

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (9-1-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Introduction to the book of the Acts of the Apostles

Acts 1:1

Additional Bible Reading: Luke 1:1-4; Colossians 4:14;

Philemon 23,24; 2 Timothy 4:4

### Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles is the second part of two volumes written by Luke, the only Gentile writer of the New Testament writers. His contribution to the New Testament is bigger than anyone else in terms of numbers of chapters. He takes the story of Christianity from John the Baptist right up till Paul arrives in Rome, in the early 60's. There was not another Church History written in continuous form till the one written in the fourth century by Eusebius of Caesarea.

There is much Luke does not tell us. Peter dominates chapters 1-12, and Paul chapters 13-28. But we know very little of the other apostles. We hear about how the Gospel spread to the North and the West, but what about its spread to the South and East of Jerusalem? Even much of Paul's life is not recorded, e.g. the events Paul speaks of 2 Corinthians 11:23ff. The speeches and sermons we can read through in minutes are only summaries. How much more we would like to know also about the life of Jesus and His apostles.

The problem is that the ancient writers did not have books like ours. They wrote on papyrus roll. For it to be manageable, there was a limit to its length, and Acts is about the maximum amount that could be got on one roll. Hence the ancient writers had to be selective.

The title of this book, the Acts of the Apostles, has been in use since 150-180. Is this the best title? Someone has suggested it could be better described as the Acts of the Risen Jesus, because Acts 1:1 speaks of the Gospel of Luke being about all that Jesus began to do and teach, implying that this second book is about all He continued to do and teach now He was alive from the dead. Others have suggested the title, the Acts of the Holy Spirit, but this does not take into account the fact that the Holy Spirit worked through the Apostles. Hence the rather full title John Stott arrives at, "The continuing works and deeds of Jesus by His Spirit through His apostles".

This sets the Christian message apart from other religions. All other religious leaders are dead. Luke shows that Jesus only began His work during His lifetime, but continues it from heaven via His apostles.

### The author, Luke

Neither the third Gospel or the Acts of the Apostles tells us who the author is, but people who lived immediately after New Testament times, the early fathers, were unanimous on saying that both books were written by Luke, the physician from Antioch. And there is evidence to back this up. According to Acts 28, the author was in Rome with Paul. The prison epistles mention 9 people with Paul in prison in Rome, and by a process of elimination, only Luke could have travelled with him to Rome.

There is also evidence that the author was a physician, by the great medical detail in his writings, e.g. the use of the technical medical term for a seizure in Luke 4:35, a “high fever” in Luke 4:38, “full of leprosy” in Luke 5:12, the two medical terms in Acts 9:18, and the rare medical word for ankle bones in Acts 3:7. When Matthew and Mark relate Jesus’ comment about a camel going through the eye of a needle, they use the word for a housewife’s needle, but Luke uses the word for a surgeon’s needle. Luke remembers and records exactly which hand (Luke 6:6) or ear (Luke 22:51) was wounded, unlike the other writers. Mark records that the woman with the issue of blood had suffered under many doctors, but Luke removes the jibe against medical doctors, and simply records that she could not be healed.

### How did Luke go about his writings?

The prologue to Luke’s Gospel is meant to cover both books. In antiquity, when a work was divided into more than one volume, the preface in the first volume covered all volumes. **Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.. Therefore since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus** (Luke 1:1,3).

He claims to write accurate history and to have researched everything thoroughly. Almost certainly he drew on Mark’s account, the earliest Gospel, as did Matthew. Then while Paul was in prison for two years in Caesarea (Acts 21:17; 27:1) he got more information. Probably Mary told him about the events of Luke 1 & 2. He met the leaders of the early church, and being a friend of Paul received stories from them.

Then clearly Luke was present in person on a number of occasions. There are four passages in Acts where he speaks of “we” rather than “they”, namely Acts 16:10-17, **we were met by a slave girl**, Acts 20:5-15, **We stayed seven days at Troas**, Acts 21:1-18, **we landed at Tyre..**, and Acts 27:1-28:16, **We sailed for Italy**. So these are four extracts from Luke’s personal travel diary, and are remarkably accurate and detailed.

Sir William Ramsay, an archaeologist in the 1870’s and 1880’s, was completely sceptical about the value and reliability of Acts. He completely reversed his opinion when he travelled to the East to find out for himself, at sites in Turkey and Greece, the historical and geographical background of Acts by archaeological investigation. He concluded, “Luke was a historian of the first rank. His statements are trustworthy. He has true historic sense because he concentrates on important and critical events and touches lightly on the rest. This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”

F.F.Bruce has more knowledge of the historical and geographical background to Acts, and concludes, “Our respect for Luke’s reliability grows as our knowledge of this field increases.” This is admitted by many Bible critics. Luke’s accuracy was a habit of mind. He was a man proven to be accurate in matters where we can test him, and therefore likely to be accurate in matters where we cannot test him. For example, the historical facts about the Gentile and Jewish rulers, kings, and Jewish leaders are accurate. The title of the different Roman governors of the provinces and cities in the

three missionary journeys are totally correct. Roman documents, the silver image of Artimus (Acts 19:24), coins and writings all support this. Also, Luke's impressions of local colour and atmosphere are collaborated by other writers of the times. He was intolerant of the crowds of Jerusalem, he speaks of the cosmopolitan city of Antioch, the self-important magistrates of Philippi, the intellectuals of Athens.

#### Luke's reason for writing this book

**For you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught** (Luke 1:4). "Most excellent" may be a polite form of address or indicate an important Roman official, for this was a description Luke also applied to Felix (Acts 23:26) and Festus (Acts 26:25). The meaning of the name Theophilus is "loved by God" or "loving God", so it could be a symbol for a Christian reader, but it is more likely to be a specific person, either an enquirer or a new convert. This information was given to strengthen his faith and help him. It was to give him the assurance that his Christian faith had firm historical foundation, and was not based on myth and fairy tale.

Then beyond this immediate purpose is the Lord's wider purpose. The record showed the innocence and good character of Jesus and the Apostles, and proved that the Romans had nothing to fear from them. Luke recorded how the Roman officials were constantly friendly to the Christian missionaries, and therefore they were not a political threat.

But above all there is the evangelistic purpose of the book. It sets forth how God had fulfilled Scripture, He had sent His Son who had died for sins, and exalted Him. It shows that through faith in Him come forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It demonstrates that this message is for all men, not just Jews, but even the despised Samaritans and Gentiles. All flesh are going to see God's salvation.

At the same time, the Acts of the Apostles is showing the church what she should be like. This is the message she should be preaching. The importance of the empowering and the leading of the Holy Spirit is key. Organisation and leadership of the church is also taught. Through the exploits of those early missionaries we learn to take heart even in opposition, to be faithful, remain loyal, and expect God's help and deliverance.

#### What sort of person was Luke?

Luke was dedicated to the Lord. He was a man of great ability, medical skills, a painstaking historian and effective writer of history. He was a skilful and charming writer. An artist in words. His pen pictures are most impressive, and he was an inspired artist. Some say Luke's Gospel is one of the most beautiful books in the world ever written. Luke 1:1-4 contains the highest quality of Greek in the whole New Testament.

All these gifts and skills and abilities were not used to further his own standing among men or to get a name for himself, but they were consecrated to the Lord, to encourage Theophilus, to preach the Gospel, to teach the church about duty and resources.

N.B. the inspiration of Scripture – **God-breathed** (2 Timothy 3:16). But God did not treat the writers as typewriters or word-processors. He takes and uses their personalities and skills, their theological interests, He does not obliterate their personality.

Finally note other aspects of Luke's personality. It is clear what he meant to Paul: **Beloved physician** (Colossians 4:14), **fellow labourer** (Philemon 24), and at the end of his life, **Only Luke is with me** (2 Timothy 4:11). There was a strong friendship between these two. Luke was devoted to Paul. Luke shared Paul's hardships and dangers of missionary life, and at the end was there to comfort, help and minister. Loyal to the end. He was not an apostle, but he was a giant in an age of giants. A giant in ability, gifts, devotion to the Lord, courage, loyalty, support and in Christian character. Thank God for Luke. Let us face the challenge of his life.