pastor Greg Laurie say this once.

<sup>47</sup> Fernando, *Acts*. NIVAC, 30: "From chapter 1, where the Great Commission is recorded (1:8), right up to the end of the book, the great activity that dominates this book is evangelism... All the messages recorded in Acts had a strong apologetic content. The evangelists sought to show that Christianity withstood the questions that the people were asking, and the records of the speeches indicate that their evangelism was strongly content-oriented."

And it wasn't even a large and prominent city in its day. It wasn't Rome or Corinth or Athens or Antioch or even Paul's native Tarsus. So God used a small group of men and women in a medium-sized town to change the world forever. They left Jerusalem and preached the gospel around the world.

**And my prayer is that God would do something similar in San Antonio, Texas. It's that God would light a fire under us that would lead to church planting and gospel explosion that would spread around the world. My prayer is that every one of us at VBVF would get fired up about gospel proclamation.**

But here's my question for you today. You can't sell something you're not buying.<sup>48</sup> You can't convince someone of something you are convinced of yourself. So let me ask you, if everyone in San Antonio, Texas was as fired up about Jesus Christ and the gospel as you were, what kind of city would we have? Would we have a passionate city? Would we have a transformed city? Or would we have a lackluster city? A complacent city? A lackadaisical city?

In his book, *A Practical Theology of Missions*, Eric Wright states, "Passion, more than anything else, will motivate the prospective missionary... 'It's the quality of those who are on fire for Jesus, who dream of the whole earth being covered with the Glory of the Lord.'"<sup>49</sup> **There's an old Christian expression that goes like this:** "When you set yourself on fire for God, people love to come and see you burn."<sup>50</sup>

**My prayer is that we would be that kind of church.<sup>51</sup> That we would be ablaze with passion for God and his gospel. May God use the book of Acts to do that in our church.<sup>52</sup>**

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I'll close with this. Oswald Chambers is one of the most famous Christian writers in the last 200 years. He lived at the turn of the twentieth century. His father was a pastor and had been baptized by Charles Spurgeon. In time, Chambers became one of the most prolific writers in Christian literature. All of his publications came after his death, believe it or not, as his wife and daughter compiled his teaching. His magnum opus, *My Utmost for his Highest*, is one of the top selling and most read Christian devotionals of all time.

Oswald Chambers said this, "Human nature, if it is healthy, demands excitement, and if it does not obtain its thrilling excitement in the right way, it will take it in the wrong. ... God never makes bloodless stoics; He makes no passionless saints."<sup>53</sup>

For some of you, I know your passion is exhibited differently than your excitable pastor. That's okay. For some of you it's more of a simmer or a slow-cooker than a raging inferno. That's okay. Zeal without knowledge is nothing to be proud of. But never should our faith be described as a bloodless stoicism. Never should it receive the designation "passionless."<sup>54</sup> **May God use the book of Acts to light a fire under us for the Lord and for gospel proclamation. Yes Lord, do that in this church.**

**Pray with me, and then we can take communion together.**

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<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: "Being an authentic witness demands an open, tender heart that is always growing in the experience it proclaims."

<sup>49</sup> Eric E. Wright, *A Practical Theology of Missions: Dispelling the Mystery; Recovering the Passion*, Ministry Mission (Leominster: DayOne, 2010), 196.

<sup>50</sup> This statement is attributed to John Wesley. But I cannot find it in his writings.

<sup>51</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: "When George Whitefield was getting the people of Edinburgh out of their beds at 5 o'clock in the morning to hear his preaching, a man on his way to the church met David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic. Surprised at seeing him on his way to hear Whitefield, the man said, 'I thought you did not believe in the gospel.' Hume replied, 'I do not, but he does.'"

<sup>52</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: "If the Christian faith is worth believing at all, it is worth believing heroically!"

<sup>53</sup> Taken from *The Complete Works of Oswald Chambers* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2000), 112-3.

<sup>54</sup> Hughes, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, chapter 1: "One man said, 'I have been a deacon in my church for years; built a church building, raised money, served on committees. But one thing my church never gave me was a relationship with Christ that would make my life exciting.' Rather than having an effervescent, relevant faith, this man found his life about as stimulating as a stale glass of ginger ale. He did not know the secret of Acts."