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The Victory of the Gospel

Many historians believe that the three most crucial decades in world history occurred when a small group of men, mostly Jews under the power of the Holy Spirit, took the gospel to the world. The book of Acts is an account of those three crucial decades, which spanned from the resurrection of Jesus, in A.D. 31, to the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, in A.D. 62 (*Acts 28:30*). The book must have been written shortly thereafter, for it stops the narrative at that point, though evidence exists that Paul was released from that imprisonment and that he resumed his missionary endeavors, preaching and traveling until he was arrested a few years later and then executed in Rome, in A.D. 67.

The book is silent about its author, but church tradition always has identified him as Luke, "the beloved physician" of Colossians 4:14 and traveling companion of Paul (*2 Tim. 4:11, Philemon 24*). Luke also traditionally is believed to be the author of our third Gospel, no doubt "the first book" mentioned in Acts 1:1 (*compare with Luke 1:3*). Luke and Acts are twin volumes on the beginnings of Christianity, respectively its origin (Jesus' life and ministry) and expansion (the apostles' missionary endeavors).

Together they comprise about 27 percent of the New Testament, the largest contribution of a single author. Writing to the Colossians, Paul refers to Luke as a Gentile coworker, someone who was not "of the circumcision" (*Col. 4:7-14*). Luke,

then, is the only non-Jewish author of a New Testament book.

This seems to explain one of his main themes: the universality of salvation. God has no favorites. The church is called to witness to all people, irrespective of their race, social class, or gender (*Acts 1:8; 2:21, 39, 40; 3:25; 10:28, 34, 35*). A failure to do so, whether by prejudice or convenience, is a distortion of the gospel and contrary to the most basic truths of God's Word. We are, before God, all the same: sinners in need of the redemption found in Christ Jesus.

It is not by chance, then, that Luke's main hero is Paul, "the apostle to the Gentiles" (*Rom. 11:13, NIV*), to whom almost two thirds of the book of Acts is dedicated.

Other important themes found in Acts include: the sovereignty of God and His divine purpose (*Acts 17:24, 25; 20:27; 23:11*); the exaltation of Jesus as Lord and Savior (*Acts 2:32, 36; 3:13, 15; 4:10–12; 5:30, 31*); and especially the role of the Spirit in empowering and guiding the church for its mission (*Acts 2:1–4; 4:24–31; 8:14–17, 29, 39; 10:19, 20*). In fact, the achievements of the early church were not the result of human wisdom or ability, though it pleased God to use someone like Paul to impact the world in a way that no other apostle did or perhaps was able to do (*1 Cor. 15:10*).

Acts deals with the formative period of the early church, in which there was considerable administrative and even theological growth. We can see this, for example, in the way the church dealt with questions concerning the time of Jesus' second coming, the status of the Gentiles, and the role of faith for salvation. What the early church was able to accomplish in such a short period of time, however, is a perpetual testimony of what God can do through those who humble their hearts in prayer, live beyond individual differences, and let themselves be used by the Spirit for God's honor and glory.

Acts is the story of those called of God to start the work; what can we who are called of God to finish it learn from their story?

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