

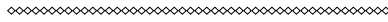
CHAPTER ONE

HOW A TRIP TO DAMASCUS CHANGED THE WORLD

[Saul] hated the name of Jesus. So much so, he became a self-avowed, violent aggressor, persecuting and killing Christians in allegiance to the God of heaven. Shocking though it may seem, we must never forget the pit from which he came. The better we understand the darkness of his past, the more we will understand his gratitude for grace.

—CHUCK SWINDOLL¹

A PROVIDENTIAL LIFE



Paul, probably even more than Peter, is the prominent leader of the early Christian Church. The central figure in the Book of Acts, Paul writes more New Testament books than any other apostle, though Luke's books contain more words and verses.²

To understand Paul, we must study both his life and writings. We can glean much about his life from Luke's detailed and often firsthand accounts in Acts and from Paul's remarkably candid epistles. New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce observes, "Of all the New Testament authors, Paul is the one who has stamped his own personality most unmistakably on his writings."³ As the earliest datable Christian documents, the epistles are our primary source on the beginnings of the faith. Many were likely written just eighteen to thirty years after Jesus' death,⁴ which is earlier than some of the Gospels, though the Gospels appear before them in the New Testament.

Certain biblical critics argue that the Paul of Acts is fundamentally different from the Paul of his letters, but I disagree, and not just because I believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. Having intensely studied the Book of Acts and the epistles in my research for this book, I am convinced this complex man is accurately and compositely portrayed in these complementary sources. Any dissimilarities in the accounts are differences we would expect between a person's self-portrait and one that another painted of him. Acts is an independent and historically reliable source for events in Paul's life, providing an invaluable framework for his main epistles.⁵

As doctrinally prolific and influential as Paul is, he's an equally energetic and consequential evangelist. Astonishingly, and principally because of his own efforts, Christianity becomes a Gentile religion within a generation of his death even though its Founder and His disciples were Jews who began the new religion in Judea. Though born Jewish, Paul spreads the Good News throughout the Roman Empire from Syria to Italy in the three short decades following his conversion. He is so confident in the churches he establishes that he plans missionary tours much farther west without fear they will dissolve when he leaves.⁶

Paul, more than anyone else, clarifies the Christian message as predominantly about grace and not works—that sinners can find forgiveness and redemption in Christ not as a result of their own efforts, but solely based on His finished work on the cross. Contrary to skeptics' claims, Paul's message is wholly consistent with the teachings and actions of Christ, Who repeatedly forgave repentant sinners without abandoning His standard of perfect righteousness, as shown in His parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Throughout the Gospel accounts Christ preached salvation by faith alone (John 3:16), and nowhere is that principle more clearly demonstrated than in His promise of salvation to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43). Christian grace is aptly described as free—a gift to those who accept it by faith alone—but it was anything but free for our holy Benefactor, Who gave everything in His life and death to purchase our salvation. This grace is not only free but also freeing, as it liberates human beings from the bondage of their sin.⁷

Crucially, Paul's Gospel of "free grace" does not contradict the Law of Moses. Christ affirmed that He came not to abolish but to fulfill the

Law (Matt. 5:17), which Jesus summarized as the duty to love God and one's neighbors, as embodied in the first two commandments (Matt. 22:40). Accordingly, Paul pronounces love as "the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10) and emphasizes that the Gospel of faith and grace does not "overthrow the law," but upholds it (Romans 3:31).⁸

It is fitting that Paul is known as the "apostle of grace" because at the time of his conversion, no one is less deserving of the gift. He becomes the consummate preacher of grace because he is its greatest and most grateful beneficiary. Prior to his conversion, Paul hates Christ and His followers and dedicates his life to persecuting these heretics. He delights in the stoning of the martyr Stephen, who refuses to renounce Christ, and like his Master, Stephen prays for his killers at the very moment they execute him. Paul's conversion from such seemingly irredeemable depths moves him to appreciate grace in direct proportion to his unworthiness. This is why Paul "understood and explained grace better than any of his contemporaries," writes Chuck Swindoll. "He never got over his own gratitude as a recipient of it. God's unmerited favor, His super-abounding grace, reached down to him in all his self-righteous zeal, crushed his pride, drove him to his knees, softened his heart, and transformed this once-violent aggressor into a powerful spokesman for Christ."⁹

By all appearances, Paul is the least likely person to become Christianity's premiere evangelist. He is a Jew, born "Saul," in Tarsus (Acts 21:39, 22:3), a city in Asia Minor in the province of Cilicia, close to Syria.¹⁰ He is raised and educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, a highly respected rabbi and Jewish scholar who mentors him on the "strict manner of the law of our fathers" (Acts 22:3). In his epistle to the Philippians Paul expands on his Jewish bona fides, declaring, "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (3:4–6).

No one is more avidly devoted to Jewish Law. Paul is of pure Jewish lineage and of the honored tribe of Benjamin, from which came Israel's first king, Saul (1 Samuel 9:1–2).¹¹ As a Pharisee, he obeys the Law's precepts to the letter and zealously torments Christians for ostensibly corrupting his religion. Yet upon his conversion, he happily abandons

all these boasting rights and discards his credentials, counting them as rubbish “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philip. 3:8). Given his background, who could better understand the futility of seeking salvation through works? Paul has few peers in “the accomplishments of the flesh”—few who achieved so much by their own deeds. He once had great pride in these “achievements” but ultimately comes to regard them as valueless, realizing that by himself he is utterly unworthy—as “all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6 NIV). Paul understands that all glory belongs to Christ—“not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philip. 3:9).

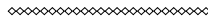
Also qualifying Paul for his mission to the Gentiles are his fluency in Greek and his familiarity with Hellenistic culture, which help him relate to Gentiles (Greek was the *lingua franca* at that time),¹² and his Roman citizenship from birth (Acts 22:28).¹³ Alister McGrath notes that whereas Jesus spoke mainly to rural Palestinian people, Paul evangelizes in Greek-speaking cities of the Roman Empire, employing images that are intelligible to his urban audience. The Christian apologist “needs to know his or her audience, speak its language, and share its common flow of life.”¹⁴

Roman citizenship is profoundly important, as citizens are part of the social elite. While such status was originally limited to freeborn natives of the city of Rome, citizenship expanded as the empire grew. It’s not entirely clear who in Paul’s lineage first gained citizenship, but it’s possible one of his immediate ancestors acquired it in exchange for his services to Rome.¹⁵ Cicero plainly expresses the benefits Roman citizens like Paul derived from their status: “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him an abomination, and to slay him is almost an act of murder.”¹⁶ Indeed, Paul’s citizenship facilitates his evangelistic work in hostile climates in the empire, as the authorities recoil in fear when Paul invokes it: “So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him” (Acts 22:29).

Providentially, Paul possesses the ideal attributes to become Christianity’s greatest evangelist—personality traits that he exhibits,

ironically, in his dark record of persecuting the Church. That God molds Paul into such a masterful messenger accentuates the gloriousness of the unmerited grace he is commissioned to preach. He is not only the Gospel's fiercest advocate, but his writings are the most thorough biblical formulations of Christian theology.¹⁷

PAUL'S ZEAL



As noted, Paul admits having been a zealous persecutor of the Church. But why? The answer can be found in his passion for his religion. He believes it's his duty to purge impurities, admitting that he even executes fellow Jews for violating God's special covenant with Israel (Acts 26:10). This new sect is especially dangerous because its adherents aren't just disobeying God but corrupting his religion at its core.

Theologian Lyman Abbott asks us to imagine what is going through Paul's mind as Christian churches spring up everywhere and many people, including those he had been close to, are betraying the cause he has always lived for, thereby dishonoring the living God of the universe.¹⁸ This is an instructive exercise that illuminates why so many Jews at this time reject Jesus as the Messiah.

The Jewish people had suffered throughout history, having been ruled and enslaved by successive world powers, and they longed for their liberation and triumph. They were expecting their Messiah to be a political and military leader who would deliver Israel from Roman oppression and make Israel the dominant world power.

Paul's conversion was early—perhaps within five years of Christ's resurrection—so he probably learned about Jesus from eyewitnesses, possibly from Jesus' followers as well as his enemies. There were still no written Gospels or apostles' writings, so by word of mouth Paul likely learned a disturbing version of these events—one that would upset anyone with half his devotion to the God he served.

Consider the facts as they were likely presented to Paul. This impostor Messiah was born out of wedlock, attracted a motley group of misfit followers with no qualifying credentials, cavorted with overt sinners, and demeaned those learned in the true religion and the Law. Despite

His interloping corruption, Jesus reportedly healed people, performed other miracles, and adding insult to injury, violated the Sabbath and flouted other sacred laws. Defying the most respected members of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish high council—He challenged and ridiculed the revered Pharisees, and rather than deferring to their holiness, denounced them as whitewashed tombs with an outward appearance of righteousness but full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt. 23:27). He presumed to discard God’s sacrificial system and inserted Himself as the proper medium to forgive people’s sins. Not only did He contradict the Jews’ messianic expectations, He predicted that Jerusalem, instead of becoming the capital of a newly inaugurated messianic empire, would be annihilated and the Temple would be reduced to abject ruins. On top of all this, this faux liberator wholly failed to bring the Jews their long awaited victory and emancipation, instead ending His life in utter defeat, hanged on a “tree” and thus, according to Old Testament Law, accursed by God (Deut. 21:23).

All this might have been tolerable had this disgraceful fellow’s blasphemies died along with Him, but His death and rumored resurrection resulted in an explosion of the cult. Once Jesus had been crucified and entombed the religious authorities surely assumed this would be the end of the movement, especially because its leader suffered such an ignominious defeat. After all, Jesus’ followers cowered into the darkness when He was arrested, so the authorities reasonably assumed they would hear nothing further from them. But everything changed days later when Jesus rose from the dead and “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Even Jesus’ close family members who had been skeptics thereafter became ardent believers. The movement was expanding at an alarming pace and the authorities knew they had to quash it before it spun out of control.¹⁹

We must view Paul’s persecution of the Church in the context of this mindset. Renegade heretics are trying to turn his entire world upside down—not just his world, but God’s. He has to do everything in his power to nip this upstart movement in the bud. Even killing some of them won’t be enough; they must be humiliated and all their dangerous ideas defeated. He admits in his letter to the Galatians, “For you have

heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (1:13).

But Paul grasps that the two systems—the rigorous, legalistic system of the religious authorities and the new Gospel of grace—are incompatible. With our New Testament hindsight today, we see how Christianity is a logical extension and fulfillment of the Jewish religion—but Paul, before his conversion, sees it differently. He views the new system as an affront to the laws God gave Moses and the customs based on them. The authorities acknowledge as much, and it is just as the martyr Stephen is beginning to deliver his fateful sermon that some “false witnesses” declare, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:13–14).

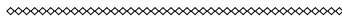
Even if Jesus’ newly offered system were somehow acceptable to Paul, which is impossible barring some divine intervention, he could still never abide the preposterous notion that Jesus was the Messiah for the reasons we’ve already addressed. Consequently, he is on a mission to destroy the new Church. “Everything that was of value in Judaism [was] imperiled by the disciples’ activity and teaching,” F. F. Bruce notes. “Here was a malignant growth which called for drastic surgery.”²⁰ Paul lives for his God as he understands Him, and he is determined to eradicate this tumor.

This is Paul’s mindset as he sets out from Jerusalem to persecute Christians in Damascus, but he may be more deeply conflicted. No one honors God with more vigor, yet his obedience and holiness aren’t calming his soul. He is extraordinarily restless for one so certain of the righteousness of his cause. Perhaps he is tormented by the difficulty of reconciling his commitment to his loving God with his mission to obliterate religious dissenters. As Abbott observes of Paul on his way to Damascus,

He was left to himself, and he found himself a very uncomfortable companion. The kindness in his heart was always great, and there marched in the way before him the shadowy forms of those whom he had put to death. He was always

courageous, and the boldness of the men who stood for their own convictions unto death stirred him with a new, strange pain. The problem of his own life came up again before him, and he remembered that though he had been blameless in the law, he had never had that peace which the Psalmist and the prophets promised to the man who has the blessing of the Almighty.²¹

A VISIT FROM GOD



The biblical account is unambiguous—the event leading to Paul’s conversion is sudden, unexpected, and dramatic. Rev. D. J. Burrell describes it as “truly one of the most momentous of history.”²² A. C. Gaebelein writes that the “conversion of this great persecutor and his call by the risen and glorified Lord to be the Apostle to the Gentiles ... is the greatest event recorded in Acts next to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.”²³ It isn’t just life changing for Paul but for Christianity itself. Paul will be that important. “We believe it would be impossible to come up with another conversion,” writes Rev. John G. Butler, “that has so affected in a positive way the growth, development, and history of the church.”²⁴

The Book of Acts records Paul’s conversion three times. The first and main account is in verses 9:1–19, which is in the middle of a section that describes the expansion of the early Church beyond Judea and into Gentile lands. Some commentators believe Luke places the story here to highlight that Paul is Christ’s chosen missionary to the Gentiles, just before Luke begins to describe this mission in chapter 13.²⁵ The other two accounts appear in Paul’s speeches defending himself, first to a Jewish mob (22:3–16) and then to King Agrippa (26:4–18).

Paul’s conversion has always had immense apologetic value because no one is a less likely candidate for such a radical transformation. George Lyttelton argues that “the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation.”²⁶ Paul begins toward Damascus planning to capture dangerous Christian heretics and return them to

Jerusalem. He even volunteers for the privilege. In Burrell's words, "He went out a bitter antagonist of Christianity; he came back a Christian. A miracle had happened. Saul had seen the dead, risen, and now glorified Christ. . . . Such is the only explanation admissible, considering the quality of Saul's mind."²⁷

Paul repeatedly testifies to the event. "Am I not free?" he asks in his first letter to the Corinthians. "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (9:1). He affirms his personal, physical encounter with Jesus later in the epistle: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (15:8). Though Paul does not satisfy the apostolic credentials specified in Acts 1:21–22—as he was not with Jesus during his earthly ministry and did not witness His resurrection prior to His Ascension—Christ commissions him directly, and he becomes a vitally important witness to the risen Christ. Further, Luke refers to Paul as an apostle in Acts 14:14, and Luke's conversion accounts portray Paul's upcoming missionary work as being based on the work of the risen Christ (9:3–5; 22:6–8; 26:12–18).²⁸ Paul himself also frequently asserts that his apostleship is grounded in Christ calling Him (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; 15; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1).²⁹

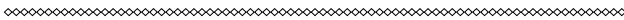
Finally, it's important to recognize that in his previous frenzy to persecute the burgeoning Church, Paul was not merely brutalizing human beings. He was also, and much more significantly, persecuting the Lord, as Christ elucidates in His exchange with Paul during the Damascus Road encounter. As Paul falls to the ground under blinding light, Jesus asks him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul replies, "Who are you, Lord?" Christ says, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4–5). Nothing more convicting can be imagined in this life.

Before Damascus Road, Paul was on a mission to imprison and punish heretics and destroy the Church. He was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1) and "was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). Paul later admits, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I

journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished” (Acts 22:4–5). Notably, when the Lord tells Ananias to look for Saul in Damascus following his conversion, Ananias protests, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem” (Acts 9:13).

In a marvelous outworking of His sovereign will, however, God produces a wondrous silver lining from Paul’s persecutions. To escape this unspeakable abuse, believers—except for the apostles—fled from Jerusalem “throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). In an ironic twist, this fanning out of believers resulted in the preaching of the Gospel in areas outside Jerusalem, causing the Gospel to spread like wildfire.³⁰ Even before his conversion Paul was an unconscious instrument of God, unwittingly laying the foundation for obeying Christ’s command to the Apostles, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). How exquisitely God works His sovereign will, using Paul’s unique passion and intensity to spread the Good News, both in Paul’s persecution phase and in his signature work as history’s foremost Christian missionary!

FINDING STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS



Paul’s background is instrumental in informing his epistles. Who else would have proclaimed, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Romans 1:16)? But it makes perfect sense since he dedicated years to attacking the Gospel. Who else would have declared, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:22–25)? Clearly, Paul witnessed firsthand the counterintuitive nature of the Gospel. God showed His strength through Christ’s “weakness” on the cross; He proved His wisdom by orchestrating a salvation scheme that seemed completely foolish to men.

Paul comes to see Christ’s voluntary submission to the evil authorities not as weakness and defeat but as strength and victory. He then

appropriates Christ's example of "weakness" in his own relationship with God and commends it to all believers. Pride, he knows, is faith's worst enemy and the devil's best friend. It keeps us from God. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. . . . For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God" (2 Cor. 12:9, 13:4). How far Paul has come from railing against Christ's weakness to adopting it as fundamental to Christian living! He intimately understands that God's salvation plan for mankind can be achieved only through Christ's sacrificial death, which represents strength and victory, not weakness and defeat, because it completed God's triumph over Satan, sin, and death. And while Christ hadn't yet restored King David's throne, He would do so in His second coming. God reveals Himself to Paul, transforming him into a confirmed believer who uniquely embraces this theological paradox of weakness as strength. Thereafter Paul redirects his zeal to the cause of Christ, enduring sacrificial suffering on His behalf and on behalf of those to whom he presents the Gospel.

THE BOOK OF ACTS: A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE GOSPELS AND THE EPISTLES



The Book of Acts is a history of the early Church beginning with Christ's resurrection. It is not a comprehensive history of this period but, like other historical sections of the Bible, is part of God's salvation history that includes only those events pertinent to God's redemptive plan for mankind.

Acts ends with Paul in his home in Rome under guard, welcoming and preaching the Kingdom of God to all who visit him, without describing what subsequently happened to the great evangelist. Pastor Ray Stedman notes that the book is deliberately unfinished because it is really a story about the unfinished work of Jesus Christ. "The book of Acts continues to be written today in the lives of men and women in the living

body of Christ, the church,” writes Stedman. “Even though Jesus has been taken up in the clouds, His body life goes on! It goes on in your life. It goes on in my life. . . . You and I are still writing the book of Acts today because it is an account of what the Holy Spirit continues to do through us today, all around the world.”³¹

Acts is a bridge between the Gospels and the epistles. It shows the apostles continuing Christ’s work, provides the historical backdrop for the epistles, and offers insight into the churches to which Paul directs his epistles. The book is summarized neatly in one of its beginning verses, which records the risen Christ’s charge to His apostles: “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” (Acts 1:8).

Acts is crucially important, for if the book were not part of the biblical canon, meaning Paul’s epistles would immediately follow the Gospels, we would have no idea why this new apostle appeared and would have far less historical context for his many epistles.³² J. Vernon McGee, in his famous series *Thru the Bible*, remarks that it contains much information found nowhere else in the Bible—unlike the Gospels and epistles, which include much overlapping information. Illustrating the continuity between the Gospels and Acts, the last recorded events in each of the Gospels are also recorded in Acts (Matthew [and the other Gospels]: the Resurrection; Mark: the Ascension;³³ Luke: the promise of the Holy Spirit; and John: the second coming of Christ.) “It is as if the four Gospels had been poured into a funnel,” writes McGee, “and they all come down into this jug of the first chapter of the Book of Acts.” In short, Acts confirms Christ’s Great Commission to the apostles to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth.³⁴

Commentators debate whose acts are referenced in the book’s title, depending on whom they believe is the book’s lead character. Most say the title refers to the activities of the apostles, who take the Gospel message to the world. Many say the book describes the work of the Holy Spirit, Who empowered the apostles for their work. “It is impossible to read the Acts,” says nineteenth and early twentieth century minister Joseph Exell, “without seeing that the Holy Spirit was the acting Guide of all the sayings and actions of the first teachers of Christianity.”³⁵

Theologian R. C. Sproul favors the title, “The History of the Acts of the Holy Spirit” because the Holy Spirit inspired the book, which is a record of the Spirit’s outpouring on the apostolic Church and its ministry.³⁶ Admittedly, references to the Holy Spirit in Acts are, says Ben Witherington, too numerous to list.³⁷ Still others argue that the main actor is “the risen and glorified Christ through the apostles.”³⁸

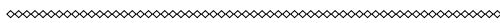
This strikes me as a false choice. All three are correct. We must recognize the apostles’ obedience in carrying out their mission, honor the Holy Spirit for His indwelling power that enables their work, and glorify Jesus Christ, Who sacrificed His life for us, fulfilled His promise to send the Holy Spirit following His death and resurrection, and continues His work through the apostles, empowered by the Spirit. Theologian John Stott notes that Luke “implies that the acts and words he reports are those of the ascended Christ working through the Holy Spirit who, as Luke knows, is, ‘the Spirit of Jesus’ (Acts 16:7).”³⁹ Stott therefore suggests the title, “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles.”⁴⁰

Indeed, while all three are vital—Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the apostles—Christ is the central figure of all salvation history. “It is not enough to say that while the Gospels contain the history of the Master’s ministry, the Acts record that of the apostles,” writes Exell. “Both alike narrate the work of the Lord: the Gospels what He did in Person, the Acts what He did by His chosen witnesses. . . . His incarnation [and] death . . . were only the foundation. In the Acts He rears a lofty temple on that foundation.”⁴¹

There is sovereign continuity in all of God’s salvation history throughout which Christ is the Prime Mover. Before Christ’s birth, God prepared the way for Christ. The Gospels record Christ’s acts and teachings. The Book of Acts records His further actions and teachings through the apostles empowered by the Holy Spirit. But His saving activities didn’t end with the death of the apostles. He has been acting and teaching ever since, through the Holy Spirit and His Word. Exell observes that Luke, in his two-part story, describes Christ’s model of doing and teaching. Exell nicely summarizes the balance that we must bring to our evangelism and exhorts us to incorporate both elements in our Christian living. “If we do, but fail to teach, we shall be but barren puzzles,” he

observes. “If we teach, but fail to do, we may incur the just imputation of being theorists and fanatics, or devotional sentimentalists.”⁴² As Charles Foster Kent comments, “While the book of Acts is excellent history, it is more than history, it is the epic of conquering Christianity; it is the pragmatic proof of the invincible power of the spirit and teachings of Jesus.”⁴³

FACTS YOU CAN COUNT ON



Though the text does not identify the author by name, Church tradition and most scholars hold that Luke, the author of the third Gospel, wrote Acts as the second part of his two-part record.⁴⁴ It’s possible that the two books became separated because of an early Church practice of setting apart the four Gospels for studying and praying.⁴⁵ Luke addresses his Gospel to his friend Theophilus, and Luke acknowledges him again in the first verse of Acts, in which he refers to “the first book.” Acts, then, continues where the Gospel of Luke ends and details how the apostles obey the risen Christ’s command to preach the Gospel throughout the world (Acts 1:8). Specifically, Luke begins by affirming Christ’s sacrificial death, His numerous resurrection appearances over forty days, His promise that He would soon send the Holy Spirit to His apostles, and His ascension, which had to precede the coming of the Spirit.

Scholars differ widely on when Acts was written, but many believe it significant that it ends abruptly with two of early Christianity’s key leaders, Paul and James, the brother of Jesus, still living. Clement of Rome and other early Church fathers report that Paul was executed during Nero’s reign, which ended in 68 AD, and Jewish historian Josephus writes that James was killed in 62 AD, so it is reasonable to assume the book was written in or before 62.⁴⁶

In the opening verses of his Gospel, Luke expresses his driving passion for presenting an accurate account of the Gospel and the history of the early Church. These are among my favorite Bible verses because each time I read them, I am moved by Luke’s heartfelt commitment to presenting a meticulously researched and authentic historical account to assure his readers that these momentous events actually occurred. This flies in

the face of cynics who dismiss the Gospels as sloppy compilations of orally passed-down stories. Luke writes, “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”

Though nineteenth-century liberal scholars panned the book as historically unreliable, many archaeologists and scholars persuasively defended the factual accuracy of Luke’s record. Scottish archaeologist Sir William Ramsay began as a skeptic, accepting the liberal Tübingen school theory that Luke’s writings should be dated in the second century. But after his extensive studies in Asia Minor, he became an ardent believer in the accuracy of Luke’s historical account.⁴⁷ “Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness,” writes Ramsay.⁴⁸ “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historical sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history, and proportions the scale of his treatment of the importance of each incident. He seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”⁴⁹

Similarly, classical Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White declares, “For the New Testament book of Acts, the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. . . . Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.”⁵⁰

Luke demonstrates his intricate familiarity with the geography and titles of the time, such as precisely identifying the various Roman provinces and the particular titles of government officials. His references to persons and events from other sources are easily corroborated. He proves his detailed knowledge of the Roman judicial system in his recounting of Paul’s trials, such as in Acts 22–26.⁵¹ J. B. Lightfoot shows that Acts is unique among New Testament books in its quantity of historically

verifiable events. He concludes, “No ancient work affords so many tests of veracity; for no other has such numerous points of contact in all directions with contemporary history, politics, and topography, whether Jewish, Greek or Roman.”⁵²

Norman Geisler and Frank Turek note that Luke cites eighty-four details from Acts 13–28 that could have only been derived from an eyewitness.⁵³ Admittedly, some conservative scholars acknowledge certain questionable passages in the historical record put forward by Luke, but they have plausible explanations. In 1999, Brian Janeway examined and compared the critical scholarship and concluded, “The Book of Acts is not without difficult passages, yet when compared to Josephus’ well-documented biases and tendencies to exaggerate, Luke’s careful accounting of events, people and their speeches is even more apparent. . . . In the final analysis, we must conclude that the Book of Acts is historically reliable.”⁵⁴

“ALL THE RESIDENTS OF ASIA HEARD OF THE WORD OF THE LORD”



In his narrative, as noted, Luke often provides summaries of the condition of the early Church at different times.⁵⁵ He reports that following Pentecost, the believers are devoted to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers. They are awestruck by the apostles’ many signs and wonders, and they act as a tight-knit community, selling their possessions and distributing the proceeds to the needy. Each day they attend the Temple together, socialize in their homes, display happy and generous hearts, and praise God. More people become believers every day (2:42–47). Again in verses 4:32–35, Luke describes the extraordinary communion and generosity among believers and the ongoing power of the apostles’ testimony to Christ’s resurrection. In verses 5:12–16, he recapitulates how believers hold the apostles in high esteem as they perform many signs and wonders in Jerusalem, including healings, which draw many afflicted people from surrounding towns. And in verse 19:10, we find a brief description of Paul’s extended ministry in Ephesus: “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard of the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”⁵⁶

Acts prominently features numerous important speeches, including three from Peter (to Jews in Jerusalem [2:14–36 and 3:11–26] and in Cornelius’s household [10:34–43]); one from Stephen (to Jews in Jerusalem, leading to his execution [7:1–53]); and six from Paul (to Jews in Pisidian Antioch [13:16–47]; to Greeks in Athens [17:22–31]; to Church elders in Ephesus [20:18–35]; to Jews in Jerusalem [22:1–21]; to Felix and his court [24:10–21]; and to Agrippa and his court [26:1–29]).⁵⁷ There are also shorter speeches throughout Acts. Constituting some thirty percent of the book,⁵⁸ these addresses center on the proclamation of the Gospel, emphasizing Christ’s fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises, His messiahship, His works (the crucifixion, resurrection, and His promised return and judgment), and the call to repent and be baptized.⁵⁹

The powerful speeches demonstrate the unity of scripture and how Christ fulfills the Old Testament prophecies and consummates God’s salvation plan. Ralph Martin aptly observes that these sermons splice together “in one narrative thread the past, present, and future of God’s salvific activity.”⁶⁰ They show that Christianity neither distorts nor departs from Judaism but is its legitimate fulfillment. The Church is shown as including both Jews and Gentiles, which further demonstrates Christianity’s continuity with the Old Testament.⁶¹ In that sense, the book presupposes a unified picture of salvation divided into three major sequential and interconnected epochs: the history of Israel during Old Testament times (the time of the Law and prophecy); the earthly ministry of Jesus; and the Church era, in which the Church, empowered by Holy Spirit, spreads the Gospel throughout the world.⁶²

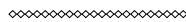
The sheer volume of recorded speeches in the book might suggest Luke is fascinated with the power of words, but the speeches convey voluminous information showing “All that God had done with them” (14:27). The speeches report actions and are also an important part of the action—the spreading of God’s Word.⁶³

Another dominant theme is the indispensability of the Christian witness to Jesus.⁶⁴ Considering Christ’s charge to the apostles to be His witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout the world, it is significant that these speeches are made by witnesses and that in recording them, Luke is giving further witness in a more permanent form. The witnessing is

worldwide and to all groups—Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, the infirm, the pagans, jailers, philosophers, governors, and kings. The witnesses boldly testify to their faith in Christ in obedience to the Great Commission, persevering despite fierce opposition, threats, and other challenges.⁶⁵

Luke shows that the Gospel is intended for the Gentiles as well as the Jews, pointing to Old Testament passages foretelling this development (Luke 24:27; Acts 13:47; 15:15–18; 28:25–28).⁶⁶ A salient confirmation of the universality of the Gospel occurs in Acts 2, when at Pentecost the Holy Spirit is poured out on Jews from all over the empire, who begin to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:4). We tend to focus on the supernatural aspects of this event, as each person speaks a language unknown to him, yet others present hear and understand the people in their own language. Some are so astonished they accuse the speakers of being drunk on wine. But we must recognize the symbolic import of this miraculous enabling of Jews from many nations to hear the Gospel in their native languages, illustrating that the Gospel is for people of all tongues and nations, but for the Jews first.⁶⁷

OUTLINES



Scholars outline the book in various ways, including the biographical outline, which divides the book into the works of Peter (Chapters 1–12) and Paul (Chapters 13–28), respectively.⁶⁸ “It is one of the most striking features about Acts that it says so little about the other apostles and so much about Peter and Paul,” writes Donald Guthrie.⁶⁹ He suggests this might be because Peter is chief apostle to the Jews and Paul chief apostle to the Gentiles, and because there are certain notable parallels between their works.⁷⁰ The *New Testament in Antiquity* highlights some of these parallels in a comparative chart:

- Peter delivers a sermon in Jerusalem (2:22–36) and Paul delivers one in Pisidian Antioch (13:26–41);
- Peter and Paul both heal a lame man (3:1–10, 14:8–11);
- They are both filled with the Spirit (4:8, 13:9);

- They both perform extraordinary healings (5:15, 19:12);
- They both lay their hands on people to enable them to receive the Spirit (8:17, 19:6);
- They both have a conflict with a magician (8:18–24, 13:6–11);
- Empowered by the Spirit, both raise people from the dead (Peter with Tabitha [9:36–41] and Paul with Eutychus [20:9–12]);
- Both are miraculously released from jail (12:6–11, 16:25–40).⁷¹

Another approach is the summary statements outline, which divides the book into six sections based on thematic statements Luke makes at the end of each section summarizing what he has just described.⁷² The six sections and their accompanying summaries are as follows:

1. The beginning Church in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7): “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”⁷³
2. The Church expands into Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31): “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”
3. Spreading of the Gospel to the Gentiles (9:32–12:24): “But the word of God increased and multiplied.”
4. The Gospel spreads into Asia on Gentile missions (12:25–16:5): “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.”
5. Further expansion of the Gospel into the Gentile world (16:6–19:20): “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”
6. The Gospel moves into Rome (19:21–28:31): Paul for two years is “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching

about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”⁷⁴

I believe the most useful way to organize the book, however, is the geographical outline, which is framed around Luke’s thematic summary of the book in verse 1:8, in which Jesus tells His disciples they will receive power from the Holy Spirit and then commands them to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. The disciples dutifully obey, and the book follows a natural structure corresponding to the missions.⁷⁵ Following the prologue (1:1–8), Acts is outlined according to the locations of the missions:

1. The witness to Jerusalem (1:9–8:3);
2. The witness to Judea and Samaria (8:4–12:25);
3. The witness to the ends of the earth (13:1–28:31).⁷⁶

This geographical outline reflects the sequence in which the Gospel is preached: first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, as Paul explains (Romans 1:16). As noted, Peter is considered the main evangelist to the Jews, and Paul the head of the Gentile mission.⁷⁷

In the next chapter, we’ll be looking over the shoulders of the apostles as they lead the explosive growth of the Church through persecution and hardship. The inspiring history of the early Church is recorded with meticulous detail by Luke, a medical doctor, who actually joins Paul on missionary journeys all over the ancient world. But Luke will start us in Jerusalem with Jesus.