

Group Study Outline

Introduction:

Today, we're going to review some of the main themes from *Acts* to draw some strands together, and to help us think through some practical implications.

READ Acts 8:1-4

What is the cost of 'preaching the word'? find another example of this same cost
What does this passage reveal about what God wants his church to do?
How does God achieve his purpose? can you think of another example of this?
How does this passage relate to 1:8?
Having read this passage, what should be our reaction to 'doors closing'?

READ Acts 16:6-12

What does this passage reveal about what God wants his church to do?
How does God make it clear that this is his plan? where else does he do similar?
How does this passage relate to 1:8?
Having read this passage, what should be our reaction to 'doors opening'?

READ Acts 17:1-15

What are we told here about the message that Paul proclaimed?
What reaction(s) did his message receive? how is this typical?
What is the reaction of Paul and his companions to opposition? why?
How does this passage relate to 1:8?
Is this a passage about 'doors opening' or 'doors closing'?

Thinking it through

Imagine that you are responsible for training a new generation of Christian missionaries. What are the most significant lessons from *Acts* to pass on ...?

What are the main things you feel we need to learn at Emmanuel from studying *Acts* in terms of these three themes:

- that God's priority for his church is that the gospel should be spread
- that God's method for this gospel spread is fearless gospel preaching
- that we should expect hostile opposition

Do we face an 'open door' or a 'closed door'? what difference does that make?

What do you feel is the main thing that has really struck home for you in reading *Acts* these last six months? what will you do about that?

How can we maintain the urgent perspective of *Acts* as our priority?

Alternative idea for different **Group Study** (... or as a possible Optional Extra)

READ Acts 28:11-30

In what ways does this chapter bring the story of *Acts* to a conclusion? what happens to Paul here, and why? cf 21:13 why didn't Paul die in Jerusalem?
In what ways does this chapter leave things unresolved? why aren't we told what happens next to Paul?

Is Acts 1:8 fulfilled (a) by the end of *Acts*? and (b) by the year 2010?
Are we in 'Acts 29'?

Acts review



God's work is gospel spread

1:8 is the key verse, introducing God's agenda, and a structure for the book:

- the giving of power (roughly, chapters 1-2);
- being witnesses in Jerusalem (with an explanation of what being a witness means, and what it is that they claim to have witnessed) (3-7);
- a move beyond the city to the surrounding areas (8-9);
- a move to the ends of the earth (10 to the end, as the gospel reaches Rome).

All this spreading of the gospel is directed by God the Evangelist. Note that ...

First, Acts 1:1-2 makes it clear that this is **the work of the ascended Jesus** by his Spirit (cf John 16:7), continuing what he began in his earthly ministry.

Second, the work of the Holy Spirit (mentioned 52 times) occurs in clusters:

- the section beginning 1:9 (the commissioning the twelve apostles, including the replacement for Judas, as they wait for the Spirit)
- the section beginning 2:4 (Pentecost and the first Jewish converts)
- the section beginning 6:3 (the choosing of seven assistants to free the apostles for their preaching and praying)
- the section beginning 8:17 (the first Samaritan converts)
- the section beginning 10:19 (the first Gentile converts)
- the section beginning 16:6 (the gospel goes to Europe)
- the section beginning 20:23 (Paul's trials and hardships foretold as he travels to evangelise in Jerusalem and Rome)

Apart from the first cluster (which is a promise of and preparation for the second), each cluster is about evangelism. In other words, the work of the Spirit in *Acts* is **to push the churches outward in new missionary activity**, and this activity is focussed on **telling people about Jesus**. (When the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost we get a sermon - about Jesus, not the Holy Spirit!)

Third, Luke uses a **phrase about 'growth'** as a summary sentence to mark sections throughout the book. Look at the last verse(s) in each of the following:

- 1:1-2:47 the first Christians
- 3:1-6:7 the first Christians in Jerusalem
- 6:8-9:31 the first *partly* Jewish Christians
- 9:32-12:24 the first *non*-Jewish Christians
- 12:25-16:5 the encounter with the wider non-Christian world
- 16:6-19:20 more acceptance, more resistance

These sections show the same church growth outwards (as outlined in 1:8). But see in that growth, it is not the church who is held up as the hero: the growth is in God's plans and effectiveness by his word/gospel.

Gospel growth comes from gospel preaching

20% of *Acts* is given over to speeches/sermons/defences of the gospel. For a book that is called 'Acts', it's surprising how much is 'Words'! Reading these sermon summaries helps us be clear what the gospel is: what did they preach?

1 the kingdom of God

'The kingdom of God' is a familiar phrase in the gospels; Luke uses it 8 times in *Acts*. Two of these references are at the start (1:3, 6) and two at the end (28:23, 30-31), giving bookends to the intervening story. Of the other references, two are in the context of evangelism (8:12; 19:8) and two in the context of church leadership (14:22; 20:25). In other words, the significance of this phrase is not its frequency, but its strategic placing.

What is the point of this? Luke is helping us to understand what this phrase means: understand it by all the other things the church does and says. In particular, when Paul explained 'the kingdom of God' in Ephesus (19:8) he was not doing anything different than when he 'proclaimed the word of God' in Salamis (13:5), or 'explained and proved that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead' in Thessalonica (17:2-3). The kingdom of God is about believing in and submitting to the risen Messiah Jesus, our Saviour and Judge. These are all different ways of summarising the same gospel.

2 concise summaries of this 'kingdom of God' gospel

Luke rarely repeats himself. He tells us what Peter/Paul/whoever 'typically' preached. So as the book goes on, his summaries become more and more concise. For example, the first full-blown evangelistic sermon is 22 verses (2:14-36), then 14 (3:12-26), then 5 (4:8-11, 19-20), then 3 (5:29-32)!

The condensed version is: *you* killed him; *God* raised him; *we* saw him. For those not at the crucifixion (eg 10:36-41), it's adapted to: information about who Jesus was; *they* (not *you*) killed him; *God* raised him; *we* saw him. Later when Paul preaches to Jews and Gentiles (in 13:16-42), it's adapted further: a longer OT background about the Messiah, then some information about who Jesus was; *they* (not *you*) killed him; *God* raised him; *they* (not *we*) saw him.

The importance of this is that there is a clear and consistent content to the gospel that the apostles preached and that we preach. Extra bits may need adding according to the particular audience, but the basics are the same. It is a consistent message that focuses on Jesus as God's king, killed, raised, seen.

3 to the Jew and to the Gentile

There are many points of similarity between the ministries of Peter and Paul, as they dominate the book at different points. But Luke's differing focus reflects an overarching strategy: **first the Jew, and then the Gentile**. This prioritising is the same pattern Jesus taught his first disciples (eg Matt 10:5-6). As the Jews historically and consistently reject the gospel, God appoints his 'apostle to the Gentiles' (26:16-18) to take the message wider.

- ch 1-15 Peter (= the gospel spreads from Jew to Gentile)
- ch 9-28 Paul (= the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Rome)

Gospel preaching produces hostile opposition

It is all far from plain sailing! Right from the opening chapters of the book, we see how God's plan for gospel growth is threatened by ...

1 opposition from without (cf 4:1-22)

This opposition comes ...

• from the Jews

Motivated by 'jealousy' (13:45; 17:5), and angry at the preaching of 'the resurrection from the dead' (4:2) and the inclusion of Gentiles (21:28; 22:21-22) just like Paul himself, the Jewish authorities are 'breathing threats/murder against the disciples of the Lord' (9:1), travelling afar to stir up opposition.

• from the Gentiles

are no more welcoming (cf 13:50; 14:5, 9; 16:19f; 17:5f; 19:23f and then 21:27ff): all of this fulfilling the prophecy given to Paul in 21:11, 13.

Acts 9:15-16 is a good summary of this theme: right from his commission, the Apostle Paul is shown 'how much he must suffer for my name' '**before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel**'. Paul's destiny was to imitate the suffering of his master and show the intimately painful nature of Christian ministry (cf 2 Tim 3:10-12): hence the lengthy 21:27-26:32 describing his trials.

But of course, alongside the reality and pain of suffering is a parallel victorious theme: God uses this very hostility to achieve his purpose. 8:1-4 shows the pattern: opposition 'scatters' preachers of the word, and the result is that the gospel ends up being proclaimed to all nations (as Jesus predicted in Mark 13:10).

2 opposition from within

'Opposition' may be too strong a word. But there certainly are things within the church that have the potential to thwart Acts 1:8 ... eg

- moral compromise (eg 4:32-5:11);
- competing priorities (eg 6:1-7);
- theological disagreements that will undermine unity (eg 8:14f; 10:1-11:18; 14:27-15:35).

This is just what Paul will warn the Ephesian elders to 'pay careful attention to' (20:29-30) ... danger 'from among your own selves'.

How the book of Acts ends

The stories of both Peter and Paul have abrupt endings (Peter completely disappears after 15:7-11; and although Paul reaches Rome, the story is left hanging as he continues preaching there in 28:30-31) for *Acts* is not telling us their biographies. Luke has told us all he needs to, with no additional task to be given to us today: we have a worldwide, evangelistic message of the kingdom of God to proclaim. Our place in the book is after it closes, but with exactly the continuing task of those within it. Their task is ours:

- **gospel spread, through gospel preaching, despite opposition.**