

The Acts of the Apostles: AN UNFINISHED STORY

by Ray C. Stedman

Acts is the book that reveals the power of the church. Therefore, when a church begins to dwindle, lose its power, and turn dull and drab in its witness, it needs desperately to get back into the spirit, expectation, knowledge and teaching of the book of Acts. In this book, the principles of the exchanged life -- "Not I, but Christ" -- is dramatically unfolded.

If the book of Acts were taken out of our New Testament, we would never understand the rest of it. It would be like a child with his front tooth missing. When you close the record of the gospels, you see nothing but a handful of Jews in the city of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life, talking together about a kingdom for Israel.

When you open the book of Romans, on the other side of Acts, you discover that a man whose name is never mentioned in the gospels is writing to a group of Christians in Rome -- of all places, the center of Gentile culture -- and he is talking about pushing out to the very ends of the earth. Obviously, something has happened in between. How did this tremendous change take place? What happened to make the gospel burst out of its confines in Judaism and the city of Jerusalem and reach out in one generation's time to all the limits of the then-known world?

This book was written by Luke, Paul's beloved companion, the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Unfortunately, it bears the wrong title. In almost all the editions of Scripture it is called "The Acts of the Apostles." But as you read the book through, the only ones whose acts are referred to are Peter and Paul. All the others are left almost entirely unnoticed, so the title is hardly fitting. It really should be titled, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." or even perhaps, "The Continuing Acts of the Lord Jesus Christ." You find this suggestion in the introduction of the book. As Luke is writing again to the friend to whom he addressed his first book, he says,

**In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,
... {Acts 1:1 RSV}**

Obviously, then, Luke was "Volume One" and Acts is "Volume Two." Acts is a continued story of what Jesus began both to do and to teach. Luke goes on to say,

...until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." {Acts 1:2-5 RSV}

That is what the book of Acts is all about. It is the account of the way the Holy Spirit, coming into the church, continued what Jesus began to do, that is, carried on the work which was initiated during the days of his incarnation.

Thus, the record of the gospels is the story of only the beginning of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. When you come to the end of the gospels, you have come not to the end, nor even to the beginning of the end, but to the end of the beginning. In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit now begins to fulfill the designed program of God. He begins to carry on his work through the reincarnated body of Jesus Christ -- the church -- the body by which the Lord intends to reach out to the uttermost parts of the earth. That work began 1900 years ago, and as you can see, he is still at it today. We are living now in the age of the Spirit which was inaugurated by the day of Pentecost, the first major event of the book of Acts.

The church has suffered for many centuries from a very wrong idea. Much of the weakness of the church is

due to the fact that somehow, over the years, through the traditions of men, a wrong concept has developed within the body of Christ. Christians have met together and have recited the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to take the gospel out to the farthest corners of the earth,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ... {Matt 28:19a RSV}

And that is unquestionably the will of God. It is one of the favorite tricks of the devil, however, to hold up before Christian people the end that God has in view, and then suggest to them that they go about doing it their own way -- trying to fulfill God's will in man's way.

Now that is exactly what the church has been doing. It has gathered itself together, recited the Great Commission, and said, "Now we must mobilize all our human resources to plan the strategy to carry this out." Christ is often pictured as waiting up in heaven, earnestly watching to see what is taking place down here, hoping somebody will get with it and carry out his program. The idea is that the church must somehow plan all the strategy, and figure out how best to reach out to the far corners of the earth, so as to fulfill this expectation of God. But that is because we have listened to only one part of the Great Commission. We have heard the first word, "Go!" but our Lord spoke another little two-letter word that we have almost completely forgotten -- "Lo."

Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. {Matt. 28:20b RSV}

It was never the intention of the Lord that the whole job of planning the strategy of reaching out to the ends of the earth and of mobilizing the resources should fall upon the Christian. When the church attempts the work on this basis, the Lord simply folds his arms and lets us go about our busy ways. He watches us try to fulfill this Great Commission in our own strength, while he stands by and quietly waits until we get over it.

When exhausted and utterly beaten and discouraged, as we inevitably will be in this process, we come back to him and cry out, "Oh, Lord, we can never get this job done. We can never accomplish this." Then he quietly reminds us that his program was for the Holy Spirit to accomplish this task through the church, that he is perfectly capable of doing it, and that the book of Acts is the complete testimony to his ability and adequacy to carry out the program he had in mind. "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" {1 Th 5:24 RSV}. It was always God's intention not only to lay the program before us, but to fulfill it in his own strength.

As you read through this book, you see various aspects of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. First of all, he is visible in directing the activities of the church. It is the Spirit of God who takes the initiative and launches new movements in carrying out the program of God. For example, when Philip was in Samaria preaching the gospel, a great city-wide revival was in progress as a result of his preaching. The whole city was stirred. But the spirit of God said to him, "Rise and go down to a man in the desert" {cf, Acts 8:36}. Now, what kind of strategy is that, to leave a city-wide campaign where the Spirit of God is moving in power, where multitudes are coming to Christ, to go down into the desert to talk to one man? But what one man was it? It was the Ethiopian eunuch, a man who was the treasurer of the Ethiopians {Acts 8:27}. Remember the story of how he was prepared by the Holy Spirit {Acts 8:38}. As Philip ran along beside the carriage, he heard him reading Isaiah and asked him if he understood it {Acts 8:39}. The eunuch answered,

How can I if someone doesn't explain it to me? {Acts 8:31b RSV}

When Philip came up to sit beside him, he found he was reading exactly the right place, Isaiah 53. Beginning at that spot, Philip began to preach to him about Jesus. And he was won to Christ.

That is always what Spirit-led witnessing is -- the right man in the right place at the right time saying the right thing to the right person. This is one of the first evidences in this book of the overall directing activity of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter nine, the Holy Spirit calls a man on the Damascus road and sends another man to pray with him -- Ananias, who was absolutely astounded by this commission. "Lord," he said, "you don't know what you are asking." God said, "I know whom I have called. He's a chosen instrument of mine."

In chapter 13 the Holy Spirit is recorded as saying to the church at Antioch,

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. {Acts 13:2b RSV}

Later on in the book, Paul says, "We tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit said 'No.' And we started to preach the gospel in Asia, but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit." {cf, Acts 16:6-7}. All through this book you find that the strategy has all been worked out in advance by the Holy Spirit. As Christians are available to him, he unfolds the strategy step by step. Nobody can plan this kind of a program. We can only be willing to follow the overall directive activity of the Spirit of God at work in his church. That is the divine strategy.

Further on in Acts you find the Holy Spirit in another aspect of his ministry doing what no man can do -- communicating life to those who believe. Wherever the gospel is preached, wherever the Word of God is upheld, wherever the good news of the work of the Lord Jesus is preached to men, the Holy Spirit is there to communicate life.

Have you ever noticed who gives the altar call in the book of Acts? It is almost invariably the ones being preached to. On the day of Pentecost it was. As the Spirit of God preached through Peter to those thousands who had been brought in by that tremendous miracle of the tongues after the Holy Spirit descended upon them, Peter got only halfway through his message. He had only reached his second point. What happened? They were convicted in their hearts. They broke in on him and said, "Preacher, what must we do to be saved?" {cf, Acts 2:37}. Now, who gave the altar call there? Well, they did. When the Philippian jailer is impressed by the singing of Paul and Silas at midnight, and the earthquake comes and shakes down the prison walls, who gives the altar call? Why he does. He comes running and says to them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" {cf, Acts 16:25-27}.

It is the Holy Spirit communicating to them, imparting life to them when they believe. A most helpful verse in this regard is in the Gospel of John. I have read this many, many times to remind myself that it is not the invitation that makes people come to Christ; it is the truth as it is being proclaimed by the Holy Spirit. In chapter eight of John, Christ is explaining his message to his followers. He is the light of the world. He reveals himself to men. Verse 30 says, "As he spoke thus, many believed in him" {John 8:30 RSV}. While the word was going out.

Not only does the Holy Spirit communicate life, as he did in the home of Cornelius (while the message was going on the Holy Spirit fell upon the people gathered there), but he is also at work preserving the purity of the church.

Today there are groups of people whose sole occupation seems to be to defend the faith; to preserve, if they can, the purity of the church. Many of these people go so far as to corner unsuspecting pastors, nail them to the wall over this whole matter of defending the faith, and try to convince them to drive out those who disagree, or who have heretical ideas, within the church. Their perfectly proper intention is to try to preserve the purity of the church. But throughout the book of Acts you will discover that the Holy Spirit himself is in charge of this task. As the church fulfills its commission to be available, to be willing instruments of the activity and life of the Holy Spirit, he is at work to preserve the purity of the church.

For example, there is an amazing incident that occurs early in the book. Ananias and Sapphira's hypocrisy was revealed when they tried to attach to themselves a holiness which they did not actually possess (Acts 5:1-11). They tried to appear more committed or dedicated than they really were. They tried to gain a reputation for sanctity among the Christians by appearance only. The judgment of the Holy Spirit came immediately in the form of their physical death. Now, he does not judge that way today (at least not to that extent). This is a pattern to indicate what the Spirit of God does on the spiritual level. But at the beginning, he judges on the physical level, in order that we might see this principle at work. But whether spiritual or physical, the result is exactly the same. Let somebody begin to use his religious standing, his Christian opportunities in order to advance his own sanctity in the eyes of people -- to pretend to a holiness he does not possess -- and what happens? The Spirit of God cuts him off from the manifestation of the life of Christ. Instantly that life is as

powerless, as weak and fruitless, as dead as far as its effect upon those around, as Ananias and Sapphira were as they lay dead on the floor at Peter's feet.

Finally, the major emphasis of this book and the amazing thing about these Christians -- the quality that made them a constant wonder to those who heard them preach -- is that the Spirit of God is always at work imparting boldness to Christians. Did you notice how bold these Christians were? At one moment you see Peter and John hiding behind locked doors, afraid to go out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the enmity of the Jews against the Lord Jesus. Now, after the Spirit of God comes upon them, they are out in the streets and temple courts boldly proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ. When they are locked up in prison, the angel releases them and they go right back into the temple courts to pray and preach again.

Once again they are arrested, and the church makes prayer for them, asking God that they might go out again and preach the gospel in the very same place. In other words, they are saying, "Lord, do it again. We got into trouble the last time, but Lord, do it again!" Their boldness was simply irresistible. Even those who were bitter enemies of the gospel could not resist the boldness with which they proclaimed the truth.

That is God's program -- the Holy Spirit doing the whole thing -- energizing, guiding, directing, programming, empowering and communicating life. He does it all. It is not up to us to do anything except be available, to be his instruments, to go where he wills, to open our mouths, to be ready to take advantage of whatever situation he places us in. It is the job of the Spirit, which he never fails to fulfill, to carry out that ministry. That is what the church has lacked, is it not? That is what you see so much here in the book of Acts.

The extent of this program is revealed to us both geographically and chronologically in this book. In chapter one you have the geographic dimension (verse 8):

**"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."
{Acts 1:8 RSV}**

You can divide the book on that basis; this is a divinely given table of contents. The first seven chapters gather around being a witness to Christ in Jerusalem. In chapter eight you find a break, and the disciples are driven out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Beginning with chapter 13 you have the call of Paul and Barnabas to go out to the Gentile world. That begins the story of the outreach to the uttermost parts of the earth. That is God's program for the geographical carrying out of the gospel, and it is only in our own generation that we begin to see this completely fulfilled.

In chapter two you see the same program fulfilled chronologically (in point of time). Here, as the people are stunned by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and are asking what they must do to be saved, Peter says (verses 38, 39):

"Repent [that is, change your mind] and identify yourselves in baptism with the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of yours sins, and you shall receive Christ. Believe in him, for this promise is to you." {cf, Acts 2:38-39}

It was to the very generation to which he was preaching, "to you and to your children [the next generation] and to all those that are far off" {Acts 2:39b RSV} -- down the corridors of time. No matter how many generations may come in this far-reaching age of grace, the promise is to you as it was to them, that to everyone who receives the Lord Jesus Christ, the promise of the Holy Spirit will be given, "to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" {Acts 2:39c RSV}. That is the program of God in the dimension of time.

It began, in the first act after the ascension of Christ, with the completion of the twelve apostles once again. Here, I must take issue with those of my colleagues who suggest that Matthias was chosen as one of the disciples in the energy of the flesh, and that it was a mistake on the part of men; that God chose Paul rather than Matthias. I believe that this account makes very clear that Matthias was chosen under the superintendency of the Holy Spirit and that he was put in the right place at the right time.

In this account, Peter stood up and quoted the Scriptures, saying that it had been predicted that one should be chosen to take Judas' place. "His office," he quoted, "let another take" {Acts 1:20b RSV}. His conclusion is,

"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us -- one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." {Acts 1:21-22 RSV}

Then, as you know, they put forward two men, Joseph (called Barsabbas) and Matthias. Then through the exercise of a perfectly appropriate method, one which was used in Old Testament time again and again to determine the mind of God (the casting of lots) Matthias is chosen.

Further indication that this choice is indeed under the leadership and superintendency of the Holy Spirit is found in chapter two, where it says that on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, Peter stood up with the eleven. Peter (one) with the eleven (twelve altogether) goes on, lifts up his voice, and addresses the assembled multitude (Acts 2:14). Then in chapter six, long before Paul is called as the apostle to the Gentiles, we read (verses 1, 2):

In these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists [that is, the Grecian Jews] murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples ... {Acts 6:1-2 RSV}

What twelve? Why, the eleven with Matthias, who was chosen to take Judas' place, completing the number of witnesses. It is upon this twelve, the complete number of the apostles, that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost.

You remember in the book of Revelation that the names of the twelve apostles formed the foundations of the city that John saw coming down from heaven -- the twelve, with Matthias {Rev 21:12-14}. There were twelve apostles to Israel. There had to be twelve. Judas fell, but God chose Matthias to take his place as a witness to Israel, but it is Paul who is the special apostle, called to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Now, this does not mean that the other apostles do not have a ministry to us; they do. But it was agreed among them that God had chosen that Peter should go to Israel, while Paul went to the Gentiles. The same message was given to each, but the twelve were especially designed to be a complete, divinely chosen witness to Israel, and they fulfilled that ministry completely.

After the full number of the apostles was restored, the great mark of the book of Acts, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, took place. Everything else flows from this event. The interesting thing is to see how Christians, reading about this amazing occurrence, have focused their attention on the incidentals and neglected the essentials:

What are the incidentals here? The rushing wind, the fire that danced on the heads of the disciples, and the many tongues or languages by which they spoke. These are the incidentals of the story. These are simply the peripheral events that took place, the signs that showed that something important was happening.

What was the essential, then, the important thing? It was the forming of a new people -- the church. One hundred and twenty individuals met in the temple courts. They were as unrelated to each other as any people born in widely scattered parts of the earth might be to each other today. They were individually related to the Lord, but they had no blood ties. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, he baptized them into one body. They became a living unit; they were no longer related only to the Lord; they were related also to each other.

They became a living organism, which was from then on, and still is, to be the body of Christ, the means by which he speaks to the world, by which he is given a flesh and blood existence in our day. They were made a new people, by means of a new power -- the Holy Spirit, indwelling them and tying them to one another -- and

given a new program. As we have already seen, this was to reach out to Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth, through time, from one generation to the next, until the coming of Jesus Christ. Those are the essentials. Isn't it strange how we focus on these tiny little incidentals, neglecting the tremendous matters that the Holy Spirit would impart to us?

The rest of the book deals with the calling of Paul, the wise master builder, the one whom the Holy Spirit selected to be the pattern for Gentile Christians. This is why Paul was put through a very intensive training period by the Holy Spirit, during which he was subjected to one of the most rigorous trials that any human being could undergo. He was sent home to his own home town to live in obscurity for seven years, until he learned the great lesson that the Holy Spirit seeks to teach every Christian, and without which no one of us can ever be effective for him. In the words of our Lord, "... unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone" {John 12:24b RSV}.

As you trace the career of the Apostle Paul, you discover that, like every one of us, when he first came to Christ he did not understand this. As we would have reasoned in his place, he thought that he had all it took; he was especially prepared to be the kind of instrument that could be mightily used of God to win Israel to Christ. Undoubtedly he said to himself, as he reveals in the letter to the Philippians, he had the background; he had the training. He was by birth a Hebrew; he was educated in all the law and the understanding of the Hebrews; he had the position; he was the favorite pupil of the greatest teacher of Israel, Gamaliel; he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees; he understood everything of the Hebrew background.

Out of this consciousness of his own background and training arose in his heart that pulse beat that you find constantly breaking through from time to time in the writings of this mighty man. This hungering to be an instrument to reach Israel for Christ. In the ninth chapter of Romans he said, "... I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race" {Rom 9:3 RSV}. But God had said to this man, "I don't want you to reach Israel. I'm calling you to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to bear my name before kings and to preach unto the Gentiles {cf, Acts 9:15} the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Do you remember how he went out into the desert, and there God taught him? Then he sent him back home to Tarsus. After he tried in Damascus to preach Christ out of the energy of his own flesh and found it failing, he was driven out of the city and let down like a criminal over the wall in a basket. Broken-hearted and defeated, he found his way to Jerusalem and thought the apostles at least would take him in, but they turned him aside. It was only as Barnabas finally interceded for him that he was given any acceptance in the eyes of the apostles at all.

Then, going into the temple, he met the Lord, who said to him, "Go back home. Get out of the city. They won't receive your testimony here. You don't belong here. This isn't the place I've called you to," {cf, Acts 22:17-21}. In Tarsus he faced up at last to what God was saying to him all the time, that unless he was willing to die to his own ambition to be the apostle to Israel, he could never be the servant of Christ. And when at last he received that commission and took it to heart, and said, "Lord, anywhere you want. Anything you want. Anywhere you want to send me. I'm ready to go." God sent Barnabas to him, and he took him by the hand and led him down to Antioch, a Gentile church, and there the Apostle Paul began his ministry.

The book ends with Paul in Rome, preaching in his own hired house, chained day and night to a Roman guard, unable to get out, unable to pursue the evangelizing of the ends of the earth as his heart longed to do -- limited, fettered, bound -- and yet, as he writes to the Philippians, his heart overflowing with the consciousness that though he was bound, the word of God was not.

One of the most amazing words in all of Scripture is given there, as he writes to his friends in Philippi and says, "All these things which have happened to me, have happened to advance the gospel," {cf, Phil 1:12b RSV}. They have not limited anything. They have not held anything back. These obstacles, and these apparent disappointments have not stopped a thing; they have only advanced the gospel. And then he gives two specific ways in which this was happening. One was that the cream of the crop in the Roman army who formed the special palace guard of the emperor were being brought to Christ one by one. The praetorium guard was being reached, and, of course, you know how it was happening. They were being brought in by the emperor's command and chained to the Apostle Paul for six hours. Talk about a captive audience! God was using the

emperor to bring his best boys in and chain them to the apostle for six hours of instruction in the Christian gospel. No wonder Paul writes at the end of the letter, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household" {Phil 4:22 RSV}.

The second thing is that because Paul had been arrested, all the other brethren in the city were busy preaching the gospel, so there was more of the gospel going out in Rome because he was in prison than there would have been if he were loose. He said, "I rejoice in that." That always suggests to me that one of the finest ways to evangelize a community might be to lock all the preachers up in jail!

But there is a third advantage the apostle could not see, a thing he never dreamed was taking place. We can see now, looking back, that the greatest thing that Paul ever did in his lifetime was not to go about preaching the gospel and planting churches, as he would have thought. But the greatest accomplishment was the letters which he never would have written if he had not been in prison. Because of those letters, the church has been ministered to and fed and strengthened through 20 centuries of Christian life.

Now, as you know, the book of Acts is an unfinished book. It has never been completed -- it suddenly ends. Luke does not even write *finis* at the end, he leaves it there. He never gets back to it, because, of course, the Holy Spirit intended it to be unfinished; it is still being written. The book of Acts is the book of the record of the things which Jesus began both to do and to teach. Is he through yet? No. He is still working, isn't he? Volume 20 is now being written. When this great book is fully completed and, in glory, you get to read it -- what will be your part in it?

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this wonderful book that challenges us, blesses us, encourages and delights us, and makes us want to cast ourselves anew upon your grace, forgetting all the traditions of men, and to turn once again to the program and the strategy of God. How we thank you, Lord, that every bit of it is still as vibrantly true as it ever was, and that in this twentieth century day, we can discover again for ourselves all that this book contains. Thank you, in Christ's name, Amen.

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