**Introduction to Acts 10–19**

David Peterson (2021)

**1. The character of Acts**

**a. A theological history:** recording God’s extraordinary actions through his word and Spirit after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

**b. A narrative dominated by speeches:** showing how the gospel was presented in different contexts (e.g. 2:14-41; 3:11-26; 10:34-43; 17:22-31) and how the first Christians came to understand their role and significance (e.g. 1:15-22; 15:6-21; 20:17-35).

**c. A narrative about fulfilment:** Scripture, contemporary prophecies, visions, and angelic messages have their impact on the story and show that God is supernaturally at work (e.g. 1:15-22; 2:14-41; 8:26-35; 11:27-30; 18:9-11; 21:10-14; 27:22-26).

**2. The structure of Acts**

**a. The progress of ‘the word’:** the gospelis called ‘the word of God’ (e.g. 4:31; 6:2; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24) or ‘the word of the Lord’ (e.g. 8:25; 13:49; 15:35; 19:10), affirming its divine origin and authority. It is presented as a dynamic force at work in the world, transforming the lives of those who receive it (2:41; 8:14; 11:1; 17:11), as it spreads (13:49), and is honoured by those who believe it (13:48).

**b. The growth of the church:** the increase in the number of disciples (6:1; 9:31)is related to the ‘growth’ of the word (6:7; 12:24). These texts are part of a series of eight summaries of church growth in Acts (2:47; 5:14; 6:7; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20). This unusual application of the language of increase and growth signifies *the advance of the gospel and the movement it creates*.

**c.** **Growth through suffering and persecution:** three key editorial markers (6:7; 12:24; 19:20) climax a section of the narrative recording the resolution of some conflict or the cessation of opposition and persecution. The gospel is shown to prosper in spite of, and even because of, suffering. Four major sections of Acts are suggested by these texts:

1:1 – 6:7 **Development of the church in Jerusalem under the leadership of the Twelve**

6:8 – 12:24 **Spontaneous expansion to Judea, Samaria and Gentile areas, with a widening of ministry to include Stephen, Philip, and others scattered because of the persecution in Jerusalem**

12:25 –19:20 **Planned geographical expansion into Asia Minor and Europe, under the leadership of Paul, emanating from Antioch in Syria**

19:21 – 28:31 **The word of the Lord continues to grow and prevail, even though Paul is persecuted and arrested.**

**d. Further indications of expansion and church growth:** in 9:31, after Saul’s conversion, ending the persecution he promoted; in 16:5, concerning Paul’s second visit to that area, delivering the decisions reached by the council in Jerusalem; the extraordinary importance of Paul’s Ephesian ministry in 18:23 – 20:38. This suggests the following structure:

**1:1-14 THE MISSION PLAN OF THE RISEN LORD**

**1:15 – 6:7 THE WORD IN JERUSALEM**

6:8 – 9:31 THE WORD GOES OUT FROM JERUSALEM

**9:32 – 12:25 THE WORD ADVANCES IN JUDEA AND SYRIA**

**13:1 – 15:35 THE WORD GOES TO CYPRUS & ASIA MINOR**

**15:36 – 18:22 THE WORD GOES TO EUROPE**

**18:23 – 20:38 THE WORD IN EPHESUS: CLIMAX OF PAUL’S MISSION AS A FREE MAN**

**21:1 – 28:31 PAUL’S FINAL JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM AND ROME**

**3. The purpose of Luke–Acts**

1. The prologue in Luke 1:1–4 also applies to Acts: *Luke’s narrative is ordered according to his own interests and emphases*, climaxing with stories of the gospel’s progress throughout the Roman Empire.
2. Theophilus appears to be a Roman official who has been instructed in the Christian faith, but who needs to know *‘the certainty’ of the things he has been taught about Jesus and the growth of the early Christian movement* (v. 4).
3. Most likely, Luke hopes that Theophilus will help to *publish his work and distribute it to others who have a similar need for certainty about the things that he writes about.*
4. Theophilus represents the ‘ideal reader’: Luke–Acts is written *to strengthen believers and enable inquirers to have certainty about*
5. The identity, character, teaching, and authority of Jesus;
6. God’s plan of salvation and how it is fulfilled by Jesus and the Spirit;
7. How and why Christianity has spread so widely and so quickly;
8. Why there is so much opposition to Christianity in Jewish and Gentile circles.

**4. Understanding Acts 10–19**

**9:32 – 12:25 The word advances in Judea and Syria**

1. Peter’s visit to the Lord’s people on the Mediterranean coast brought him further and further into *Gentile territory*, where many people came to believe in Jesus (9:32-43).
2. But Peter needed a threefold vision from the Lord to accept an invitation from the Roman centurion Cornelius to *preach the gospel to his household in Caesarea* (10:1-48):

* Cornelius was a devout ‘God-fearer’ but not a full proselyte to Judaism. Peter knew that the gospel is for Gentiles (3:25–26), but he also knew that the laws of Leviticus prevented him from eating with them and staying with them;
* The radical command to kill and eat what is unclean is explained in 10:15, 28; 15:8–9, opening the way for Jews and Gentiles to have unrestricted fellowship in the gospel through faith in Jesus;
* Peter’s message to Cornelius and his household climaxed with the offer of definitive forgiveness from Jesus, whom God appointed ‘as judge of the living and the dead’ (10:34–43);
* God poured out his Spirit on these Gentiles in a way that is reminiscent of Pentecost (10:45–46; compare 2:4) and they were baptised with water.

1. The extraordinary events in Caesarea had to be explained and justified to ‘the circumcised believers’ in Jerusalem, where the emphasis is placed on *God’s initiative in similarly baptising them with the Holy Spirit* (11:1-18).
2. Meanwhile, a thriving church was planted in Antioch by ordinary believers scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution there (8:4), and it grew to become a missionary centre for the Gentile world under the leadership of Barnabas and Saul (11:19-30; cf. 13:1-3).
3. Persecution resumed in Jerusalem, but judgment came upon King Herod and the word of God continued to spread and flourish (12:1-24).

**13:1 – 15:35 The word goes to Cyprus and Asia Minor**

1. When God called Barnabas and Saul to a wider ministry, the church at Antioch *released them and encouraged them forward* (13:1–3). Cyprus was their first port of call (13:4–12), perhaps because Barnabas came from there, but more likely because it was on the shipping route to Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Here we are introduced to *the sort of difficulties and opportunities they faced everywhere they went*.
2. More space is devoted to the ministry in Pisidian Antioch, because Luke provides *a sample of the way Paul preached in synagogues to Jewish audiences* (13:13–31). The similarities to Peter’s preaching in 2:16–41 are notable, though Paul makes his own distinctive contribution (13:38–39).
3. The different responses of the Jews in 13:42–52 forced Paul and Barnabas to minister to Gentiles *outside the synagogue context*, but they viewed this positively in terms of the fulfilment of Isaiah 49:6. This did not mean abandoning synagogue ministry absolutely, as 14:1–7 shows.
4. Ministry in Lystra and Derbe was directed to pagans with no synagogue involvement (14:1–20). When Paul healed a man who was lame from birth, he and Barnabas were treated like gods. *Paul could only begin to preach about the true and living God before Jewish opponents intervened to stop him*. His creation-based message anticipated his preaching in Athens (17:22–31).
5. The return of the missionaries to their home base in Antioch involved *revisiting the new churches, appointing elders, exhorting the new believers to stand firm in the face of persecution, and reporting back to those who had been praying for them* (14:21–28).
6. The surprising success of the Gentile mission provoked ‘certain people from Judea’ to insist that *Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses’* (15:1-5). This massive threat to the truth of the gospel and the unity of churches necessitated *the first international conference of Christian leaders in Jerusalem* (15:6–21):

* Peter explained why he had changed his mind on this issue (vv. 6–11);
* Paul and Barnabas told about God’s confirming signs and wonders (v. 12);
* James proposed a solution based on Amos 9:11–12 (vv. 13–21).

1. Chosen representatives took a letter from the conference to the Gentile churches and explained its meaning, *encouraging them all* (15:22–35).

**15:36 – 18:22 The word goes to Europe**

1. Paul’s second missionary journey began with a sad separation from Barnabas (15:36–41). But *two mission teams were formed,* because Paul established a new partnership with Silas and Timothy (16:1–5).
2. As Paul and his new team headed north through modern Turkey, they were ‘kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word’ until they came to Troas and received *the extraordinary vision encouraging them to cross the Aegean Sea and begin a new work in Macedonia* (16:6–10).
3. The founding of the church in Philippi is told with *three conversion cameos:* Lydia ‘the worshipper of God’ (16:13–15); the slave girl who was a fortune teller (16:16–18); the jailer and his family (16:19–34). The concluding paragraphs reveal something of the complexity of the political situation for Paul and the earliest believers in the Roman Empire (16:35–40).
4. Paul and his team began their ministry in Thessalonica *in the synagogue*, where they had mixed results (17:1–9; compare 13:42–48). But their reception in Berea was different, until some Thessalonian Jews intervened (17:10–15).
5. Luke gives an extensive report of the mission to Athens, because of the importance of the situation, and provides *a sample of how Paul preached to educated pagans* (17:16–33).
6. The planting of the gospel in Corinth is also told with much detail, because of *the ongoing significance of this church*: Paul preached in the synagogue with Aquila and Priscilla (18:1–6); he founded a church next door with many converts (18:7–11); he was brought to judgment by Jewish opponents, but he was released by the proconsul (18:12­17).

**18:23 – 19:41 The word in Ephesus**

1. Paul returned to Jerusalem via Ephesus, where he began a ministry in the synagogue and expressed *his intention to return* (18:18–22). After spending time in Jerusalem, he went to Antioch in Syria again, and then he *revisited the churches he founded on his first journey* (18:23).
2. Meanwhile, Priscilla and Aquila were ministering to *Apollos* in Ephesus, who became a significant leader in the early Christian movement (18:24–28; see 1 Cor. 1:12). Acts is about nurture and training, not simply evangelism!
3. Luke gives a lengthy report of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus and adds Paul’s farewell address to the elders in 20:13–38. Ephesus was a significant city and Paul’s *final opportunity to preach as a free man.* Luke describes his ministry to some disciples of John the Baptist (19:1–7), his teaching in the synagogue and in a hired lecture hall (19:8–10), miraculous events (19:11–22), and a near–death experience (19:23–41).

**5. The problem of then and now**

As we seek to interpret and apply biblical narratives, we need differentiate what is **descriptive** (e.g. Acts 2:1–4), from what is **prescriptive** (e.g. Acts 2:38–39)**,** and what is an encouraging **model** (e.g. Acts 4:32–37) or a **warning** (Acts 5:1–11). But descriptive passages may have theological and pastoral implications.