



ACTS

Survey of the New Testament: The Gospels & Acts Winter 2005

Introduction

Author

In the book of Acts, the author uses the term “we” in four separate sections of the book: Acts 16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, and 27:1-28:16. From Paul’s epistles we know Paul’s various companions at each point of his ministry, and Luke is the only person who matches these “we” passages. Therefore we can deduce that Luke is that author of Acts, and is therefore also the author of this gospel. The early church fathers confirm this authorship.

Luke is described in Colossians 4:14 as the “beloved physician.” He is the only Gentile author in the New Testament. As a physician he would have been highly educated. His writing style uses the most classical forms of the Greek language of any of the gospels.

Date

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome awaiting trial. However, the outcome of the trial is left a mystery, strongly suggesting that the book of Acts was completed prior to Paul’s trial in Rome, which took place in the mid 60s. In addition, Acts 28:31 states that the gospel was being preached in Rome “without hindrance.” This would not be the case during the persecution of the church under Nero, which took place around AD 64.

On the other side, Acts is the sequel to the gospel of Luke. This gospel borrowed heavily from Mark and Matthew in its compilation. If we date the writing of Mark after the death of Peter, which took place around AD64, this leaves a very narrow window in which Luke could have written these books.

Therefore the best estimate is that Acts was written in the mid-60s.

Audience

Luke addresses the book of Acts to an unknown individual named Theophilus. While we do not know who this person was, it is likely that Luke was dedicating this work to him, while expecting that the book would also reach a larger audience.

The book of Acts emphasizes the spread of the gospel from its Jewish roots to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. Given this content, and based on the style of the language, it is likely that Luke was writing to the Gentile believers who were growing in number throughout the Roman Empire.

Purpose

As shown in Acts 1:1, this book is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. The primary purpose, then, is the same as that gospel: to present an orderly account of the on-going ministry of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus did not end with His ascension into heaven, but continued on through the apostles who were empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2).

Luke is primarily providing his audience with a detailed history of the expansion of Christ's ministry from a little Jewish sect found only in Jerusalem to a movement that encompassed the entire Roman Empire. As Barclay puts it:

Luke's great aim was to show the expansion of Christianity, to show how that religion which began in a little corner of Palestine had in a little more than 30 years reached Rome.¹

There are a number of secondary purposes to the book of Acts:

- A defense of Paul's apostolic authority. Throughout his epistles, Paul often has to defend his authority as an apostle. The book of Acts systematically compares Paul to Peter, and thus presents Paul on an equal footing with Peter.
- A legal brief prepared to defend Paul in his trial before Caesar. This is certainly not Luke's primary purpose, for such a brief would not include the theological aspects contained in the book. Nonetheless, the book does repeatedly remind its readers that Paul is a Roman citizen, that he is a law-keeper (stayed in prison when he could have escaped), and that he is a hero who rescued a ship that was sinking. In addition, any civil troubles Paul faced were religiously motivated disputes, and not a conflict with the Roman authorities.
- An explanation of how the church fits into the kingdom of God². The Jews vision of the Messianic kingdom expected that the Messiah would usher in a physical kingdom where he would rule the world from Jerusalem and bring peace and prosperity to all humanity. Yet Jesus ascension into heaven squashed thoughts of that. Luke provides an explanation of how the kingdom of God would continue to expand out of its Jewish roots to the Gentiles, and demonstrate that the kingdom would indeed impact the entire world, but just not in the manner which had been expected.
- A defense of Christianity to a Roman world. F. F. Bruce states that Luke "...addressed secular authorities to establish the law abiding character of Christianity."³ Luke shows repeatedly how the uprisings that came with the growth of the church were either religious in nature or due to threats to idolatrous commerce. To the contrary, the apostles are very respectful of authority, and are portrayed in as civil and peaceful. To an empire that sees Christianity as a "mischievous superstition" at best, and at worst as arsonist troublemakers, Luke's defense of the church is a very important sub-point.

Structure

The structure of the book of Luke is closely tied with the structure of Acts⁴. Both books are most easily tied to the geography of the book. Luke begins with a global perspective, dating the birth of Christ to the reign of the Roman emperors in Luke 2:1 and 3:1. From there we see Jesus' ministry move from Galilee (chapters 4-9), through Samaria and Judea (chapters 10-19), to Jerusalem where he is crucified, raised and ascended into heaven (chapters 19-24).

The book of Acts follows just the opposite motion, taking the scene from Jerusalem (chapters 1-5), to Judea and Samaria (chapters 6-9), then traveling through Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe towards Rome (chapters 9-28). This "chiastic" structure emphasizes the centrality of the

¹ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. xvii, as quoted in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Victor Books, 1988), 350.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Victor Books, 1988), 350.

³ F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 24, as quoted in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Victor Books, 1988), 350.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg. *Jesus and the Gospels*. (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman. 1997), 140-145.

resurrection and ascension to Luke’s message, while emphasizing the universal nature of the gospel.

This geographic structure is foreshadowed in Acts 1:8, where Jesus says “you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem (chapters 1-5), and in all Judea and Samaria (chapters 6-9), and even to the remotest part of the earth (chapters 10-28).” The first two sections (chapters 1-9) represent the witness of the apostles to the Jews, while the last section (chapters 10-28) represents the witness of the apostles to the Gentiles.

The book of Acts can also be broken down by the major characters of the book. While the complete title of the book is the Acts of the Apostles, really the book focuses on only two of the apostles: Peter (chapters 1-12) and Paul (chapters 13-28).

Within this structure, the sub-points of the book are marked by a series of summary statements, or what one commentary calls a “progress report.”⁵ Just before the geography of the scene shifts to a new location, Luke summarizes how the gospel has impacted that location. The standard for these progress reports is in 2:46-47, where Luke describes the impact of the gospel on the new church in Jerusalem. The remaining progress reports are located:

- Acts 6:7 – Impact of the gospel in Jerusalem.
- 9:31 – Impact of the gospel in Judea and Samaria.
- 12:24 – Impact of the gospel in Syria.
- 16:5 – Impact of the gospel in Asia Minor.
- 19:20 – Impact of the gospel in Europe.
- 28:31 – Impact of the gospel on Rome

This structure can be also seen as a series of concentric circles, where the gospel begins in the center, Jerusalem, and is expanding ever outward to Judea & Samaria, Syria, Asia Minor, Europe, and eventually to Rome.

Ironically, in this day Rome is not the “remotest part of the earth,” but rather the very center of the civilized world. Yet the arrival of the gospel in Rome represents the universal impact of the gospel message. From Rome the gospel would begin to penetrate and impact even to the remotest parts of the world.

1:1	6:7	6:8	9:31	9:32	12:24	12:25	16:5	16:6	19:20	19:21	28:30
Jerusalem		Judea & Samaria		Syria		Asia Minor		Europe		Rome	
				Remotest Parts of the Earth							
Witness to the Jews				Witness to the Gentiles							
Ministry of Peter						Ministry of Paul					

Theme

The theme of Acts is the expansion of the witness of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit to the remotest parts of the earth. It is summarized in Acts 1:8:

(Acts 1:8 NASB) but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

⁵ Toussaint.

Being Witnesses To the Jews (1:1-9:31)

Being Witnesses in Jerusalem (1:1-6:7)

The Growth was designed by Christ (1:1-26)

The Preface (1:1-11)

The book of Acts begins with the last days before Jesus ascension into heaven. During these days, Jesus explained to his followers more about the kingdom of God and how a resurrected Messiah fit into the scheme of things.

In light of that, his followers asked him in verse 6, “is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) Jesus followers were basically asking Jesus if he was now going to establish an earthly kingdom that would rule the whole world.

Jesus followers were not off base in this question. The Old Testament is filled with prophecies that predict the restoration of a Jewish nation; a nation that will be ruled directly by the Messiah; a nation that will be the most influential nation in the world. With the recent triumph of the resurrection, the disciples were legitimately speculating that the Jesus might be about to establish his Messianic kingdom.

Jesus responds to their question in verses 7 and 8:

(Acts 1:7-8) It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

In essence, Jesus is telling them that instead of concerning themselves with the details of the Old Testament prophecies, they should instead focus themselves on being a witness of who Jesus is to the entire world⁶. That is, to tell others what they have experienced and to share the message they have heard concerning Jesus to their city, their province, and ultimately to the entire world.

What is a witness? If you think in terms of a court of law, a witness is one who has seen or experienced something, and then is willing to communicate that experience for the record. For the followers of Jesus who heard this commandment, their “court testimony” would be simply telling what they saw and heard Jesus do while he was with them.

The plan of the apostles is different than what is revealed by Christ. They ask Jesus, if now being raised from the dead, if it is time to establish His earthly kingdom. But Jesus responds that it isn't for them to know, and that first the gospel must be taught throughout the remotest parts of the earth (cf. Matthew 24:14). The growth of the kingdom of God would come not the way the disciples would expect. Instead it is designed by Christ to proceed outward as the disciples bear testimony to what they have seen and heard about Him.

But for modern Christians, we haven't seen or heard directly what Jesus did. Instead, our “court testimony” will necessarily need to be different. There are two ways that we can be a witness of Jesus:

- Be an Expert in the Life of Christ. We can become experts in what has been recorded historically about Jesus. This demands that we become scholars of the scriptures and that we diligently search out the truth about which Jesus is and what he has done. We need to become “court-recognized experts” in the life and message of Jesus.

⁶ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, Moody Press: Chicago, pg. 1727.

- Testify to the Influence of Jesus in our Lives. We can directly testify to the influence Jesus has had on our personal life. Notice that Jesus commands us not to “witness,” but to “be a witness.” Do you understand the distinction? Jesus is not commanding us to merely go do a sortie of street evangelism. Instead Jesus wants everything in our lives to be a reflection of his influence. Charles Colson puts it this way:

Authentic evangelism must involve the totality of life. Jesus said, “You shall be My witnesses,” but a lot of Christians have taken that commandment to mean that we are to witness. So we have reduced evangelism to verbal formulas, neat, easy-step plans; just utter these simple phrases and you’ll be part of the club....

Packaging the Gospel into tidy package has some serious dangers. For one thing, it tends to cheapen the message....

This is why it is so important to focus on Jesus command that we be witnesses. Jesus means, I believe, that evangelism is to involve the totality of our lives. Everything about our lifestyle counts- how we spend our money, our political values, our domestic relations, and on and on.”⁷

The Replacement Apostle (1:12-26)

Jesus then ascends to heaven and the disciples return to an upper room in Jerusalem, where they would wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit in accordance with Jesus’ command in 1:4-5. While waiting, however, they decide to replace a replacement apostle for Judas Iscariot.

The apostles cast lots to choose the replacement apostle (1:26). While this may seem an unlikely method for choosing an apostle, before the casting of lots, they first prayed over the selection of the candidates (1:24), and they required that all the candidates be qualified.

The chief qualification was that the candidate be a witness of Jesus from the time of His baptism to the resurrection. If the mission of the apostles was to now bear witness, this would become the primary criteria for the selection of the replacement apostle.

Hermeneutics and the Book of Acts

The selection of the replacement apostle leads us to ask an important hermeneutical principle: is the book of Acts primarily prescriptive or descriptive? That is, are the events Luke records in Acts intended to prescribe for us the normative pattern for the church through the ages or is it merely intended to describe for us what had taken place.

For example, in the record of the selection of the replacement apostle, is Luke merely describing the method the apostles used to choose the new apostle, or what he outlining for us the method that we should use today in choosing church leaders? In other words, should our church cast lots to choose its leaders?

This is an important question, for throughout the book of Acts we will see early church practices, such as communal living, speaking in tongues, miraculous healings and prophecies. Should we expect that as the normal part of our church life? Is Luke establishing a pattern for us to follow, or is he merely explaining what happened?

It is the contention of this author that the book of Acts is intended to be descriptive of the early church rather than intended to be prescriptive of the church today. This is based on the following:

⁷ Charles Colson, *Faith on the Line*, Victor Books, pg. 103.

- Luke's stated purpose for the book is merely to describe what has happened, not to develop a pattern for the church to follow (Acts 1:1; see *Purpose* above).
- Luke rarely records any commandments from Jesus or the apostles nor does he make any editorial comments indicating that these are normative practices.
- Acts tells us almost nothing of the organizational structure of the church, nor of the liturgy and programs of the early church. Therefore his intent is not to give a clear pattern for churches to follow.
- Many of the practices of the early church are inconsistently practiced or are not repeated. For example, the selection of the replacement apostle was by lots, but in chapter 6 the congregation nominated the deacons, and in 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appointed the elders.
- Historical narrative literature in the Old Testament is not considered to be a prescriptive, so why should historical narrative literature in the New Testament?

Bearing this in mind, as we come across events or circumstances, we should be careful not to become too dogmatic in our application from the book of Acts. Instead, we should consider how each incident is portrayed:

- Is it repeatable? – Is it possible for the church today to repeat what the early church did (e.g. casting lots for church leaders)? If it wasn't condemned then there is probably nothing wrong with the church today doing the same thing.
- Is it normative? – Is there a pattern found in the early church that is regularly repeated (e.g. meeting on Sundays)? If so, then the church today should probably follow the pattern unless there is a reason not to.
- Is it prescribed? – Was the early church commanded to do something or not to do something (e.g. avoiding fornication – Acts 15:29)? If so, then the church today must follow the command.

The Growth was powered by the Spirit (2:1-47)

The Gift of Tongues (2:1-13)

The filling of the Spirit is a continual theme in Acts, and is always accompanied by a show of power and a response of people to the gospel. As each new ethnic group or geographic location responds to the gospel, the filling of the Holy Spirit follows.

In this case, the filling of the Holy Spirit was evidenced by speaking in tongues. The term *tongues* is an archaic English word, which would be better translated as languages. The believers had the supernatural ability to speak in multiple languages in order to communicate with the pilgrims from many nations in Jerusalem. Throughout the book of Acts *tongues* is always the ability to speak in human languages.

At Pentecost, the message given by the church was to the Jews, but also spoken in many languages so that a multitude of nations could hear the message. This is a continual theme in Acts as well, as the gospel is always given first to the Jews, and then to the nations.

Peter's Sermon (2:14-36)

Peter's sermon at Pentecost provides Luke the opportunity to declare the gospel in its fullest. This sermon serves as the basis from which most of the other sermons in Acts are derived.

Peter begins this sermon by defending the Christians speaking in tongues by quoting the book of Joel, stating that they should not be surprised that God would unleash His Spirit, because such occurrences are predicted in the Old Testament. He connects the spirit filled activity of the Christians with the power Jesus demonstrated in His miracles (2:33).

But Peter quickly moves the focus of his sermon to the things “to which we are all witnesses (2:32).” Namely, Peter declares that Jesus was crucified by the Jews (2:33, 36), but raised from the dead by God. Peter defends this assertion by showing that the resurrection of the Christ was foretold in by David Psalm 16. Peter then proclaims that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (2:33) and that He is both Lord and Christ (2:36).

The emphasis, however, is that Peter and the apostles were witnesses to these events. They could not be disputed. Peter has begun fulfilling the command of Jesus in Acts 1:8 by being a witness in Jerusalem.

The Response

In response to the testimony of Peter, the people ask, “what shall we do (2:37)?” Peter responds that they must “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins (2:38).” After so doing, they also would receive the Holy Spirit. Three thousand people respond.

Peter closely connects baptism with salvation. However, before determining from this that one must be baptized to be saved, our hermeneutic principles require that we determine if a pattern has been set. Nowhere else in Acts is baptism connected with salvation. In fact, in 10:44-48, Cornelius and other Gentiles came to believe and were filled with the Holy Spirit before they were baptized.

Progress Report #1 (2:37-47)

After this incident comes the first progress report, (2:42-47), describing a unity and a love amongst the believers that exhibited itself in practical and material ways. Furthermore, the gospel continued to grow as more and more were being added to their number each day.

The Growth was “of God” (3:1-6:7)

Healing the Beggar (3:1-4:4)

The Healing (3:1-10)

In the temple, Peter and John discover a lame beggar. Peter heals the man, and he immediately begins to walk, leap and praise God. Evidently this man was a fixture at the gate to the temple, for when others saw him walking around they became amazed and began wondering what had happened.

The Sermon (3:11-26)

Peter took this opportunity to reiterate the sermon he gave at Pentecost. Namely Peter proclaims that the Jews crucified Jesus, that God raised Him from the dead, and that they were witnesses to these facts (3:15). Peter supports these claims by stating the Old Testament prophets foretold that the Christ would suffer (3:18), and he quotes Moses from Deuteronomy 18 (3:22).

Again he calls on the audience to repent so that their sins can be forgiven (3:19), but this time baptism is not indicated as part of the mechanism of salvation.

The Response (4:1-4)

In response, Peter and John were imprisoned by the Jewish leadership. However, 5,000 came to believe.

Before the Sanhedrin (4:5-31, 5:12-42)

Peter and John Address the Sanhedrin

Again Peter declares that they had rejected and crucified Christ, that God had raised him from the dead (4:10). They boldly declare that it was through the power of Jesus that this man

was healed and that salvation comes only through Jesus (4:12). When ordered to no longer proclaim the message, Peter and John both state, “we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard (4:19).” That is, they feel compelled to continue to be a witness of Christ to Jerusalem and the world.

The Growth is “of God”

The Jewish leaders throw Peter and John are thrown into jail for preaching Jesus. After being told not to do it again, they are released. But in chapter 5 we see them preaching again, so they are drug back before the Jewish leaders. The leadership debates what to do with this Christian sect. In response, the well-respected Pharisee, Gamaliel⁸ makes a most interesting observation. He recounts two other “Messiahs” who came and developed a following. But after their death, the following quickly disappeared. He states that if Jesus is also a false-Messiah, that this movement will also die. However,

(Acts 5:39 NASB) but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

This speech fits the purpose of the book of Acts. Gamaliel’s confession shows that this rapid growth from obscure Palestine to Rome itself is a result of God’s master plan.

Peter and John’s interaction with the leadership also underscore the second purpose. In both their encounters, they were very respectful of the leadership. The uprisings surrounding these incidents were due to the jealousy of the Jewish leadership and not due to the insurrection of the Christians.

Sharing of the Church (4:32-5:11, 6:1-7)

Even as thousand more join the church, the church remains characterized as compassionate and unified (4:32). The members of the church freely shared with one another. This was not a first century form of Communism, for the sharing was voluntary, and it appears that they did not sell their property so that the apostles could jointly manage it.

Nonetheless, sharing was so pervasive that everyone got into the act, including Ananias and Sapphira. This couple agrees to sell a piece of property to share with the poor. However, after claiming that they had given all the proceeds of the sale to the church, only to discover that they were lying, God killed them.

While this may seem like a harsh punishment, God often seems to demand more of sin when He is starting a new work. The punishment against Korah in the wilderness was fierce and swift. The sin of Achan in Joshua likewise was not tolerated. It appears that God wants to be taken seriously when He begins a new work.

Progress Report #2

The second progress report (6:7) concludes the section on the witness in Jerusalem, showing that the gospel kept spreading and new converts were continually coming to the group in Jerusalem.

⁸ We learn in Acts 22:3 that Paul was a student of Gamaliel.

Being Witnesses in Judea and Samaria (6:8-9:31)

The Growth resulted from Persecution (6:8 – 8:3)

The Problem

As the church was growing, it faced the problem of making sure all the needy were being taken care of fairly. However, it appears that already there was some ethnic strife within the body, for the Hellenistic Jews were not receiving their fair share. The Hellenistic Jews are those Jews who speak only Greek. A true Jew would also speak Aramaic, and would look down upon Greek speaking Jews.

To address this problem, deacons are selected. All of the deacons have Greek names, suggesting that they were Hellenized Jews.

The Sermon

One Greek-speaking deacon was Stephen. He had irritated some Jews by proclaiming the gospel and doing miracles. So Stephen is arrested, and before his stoning, he gives a lengthy speech.

Stephen begins with a brief history of Israel, including quoting Moses from Deuteronomy 18 (7:37). As part of this history, Stephen demonstrates how the Jews have systematically persecuted God's messengers, including now the "Righteous One (7:52)." The Jews understood that Stephen was claiming that Jesus was the Christ by referring to this "Righteous One." After Stephen accuses them of not keeping the law (7:53), his listeners cut short his sermon and stoned him.

The Result

Luke makes it clear that the stoning of Stephen forces the church to fulfill Christ's commandment in 1:8. Fearing for their lives, the Christians moved from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, taking the gospel with them.

The Growth resulted from Philip's ministry (8:3 – 8:40)

Preaching in Samaria

Philip was one of those who moved out into the surrounding territory preaching now in Samaria. However, as the Samaritans begin to respond and believe, they do not receive the filling of the Holy Spirit. This waits until Peter and John came to see what Philip was doing. After the apostles laid their hands on the Samaritans, they received the Holy Spirit. Because of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, the apostolic laying on of hands ensured the unity of the church.

Filling of the Holy Spirit

In the book of Acts, the reception of the Holy Spirit follows no consistent pattern.

- In Act 2:1, the apostles had been believers for 40 days but only received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost after waiting.
- In Acts 2:38, Peter proclaims that all who repent, and are baptized, will receive the Holy Spirit.
- In Acts 8:17 the apostles lay hands on Samaritans to receive Holy Spirit after their belief and baptism.
- In Acts 10:44 Cornelius & his Gentile friends received Holy Spirit while Peter was speaking, and before baptism their baptism

Belief is the only constant between these examples. Beyond that, Acts does not provide us with a normative pattern from which we can ascertain the timing of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Preaching to the Ethiopian

After Philip had preached in Samaria God sent Philip to Gaza. While in Gaza, Philip came across an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading his bible. Philip asked what he was reading and if he understood it. And in the course of the conversation which followed, the Ethiopian came to trust in Christ. That led the Ethiopian to a question: “What prevents me from being baptized?”

So, Philip baptized the Ethiopian in a pond on the road to Gaza. Philip didn't say he needed to wait until next Sunday when they would fill up the baptistery and have a special worship service. Philip didn't sit around and make them take a class on church membership. Philip didn't require them to memorize scripture or the doctrinal positions of the church. It says, when he believed was baptized.

In fact, in each and every case in Acts, when we see someone believe in Christ, it is immediately followed by baptism. There was no waiting period between conversion and baptism. They took place one right after the other, so much so that Peter equates them as one and the same in chapter 2.

This is the normative pattern and unless there is good reason not to do so, we should follow this pattern.

The Growth results from the conversion of Paul (9:1-31)

Saul was attending the stoning of Stephen and was in agreement with putting him to death (8:1). In fact, Saul became one of the most zealous persecutors of the church (8:3). On one occasion Saul sought to go to Damascus in Syria to round up the Christians and return them to Jerusalem for persecution.

On the road to Damascus Paul encounters Jesus. A bright light comes from heaven, and Jesus calls to him, “Saul, why are you persecuting me.” Through that experience Paul comes to believe that Jesus is the son of God (9:20), and becomes a powerful apologetic for Christ (9:22).

Paul saw the glory of God, recognized Him as Lord. The Lord identified himself as Jesus. Paul may not have been an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus, but this serves as Paul's witness of Jesus resurrection. Paul reiterates this conversion experience as his testimony for Christ both in Acts 22 as he is speaking to the Jewish mob and in Acts 26 as he addresses King Herod Agrippa.

Paul's desire was to preach the gospel to the Jews⁹. After all, he was trained as a Pharisee. He knew the law; he knew the Jewish mind. He had better training and education than any of the apostles did. What better person to convince the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah? But Jesus had another plan (9:15-16).

The Third Progress Report (9:31)

The third progress report (9:31) concludes the section on the witness in Judea and Samaria. The church was being built up and continued to increase throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria.

⁹ Ray C. Stedman, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Unfinished Story*,
“<http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/adventure/0245.html>”

Being Witness to the Gentiles (9:32 – 28:30)

Peter's Ministry to the Gentiles (9:32-12:24)

The growth moves to Caesarea (9:32-11:18)

Peter's Vision

In the first 8 chapters of Acts the gospel has been proclaimed to the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. In the last 20 chapters, however, the transition is made for the apostles to be witnesses to the remotest parts of the earth. This is also a transition from being a witness to the Jews to being a witness to the Gentiles. Finally the last section of Acts transitions from the witness of Peter to the witness of Paul.

The move to the witness in the “uttermost parts” required a change in theology for the apostles. Thoroughly grounded in the Jewish law and tradition, the thought of interacting with Gentiles was abhorrent. It took a supernatural revelation to Peter, to open the possibility of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

In chapter 10 we are introduced to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who is described as “one who feared God.” This man was not Jew, but was nonetheless an “Old Testament” saint. He gave to the poor and he prayed to God continually (10:2). God visits Cornelius and tells him to send his servants to find the apostles Peter, which he does.

Peter meanwhile has been on a missionary journey throughout Judea, performing miracles and preaching the gospel in Lydda and Joppa. While in Joppa Peter has a vision in which a large sheet drops from heaven on which are all kinds of animals which were unclean to eat under the Jewish law. God tells Peter to get up and eat the animals, for they are now unclean. Peter, true to his stubborn character, tells God that he is wrong, so God has to repeat his words.

Peter's Visit

But not only are the animals no longer unclean, but more importantly, the Gentiles are not unclean either. As Peter is contemplating these things, Cornelius' messengers arrive and in obedience to God, Peter goes with them to Caesarea and enters the house of this Roman soldier.

Peter proclaims to Cornelius and his household that Jesus is Christ and Lord (10:36) and that He is the judge of the living and the dead (10:42). He states that they are witnesses of his crucifixion by the Jews (10:39) and his resurrection (10:40-41). Peter states that belief in Him results in the forgiveness of sins (10:43).

In the midst of this sermon, the Holy Spirit falls upon his listeners, and they begin speaking in languages and praising God. Then Peter says,

*“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized
who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”*

Through Peter's vision and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God has now included the Gentiles in his kingdom. God did not wait for Peter or the other apostles to lay their hands on these Gentiles, for He had to demonstrate in a powerful way that “what was unclean is now clean.”

Peter's Vindication

The Jews were very xenophobic at this time, and held a great prejudice against the Gentiles. This prejudice was carried into the early church, and it took much to overcome. When Peter

returns from Caesarea, the apostles and other Jewish Christians in Jerusalem criticize him for having entered the home and eaten with an uncircumcised Gentile (11:2-3).

Peter responds by explaining all that had happened, and then concluding “who was I that I could stand in God’s way” (11:17). As Gamliel had said, if this movement was of God, no one would be able to stop it. The gospel was now open to the Gentiles. The Jewish Christians heard this, they “quieted down” and declared that “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” (11:18).

The growth Moves to Antioch (11:19-12:24)

In 11:19, persecution again spreads the Christians out, this time to Antioch. At first the Christians only share with the Jews in Antioch, but soon some men from Christians from Cyprus arrive in Antioch and begin proclaiming the gospel to the Greeks (11:20). This concerns the apostles, so Barnabas is sent to investigate (11:22).

Barnabas investigates and finds that that many are coming to believe in Antioch. He then travels to Tarsus to find Paul, and the two of them stay in Antioch and teach them for a year.

The church in Antioch becomes an important center for Christianity. This is the first church to preach to the Gentiles. This is the first church to send out missionaries. This is the first church where disciples are called Christians.

Progress Report #4

The fourth progress report (12:24) concludes the section on the witness in Antioch.

Paul’s Missionary Journeys

The Growth Moves to Asia Minor (12:25 - 16:5)

Paul’s First Missionary Journey

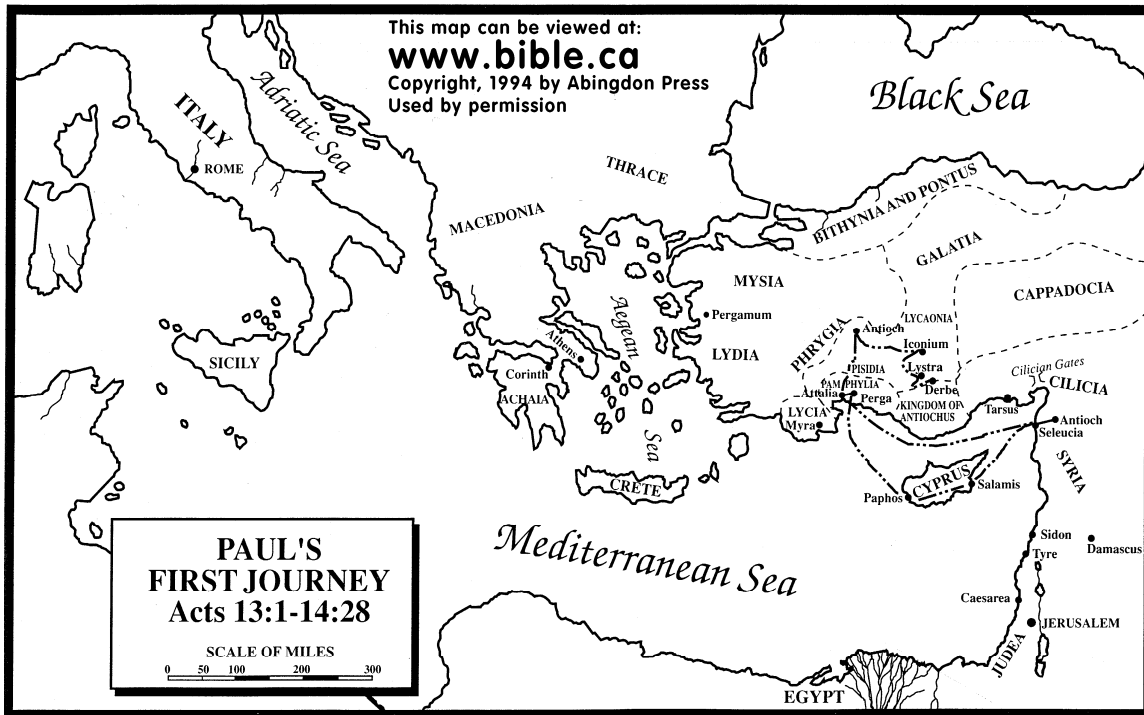
The church in Antioch instigates the next movement outward. In 13:1, they commission Barnabas and Paul to a missionary journey into Cyprus and Asia Minor on the “First Missionary Journey.” On this journey Paul and Barnabas establish a pattern for his visits to each city.

- Paul and Barnabas preach to the Jews in the synagogue (13:14, 14:1).
- Many Jews & Gentiles hear & believe (13:43, 14:1b).
- Jews grow jealous. Incite Gentile leaders (13:50, 14:2).
- Paul and Barnabas face persecution (13:50, 14:5).
- They leave for next city (13:51, 14:6).
- The disciples are filled with joy & HS (13:52).

The Message of Paul

The first recorded message of Paul took place in Pisidian Antioch during his first missionary journey. This message has elements of both Peter’s message on Pentecost and Stephen’s message. Like Stephen, Paul recounts the history of Israel. Like Peter, Paul declares that the Jews crucified Jesus (13:28), that God raised Him (13:30), and that the apostles are witnesses to this fact (13:31). Paul also borrows from the Peters’ Pentecost message in his quotation of David from Psalm 16 (13:35). Paul also declares that through Christ sins can be forgiven (13:38).

Paul, however, adds a unique element at the end of his message. Paul states that Christ brings a freedom that cannot be found in the Law of Moses (13:39). This is an intriguing addition to the message given Pisidian Antioch’s location in Galatia and Paul’s emphasis in his epistle to the Galatians on freedom in Christ.



The similarity between Paul’s message and that of Peter is not a coincidence. As the book of Acts shifts from the ministry of Peter to Paul, Luke begins to purposefully draw a comparison between the ministry of Peter and Paul.

Peter	Paul
Ch. 3: Heals lame man	Ch. 14: Heals lame man
Ch. 3: Shadows passing heals sick	Ch 19: Exceptional miracles from rags
Ch. 8: Laying on hands/Spirit received	Ch. 19: Laying on of hands/Spirit received
Ch. 9: Resurrection of Tabitha	Ch. 20: Resurrection of Eutychus
Ch. 12: Lead by angel from prison	Ch. 16: Earthquake opens prison

Luke is establishing Paul’s authority as an apostle by showing that his message and his ministry is the same as Peter and the rest of the apostles.

The Jerusalem Council

As Paul and Barnabas continue their travels throughout Asia Minor, more and more Gentiles join with the Christians. The response of the Gentiles, however, brings new questions as to the role of Jewish law in Christianity. The early church is struggling for its identity; namely, is Christianity a sect of Judaism or is it something entirely new.

As seen in the sermon in Pisidian Antioch, Paul had already declared that Christ brings freedom which the Law can not bring. From Paul’s epistles, we know that he had been teaching freedom from the Law. But many in the church in Jerusalem believed that upon conversion Gentiles needed to be circumcised and begin following the practice of the Jewish law.

The debate was settled in the only recorded church council in scripture. James summed up the argument by showing from the Old Testament that the witness to the Gentiles had been part of the plan all along (15:16-18), and that the earthly kingdom would not take place until the “uttermost parts” knew the gospel. The Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised, nor did

they need to keep the Law (15:28). All they were to do was to avoid idolatrous practices and sexual sin (15:29).

Progress Report #5

The fifth progress report (16:5) concludes the section on the witness in Asia Minor.

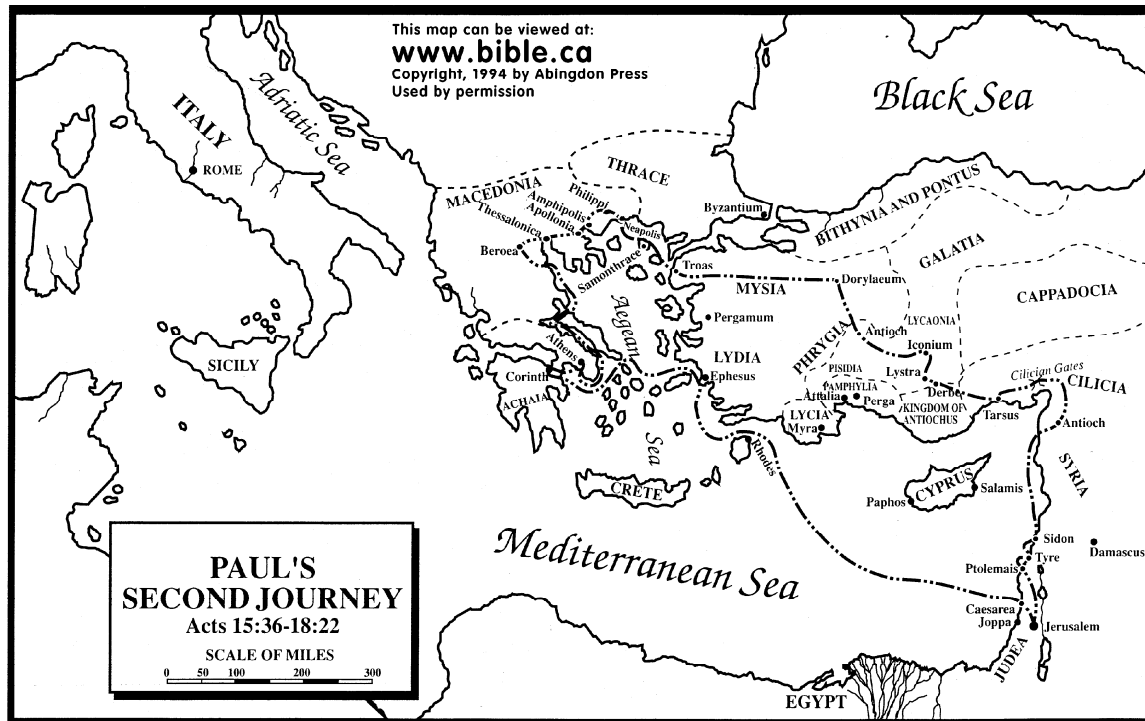
The Growth Moves to Europe (16:6 – 19:20)

Second Missionary Journey

After the Jerusalem council, Paul and Barnabas set for their second missionary journey from Antioch. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them on their journey, but Paul insisted that they travel without Mark because he had abandoned them on a prior trip. The scripture says “there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.”

Paul selects Silas as his partner for this journey. Their intent was to continue in Asia Minor to check on the churches established in the first journey. But God had a different plan. If the gospel was to reach the remotest parts of the earth, it had to expand to the next sphere of influence: Europe.

The Holy Spirit forbade Paul and Silas from preaching in Asia (16:6). Then Paul receives a vision from God of a man in Macedonia who appeals to Paul to help them (16:9). God had called them to cross over to Europe (16:10), and so they crossed the sea to Macedonia and Greece (16:11).



Just as in the first journey, this second journey also develops a consistent pattern:

- Paul and Silas go to synagogue and present from scripture that Jesus is the Christ (17:1-3, 18:4-5).
- They depart synagogue after rejected by leaders, taking Jewish and God-fearing believers (17:4, 18:6).

- They preach to the Gentiles at large and teach daily (17:5, 18:7)
- They receive abuse or mob threat and false charges that are at some point dismissed by the city magistrates or Roman officials (17:5-8, 18:12-16).
- Leave town, sometimes leaving workers behind (17:9, 18:17).

Paul's Message to Gentiles in Athens

The pattern changes somewhat with the audience. Paul, in chapter 17, does not begin in the synagogue, but in the market place. Now Paul speaks in a culturally relevant way to Gentiles first. Paul and Silas become separated after persecution in the city of Berea. Paul flees ahead to Athens, and while waiting for Silas and the others to catch up with him, he acts as a tourist, walking through the beautiful city of Athens (17:16).

Paul begins debating with some Greek philosophers in the market place. This is Paul's second recorded message to Gentiles. He addresses the Athenian philosophers using their philosophical terminology. Like with the Gentiles in Lystra, he begins by discussing God as creator (17:24) and demonstrating that he is transcendent (17:25). Paul declares that all need to repent of their ignorance, for "a Man" is coming who will judge the world. Paul states this man's authority to judge is based on his resurrection from the dead (17:31).

While Paul lost his audience with his discussion of a resurrection, we can see that Paul was trying to direct the message from that which the Gentiles would understand (God as creator) towards the resurrection of Jesus.

A Defense of Paul

Luke records details on this trip of three incidents where Paul is surrounded by uprisings. In 16:19, we see that Paul's ministry in Philippi interrupts the profiteering of some fortunetellers. But when all is said and done, they are exonerated by the magistrates (16:37-40), and it is shown that Paul's rights as a Roman citizen have been violated.

In Corinth, the Jews rise up against Paul and haul him before the Roman official, Gallio (18:12). But Paul is again exonerated by the Roman leader (18:14-15), saying that this was an internal religious debate and that it did not concern him (18:17).

During the third missionary journey, Paul's ministry in Ephesus is so successful that it begins to impact the sale of idols at the temple to Artemis. The merchants rise up in a riot against Paul and take him to the amphitheater. There the town clerk declares that this riot was unlawful and dismissed the assembly (19:38-41).

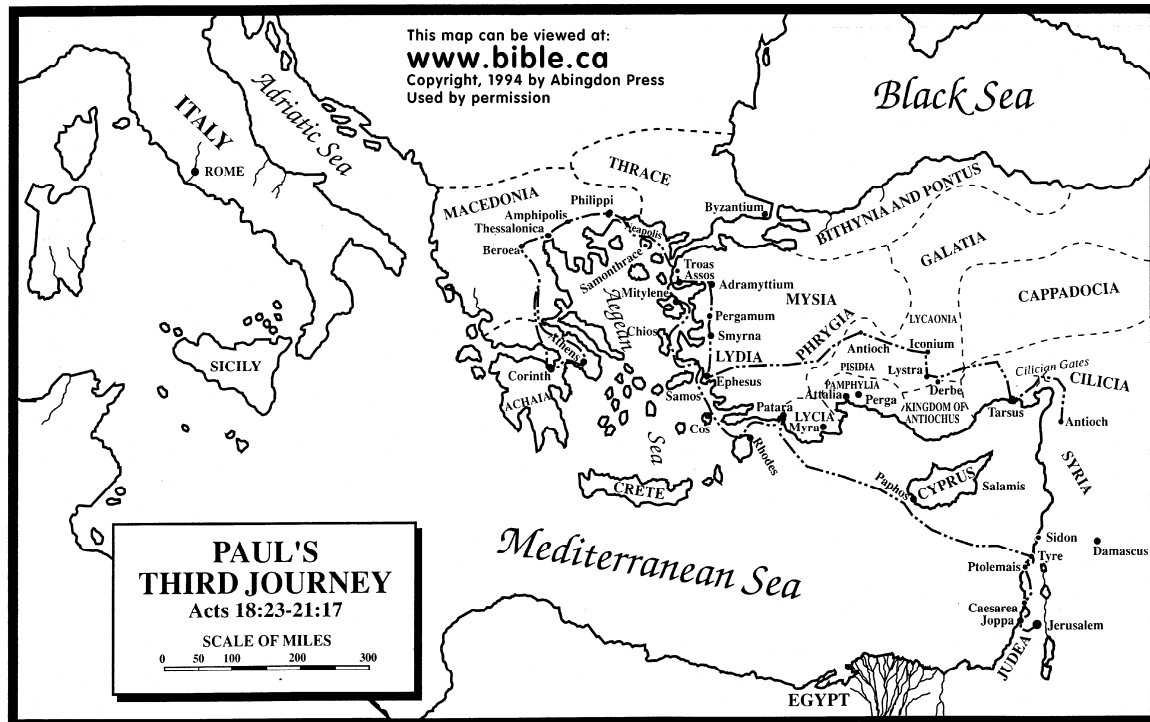
In all three of these incidents, Luke demonstrates to his audience of the peaceful intentions of the Christian movement and that any disorder was the cause of the Jewish leadership or profiteers.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey

Paul's third missionary journey is dominated by a two year stay in the city of Ephesus. Rather than a "journey" like the first and second trips, this really is a description of Paul's move to Ephesus and his leaving Ephesus as he journeys back to Jerusalem.

Apollos and the Disciples of John the Baptist

In Ephesus, Paul's associates Priscilla and Aquila met an Alexandrian Jew named Apollos. Apollos was a gifted speaker, and Luke tells us that he was accurately teaching "the things concerning Jesus," even though he himself had never heard of Jesus, instead being "acquainted only with the baptism of John" (18:25). Priscilla and Aquila take Apollos aside and told him "the way of God more accurately" (18:26), and Apollos became a powerful apologist for Christianity in Ephesus and Corinth (18:27-19:1).



When Paul came to Ephesus he found some others who evidently may have been converted through Apollos' incomplete teaching of Jesus (19:1). Paul explained to them the fuller message of Jesus as the fulfillment of John the Baptist (19:4), and they immediately became baptized and received the Holy Spirit (19:5-6).

This intriguing narrative gives rise to an intriguing question: when were these disciples of John the Baptist "saved?" They were not "Christians," for they had not heard the message of Christ. Yet the scripture says Apollos was teaching of things concerning Jesus and they are called disciples.

These were people caught in a dispensational cross-over period. These were Old Testament believers who had not yet heard the New Testament gospel. But when told of the gospel of Jesus Christ they readily accepted it and were baptized.

This leads to a larger question. When Jesus came, there were people who were "saved" by belief in a coming Messiah who would bring salvation to His people. After Pentecost and the institution of the church age, did these people have their salvation revoked until they could hear the gospel of Jesus, at which time they could be re-saved? Of course not. The narrative of Apollos and his disciples confirms this. Old Testament saints remained saints until they heard the gospel. But the confirmation that indeed they were Old Testament saints is that when they heard the New Testament gospel, they readily accepted it. Those who rejected it did not lose their Old Testament salvation, but never had salvation under the Old Testament to begin with.

This explains why Paul and his associates always started by preaching in the synagogues, and explains why the mission of the early church was "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16, 2:9-10). Those who were already saved deserved first to hear the gospel first.

This also has some intriguing ramifications for those who believe, but who may not have a complete understanding of the gospel. People need to be taught "the way of God more accurately," but their moment of salvation comes when they believe the revelation which God has already provided. This does not mean that we shouldn't send missionaries to unreached peoples, for most are not believers and they need to hear the gospel more fully in order to find salvation. Furthermore, if there are those who already believe but who haven't heard the message

of Christ, if they are believers, as they hear the fullness of the gospel, they will readily accept the gospel. If they don't, they were never believers in the first place.

Progress Report #6

The sixth progress report (19:20) concludes the section on the witness in Europe. In 19:10, the extent of the witness is profound when it states that "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Paul's Journey to Rome (19:21 – 28)

The Return to Jerusalem (19:21-21:14)

This section of the book of Acts ends while Paul is in Ephesus, and concludes in the midst of what is traditionally known as the third missionary journey. That is because while Paul is still in his final missionary journey, Paul's focus has shifted. He is now heading to Rome. But the road to Rome will go through Jerusalem (19:21).

Paul finishes his third missionary journey with a whirlwind tour through Macedonia and Greece, and then back to Miletus where he meets with the elders from the church in Ephesus. He gives them a long farewell address (20:17-35), and then they all weep and hug Paul knowing that they would never see Paul again (20:38).

Most of the Ephesian elders probably thought that Paul's journey to Jerusalem would result in his execution. All the Christians who met with Paul as he headed towards Jerusalem clearly expected that Paul would be killed when he arrived. In Tyre, the disciples told Paul *through the Spirit* not to set foot in Jerusalem (21:4). In Caesarea, Agabus the prophet tells Paul he will be bound in Jerusalem (21:11), and the Caesarean believers beg Paul not to go to Jerusalem (21:12).

But Paul's purpose was to go to Jerusalem, for the Spirit had told him that the road to Rome would go through Jerusalem (19:21). Was the Spirit being contradictory, telling Agabus and the Christians in Tyre one thing, while telling Paul another? If we look closely at Agabus' prophecy, it was not a prohibition but a merely a declaration of what was to come. Furthermore, the church in Tyre was in the Spirit, but it doesn't mean that the message was from the Spirit.

Paul would go to Jerusalem because he knew that he would be arrested, after which he would appeal to Caesar, as was his right as a Roman citizen, thus providing him with a trip to Rome with all expenses paid by the Roman empire. The gospel would reach the remotest parts of the earth by first heading back to the center of it all.

Paul's Arrest and Imprisonment in Judea (21:15-26:32)

Paul's Witness to the Jews (21:15-23:34)

All happens according to plan. Paul is arrested in Jerusalem. The actual charge against Paul is that he brought a Gentile into the temple (21:28), something he did not do (21:29). It seems that Paul's mission to the Gentiles not only upset those within the church, but it upset those Jews outside of the church as well. This charge enrages the crowd and a riot starts. Paul is rescued/arrested by the Roman army for disturbing the peace (21:30-36).

After some clarification as to his identity (21:38-39), Paul convinces the Roman army commander to let him talk with the gathered Jewish mob (21:40). In this message we see that Paul departs from a proclamation of what others have witnessed regarding Jesus (i.e. his death and resurrection), and instead proclaims what he has witnessed about Jesus. Paul recounts his conversion experience (22:6-16) and his vision of Jesus and His call to the Gentiles (22:17-21). Paul is "being a witness" of Christ, in the way that Christ has affected him.

The Jews become enraged by Paul's explanation of his mission to the Gentiles, but when the Roman centurion discovers that Paul was a Roman citizen, he unbinds Paul. But he has to put him back into protective custody because he was afraid the Jewish leaders would kill Paul otherwise (23:10).

Paul remains in "protective" custody in Jerusalem, and it seems that Paul's plan to make it to Rome had been thwarted. But Paul received sees the Lord that night and receives a promise that he would be his witness in Rome (23:11).

Paul's Imprisonment in Caesarea (24:1-26:32)

Eventually Paul is moved to a prison in Caesarea, again because of threats against his life. The centurion sends a letter with Paul to the governor in Caesarea, Felix. This letter is just one of many declarations by Roman officials in the book of Acts that Paul is not the cause of the disruption of peace wherever he goes, but that he is innocent of any of the charges.

In Caesarea Paul is given an opportunity to respond to his Jewish accusers before the Roman governor Felix. As he had done in his trial before the Jewish Council in chapter 23, Paul emphasizes only his belief in a resurrection, thereby making the dispute look like the longstanding theological debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees (24:21). Felix only keeps Paul imprisoned because of his own corruption (24:26).

Paul remains imprisoned in Caesarea for two years when a new Roman governor is appointed. The new Roman governor, Festus, asks visiting King Agrippa to help determine the charge against Paul before he sends him to face Caesar. As he did in Acts 22, Paul proclaims his personal experience with Jesus rather than that of the other apostles. As he did before Felix, Paul states that he is preaching nothing more than the Jewish prophets have stated. However, Paul goes on to proclaim that the Old Testament prophets had predicted a suffering Christ who would rise from the dead (26:23). This clearly is a defense of Jesus as the Christ, for his listeners would have known of Jesus death and of the rumors of his resurrection.

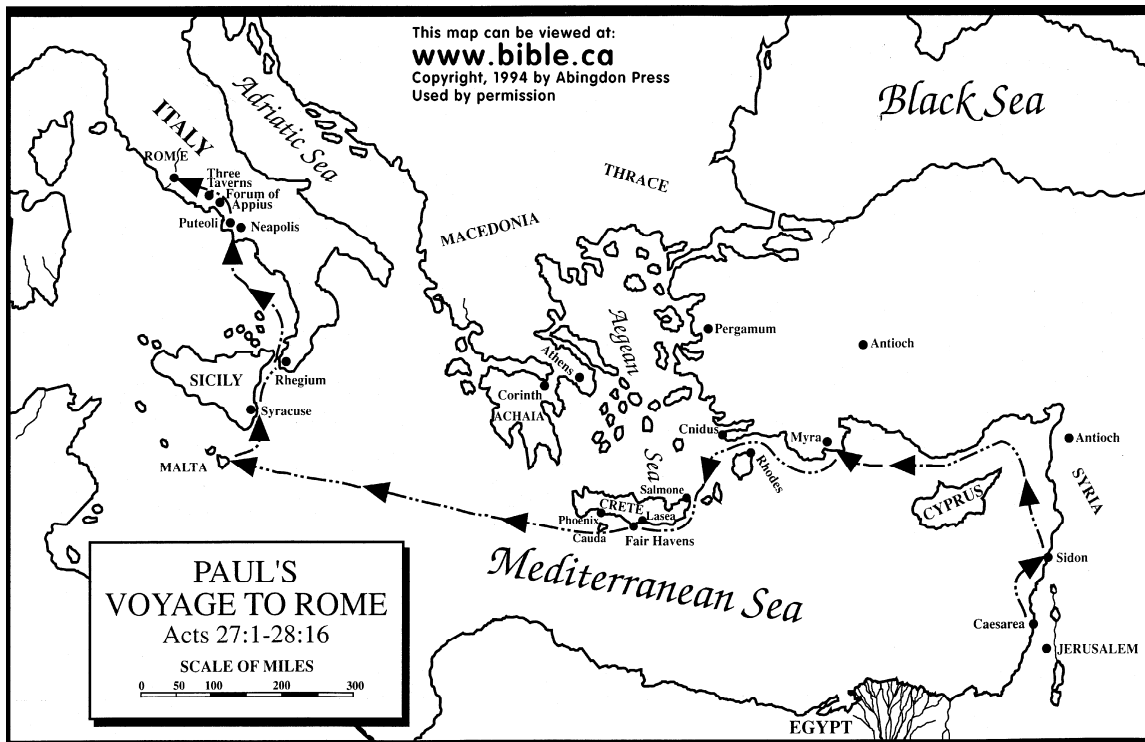
Festus (25:25) and Agrippa (26:32) both agree that it is only because Paul appealed to Caesar that they couldn't release him. Luke is demonstrating to a skeptical audience, that Christianity is not a threat to the Empire and that in reality the leadership is civil, and for the most part been badly treated by those in authority.

Passage	Official	Position	Location	Contribution to the defense of Christianity
10:1-48	Cornelius,	Centurion	Caesarea	God-fearing centurion. Used by the Holy Spirit to demonstrate that Christianity was open to the Gentiles
13:6-12	Sergius Paulus	Proconsul	Cyprus	Saw the Paul and Barn. blind Elymas the magician. Believed and was amazed at the teaching of the Lord.
16:19-40	Philippian Magistrate	Magistrate	Philippi	Embarrassed at having falsely jailed the Roman citizens, Paul and Silas. Asked them to leave to avoid a scene.
18:1-17	Gallio	Proconsul	Corinth	Declared the dispute as being between Jewish sects and was not a civil matter.
21:31-40, 23:16-35	Claudius Lysias	Commander of Roman cohort	Jerusalem	Dispute is about Jewish Law. Not worthy of death or imprisonment.
24:1-27	Felix	Governor	Caesarea	Delayed judgment hoping for a bribe. Held him to please the Jews.
25:1-12, 26:24-32	Festus	Governor	Caesarea	Agrippa said to him, "This man might have been set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar.
27:1-44	Julius	Centurion	Ship	Ignored advice of Paul to their peril.

The Trip to Rome (27:1-28:10)

Because Paul appealed to Caesar, his trial would take place in Rome not Caesarea. So he is put on a ship with other prisoners and they set sail for Rome. The journey turns out to be very eventful, for they end up in a storm and are shipwrecked on the island of Malta. But even in this narrative, Luke is defending Paul as a man innocent of the charges against him. Paul is not a trouble maker, but as an extraordinary man possessing great integrity.

- Paul warns the Roman centurion in charge of the prisoners not to sail farther during the winter (27:9-10).
- An angel encourages the ship that all aboard would be saved, for Paul must stand before Caesar (27:23-24).
- Paul warns the soldiers that if they abandon the ship that they will die, demonstrating his concern for his guards (27:31).
- Paul shakes off a deadly viper (28:3).
- Publius' father healed (28:8).
- Paul heals many of the sick on Malta (28:9).



Paul Arrives in Rome (28:10-31)

Finally, after wintering in Malta for three months, they depart for Rome. Paul is placed under house arrest, but is free to preach. He gathers the Jewish leaders in Rome and defends himself. Word has already arrived from Jerusalem warning the leadership to watch out for Paul (28:21), but they decided to hear Paul for themselves (28:22).

Large numbers of Jews came to hear Paul as he preaches about the “kingdom of God”, showing them that Jesus as Messiah as predicted in the Law and Prophets (28:23). This ties back to the beginning of the book of Acts, where the apostles ask about the kingdom of God and Jesus gives proof that he is the Messiah from the Law and the Prophets.

Some believe and some do not (28:24). When those reject him begin to leave, Paul gives a parting word, quoting Isaiah as a demonstration that their rejection had been predicted (28:26-27), and that it is for this reason that salvation would be offered to the Gentiles (28:28).

Progress Report #7

Luke ends the book demonstrating how it is that the gospel moved from being a small Jewish sect in Jerusalem to a Gentile movement found throughout the empire and even in Rome itself. He concludes with his seventh and final progress report (28:30-31), declaring that the message of the kingdom of God continued in Rome with “all openness, unhindered.” Even the might of the Roman Empire could not stop the progress of the gospel!

Conclusion

The apostles expected Christ’s kingdom and the end of the age to come after His resurrection. But the program was not their design. Paul expected to preach the gospel to the Jews, but the program was not his design. The Jewish Christians expected Gentiles to follow the Jewish traditions, but the program was not their design. The history of the church, and its quick growth was designed by God, powered by God, and as Gamaliel put it, “of God.”

The apostles fulfilled the commission of Christ not through their tremendous vision and strategy. Vision and strategy belonged to Christ. Their fulfillment came with their willingness to look for the open doors and walk through them, whether it be Paul hearing the Europeans calling to him, or Peter responding to the Spirit’s leading to enter Cornelius’ house. It was uncomfortable to them, and often just opposite what they expected. But their willingness to listen to the Spirit and respond, resulted in the growth of the church.

Bibliography

- Bayles, Albert. Classroom notes from “Acts and the Pauline Epistles.” Multnomah Biblical Seminary, Fall 2002.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels*. Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman. 1997.
- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan. 2003.
- Longenecker, Richard N. “Acts.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. Electronic edition STEP file.
- Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Ryrie Study Bible*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1995.
- Stedman, Ray C. *The Acts of the Apostles: An Unfinished Story*.
“<http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/adventure/0245.html>”
- Toussaint, Stanley D. “Acts.” *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, ed. Victor Books, 1997. Electronic Edition STEP file.