

INTRODUCTION

Some early Christian writers speak of the books of the New Testament as the "Gospel and Apostles". By this description they mean out of the gospels and the apostles which form the bulk of the New Testament, certain. These are understandable groupings, but one further division is needed to explain how the Church came into being, and how we are to connect the facts of the Gospel history are to be connected to their inspired interpretation in the apostolic letters. This "bridge" book which links the two chief parts together is the Acts of the Apostles.

The main purpose of the book of Acts, apart from the former, are as follows:

(a) The first aim of the book is to provide a chronicle of the mighty and triumphant progress of the Gospel through the known world. This theme is clearly spelled out in Acts 1:8, and pursued in each chapter of the book. It does not pretend to be a history of all the apostles, nor of the early church in all its parts up to the author's time, nor is it a series of biographical sketches. History and biography are included to serve a larger purpose—namely, to show the universal spread of the Christian faith which was begun and maintained by the Holy Spirit.

Certain emphases are given to spotlight the chief features of the Gospel's advance: the work of Stephen, who first made殉道 in his speech, ch.7; the worldwide scope of the message; the actual Gentile message (in ch.10), with its antecedents in the conversion of the Ethiopian (ch.8); the conversion of Saul (ch.9), and the conversion of Cornelius (ch.10); and the work of Paul, whose missionary task is implicit in his conversion-call (9.15).

(b) Another purpose is that which is stated by the author at the beginning of his book (1:1-4). In both his gospel and the Acts, Luke proposed to supply for Theophilus an accurate and progressive history of the origins of the Church and its faith, about which he had already received as an interested enquirer some information. Theophilus is evidently neither a proper name nor a fictitious title (meaning "a man dear to God"), but a roundabout way of addressing a representative member of the intelligent middle-class public at

Rome whom Luke wished to win over to a less prejudiced and more favourable opinion of Christianity (see F. F. Bruce).

(ii) There is an apologetic intention in this writing which aimed at defending the Christian cause against charges which were popularly brought against it in the latter half of the first century. Luke went, in this historical narration, to demonstrate that a variety of officials, mainly Roman, bore goodwill to Paul and his friends, and that where they were appealed to and had to settle a dispute between Christians and Jews, there was no substance in the charges levelled at the followers of Jesus. Moreover, Roman military officials show a consistent attitude of interest and sympathy to the Christian message whenever it is presented to them. These factors prove—so Acts demonstrates—that Christianity is politically free from suspicion by the Roman authorities, and this political “innocence” would mean much to a man such as “Theophilus”.

Thirdly, No certainty is possible in arriving at a precise date for the book of Acts, but certain historical factors make it likely that it was first published in the middle of the '60s of the first century. Two events of history in that period are decisively important for the understanding of the Church's life in the world: the persecution of Christians at Rome by Nero (A.D. 64), and the outbreak of the Jewish war in A.D. 66, which led to the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The first fact shows that Rome was beginning to be fearful of the Church's influence—a fear enhanced by the overt rebellion of the Jews in Palestine. This would be the opportune time for some statement from a Christian writer that showed that believers in Jesus, unlike the Jews, were not disloyal to the empire. The Acts provides just such a clear statement.

The omission of Paul's martyrdom in A.D. 66-68 may be taken to indicate that Luke did not know of it when he wrote; and this may fix the date of the book as after A.D. 64 and before A.D. 66-68.

Writer. Early Church tradition associates the author of both gospel and Acts with Luke, the doctor of Colossians 4.14, and the “companion of Paul” (Irenaeus). The attestation which couples Luke's name with the book of Acts is both early (the first mention is given in the anti-Marcionite prologue to the third gospel, c.A.D. 160-180) and widespread (including the Church Fathers from Irenaeus to Jerome).

The evidence from the book of Acts itself amply endorses this tradition, and there are clear indications that the author was the same as the man who composed the third gospel and was an associate of Paul.

Historical accuracy. Provided we do not ask from the book what it was never intended to give—viz., a comprehensive and detailed

account of the social origins of Christianity, we may have every confidence in the author's painstaking interest in including a reliable record. Indeed, this is exactly the claim he makes for himself (1.1.3, R.S.V. note); and scholars like E. Meyer, Sir William Ramsay, F. F. Bruce, and E. M. Blacklock have pointed to Luke's competence and accuracy in correctly reporting the proper official terminology which Roman governmental protocol were known in the first-century world. Thus *procurator* and *procurator* are carefully distinguished, and the accurate image suggests that Luke had first-hand knowledge and was concerned to make a careful investigation of his facts.

Helps. There are books on Acts to suit every need and taste. Historical allusions and much background material are given in E. M. Blacklock's Tyndale Commentary (L.V.T./Kerthman) and (with more devotional emphasis) William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible*. Larger works are those by F. F. Bruce (New London International Commentary), and C. S. C. Williams Black's N. T. Commentary. An older commentary by J. A. Finsley has been used in our notes, to much profit.

Note. An occasional reference to the "Western text" of Acts in the pages which follow draws attention to this interesting fifth-century Greek manuscript (Codex Bezae) which represents the Western tradition. It has a number of unusual additions, some of them highly imaginative and colourful and possibly authentic.

Acts 1. 1-14

V. 1-5 connect Luke's account of how the Good News was brought from Jerusalem to Rome with his earlier record of how the Good News began, set out in his Gospel. The climax of that record was Jesus' resurrection and appearance to His apostles (1), followed by a warning and a promise (4, 5). Is this "baptism with the Holy Spirit" the same as that referred to in 1 Cor. 12. 13—i.e., marking one's entry into the fellowship of the Church?

Vs. 6-11. The apostles are still bemuddled over the meaning of the kingdom (1) and the nature of their task (6, 7); and thoughts of earthly reigns fill their minds (see Mark 10. 25-45). Jesus directs them to their immediate responsibility (8), what is it? Does it fulfill Isa. 43. 10? They must leave the future in God's hands, and attend to what He commissions them to be and do. This missionary task depends upon (i) the Lord's ascension (John 16.5-11; Eph. 4.8-13); (ii) the consequent gift and empowering of the Spirit (Acts 2. 33 makes this clear, doesn't it?); and (iii) the sovereign purpose of God for His

Son in His world (Psa. 2, 6-8)—a purpose to be completed at His return (II).

Vs. 12-14 show how the apostles interpreted the command to wait (4). What was their chief occupation? The upper room, often identified with the scene of the Last Supper, was to be a hallowed spot, and not least because Jesus had bound these men and women together in love and deep friendship. Even a former tax collector and a rancorous Zealot lost their traditional hatred for each other (13, who are they?) *Nasor*, V. 4; "while staying with them" is literally "sharing a meal with them"; cf. Luke 24, 41-43; John 21, 12-14; Acts 16, 41, one of the many proofs of His true resurrection. V. 8: the ground plan of the entire book. V. 9: the cloud is an O.T. sign of God's presence. He is received into His immediate presence (John 17, 11, 24). Questions of how far is "up" are beside the point if God is omnipotent. The Ascension is the withdrawal of Jesus from our earth-bound vision, but not from our world (Mark 28, 20). V. 12: 1000 yards are the excess of such a journey. V. 14: the women are those who were last at the cross (Mark 15, 40, 47) and first at the tomb (Mark 14, 1, 2).

Acts 1,15-26

Vs. 15-22 give the substance of Peter's statement, addressed to the first problem which faced the infant community. What anticipations can you find of Peter's leadership, in the Gospels? See Matt. 16, 17-19; Mk. 16, 7. The defection of Judas is described in Matt. 27, 3-10 and should be read in the light of (i) his privileged position (17); (ii) the fulfilment of Scripture (16,20, quoting Psa. 69, 23, 109, 1); (iii) his infamous (16), yet self-willed treachery (25); (iv) the problem of a successor, created by his death (20b). This much is clear, but the character of Judas remains an enigma and a warning to us; and Scripture refuses to satisfy our curiosity as to his motivation, or to resolve the tension between Divine foreknowledge (John 6, 70, 7; 13, 18, 17, 12) and human responsibility (Mk. 14, 10; John 13, 27, 31, 11). See I.V.F. *New Bible Dictionary*, "Judas".

Vs. 23-26. Before the manner of a twelfth apostle is settled, some qualifications of the candidates are mentioned (21, 27). Who are they? Two are important: (i) they must be well-known members of the apostolic band, associated with them during the ministry of Jesus; (ii) they must be witnesses to (R.S.V.) His resurrection, why are these factors necessary? Cf. Luke 1,2; 1 Cor. 9,1. Barabbas and Matthias are nominated; and after prayer for God's guidance, the latter is chosen by the ancient practice of lot-taking (21, 26).

this the right method of making a selection? What is the significance of the fact that the use of the lot is never repeated after Pentecost, and that Matthias is never heard of again in Acts?

Notes: V. 17: the terms which Peter uses are intended to show a parallel with the election of Matthias. "Judas was numbered with us": God later added to the eleven (making again twelve of them). Judas was allotted a share in the apostles' ministry: his successor was chosen by lot. V. 25: perhaps the saddest and most revealing verdict on Judas. He "turned aside, to go to his own place"—i.e., the place he had chosen for himself. And God confirmed him in that disastrous choice. "Then I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction" (*Quintus's Pilgrim's Progress*).

Acts 2.1-13

V. 1-4. Originally a festival marking the beginning of the wheat harvest in ancient Israel (Ex. 34.22), the feast of Weeks was so called because it fell on the fiftieth day after Passover (see Lev. 23.15f. for the calculation). Hence the term "Pentecost", which means "fiftieth" in Greek. It is interesting that the later Jews celebrated the giving of the Law at Sinai at this festival, and thought of the voice of God sounding in every nation under heaven. Is this in the background of v. 6-8?

The disciples were gathered possibly in the Temple precincts or in the upper room when the promise of 1.4, 8 was made good. There were two outward manifestations of the Spirit's presence and power (2, 3)—notice the guarded language, half concealing exactly what occurred. But the consequences were unmistakable in Spirit-inspired utterances (4). Christianity lives by the communication of the truth of God to men by men.

V. 5-11. What was it that arrested attention among the motley crowd assembled in Jerusalem for the feast? Was it the universality of the Christians' message, each man hearing a language he could understand, although the hearers came from many parts of the ancient world of the Jewish dispersion and the speakers were Galileans who were noted for their guttural accent (Mark 14.70)? If so, Pentecost witnesses the reversal of Babel (Gen. 11.1-9). Otherwise, was it the remarkable speech of the disciples which expressed with rapture "the mighty works of God" (11)? This Pentecostal glorolalia is apparently different from the spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 14 (which is to be used in private and public worship, and with caution and restraint).

Acts 2.14-29

V. 14-22. The secret of early Christian testimony to "the mighty works of God" (17) is the Spirit, giving them an enthusiasm and confidence which was unequalled for ~~anywhere~~ (cf. Eph. 5.18). And the Holy Spirit's presence and power are traced to the fullness of O.T. prophecy (19): "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel". This citation from the O.T. underlines a number of basic apocalyptic postulates:

(1) the Church is living in a new era of God's dealings with men, following directly upon the Cross and triumph of Jesus. These are "the last days" (17; Heb. 1.1-2 is the best commentary on this phrase); (2) the work of the Holy Spirit, restricted in the O.T. to special persons, is now enlarged to include all believers in Jesus as the Messiah (17,18); (3) the Messianic age is often referred to in Jewish literature as the time of God's "salvation" (21). Peter goes on to declare that that promised time has arrived. The age-to-come has come! See 1 Cor. 26.11.

Vv. 22-28. Peter goes to the heart of the matter by showing how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth have inaugurated this new chapter in God's relations with the world. We must mark again some vital emphases of Christian conviction: (1) Jesus' ministry was that of 'a Man appointed by God'—i.e., Messianic (22); (2) His death at the hands of the Romans was no accident, but part of God's pre-ordained plan (23); (3) Peter's reference to Psalm 16 (25-28) illustrates again the use of O.T. "inspirations"—i.e., Scripture passages which point to the Age of the Messiah, now begun. Paul will use the same thought in a later sermon (13.31ff.).

Notes: V. 15: "third hour" — 9 a.m.; and on that day a fast was observed until mid-morning. V. 17: the promised Spirit comes on all, irrespective of class and sex (Gal. 3.14,28; 1 Cor. 12.12,13). V. 21: the key word is "saved", but given here a richer meaning than in Joel 2.29ff. V. 22: a reference to Jesus' Galilean ministry, evidently known in Jerusalem. V. 24: read "snares set by death".

To think over: What criterion decides the literal (27) and non-literal (19,20) fulfilments of prophecy?

Acts 2.29-36

We may take these verses as a single unit. They form the third and concluding part of Peter's Pentecostal address, and follow the earlier pattern—namely, a personal address (14,22) to his hearers (29).

"question" 3, a question of Christian ascension (29,33) and its O.T. antecedent which becomes the affirmation (34,35), from the same Psalms in the final section (36).

The allusion to Psalm 16 is now explained. Though written by David, it cannot refer only to him because he died (29); nor the author (leader of "and was buried"—a phrase which belongs also to the earliest Christian creed of 1 Cor. 15,2,3). His psalm, however, expresses the confidence that this will not happen to God's anointed King, whom David repaid. The only possible conclusion, then, is that David was speaking prophetically of the Messiah (36,31). His death—but, when even had done their worst, was vindicated by God in the resurrection.

These proofs are supposed of the reality of His resurrection; hence plainly a bodily resurrection of Messiah can make sense of prophetic Scripture. (C) the apostles themselves are living witnesses to His personal victory over death (see especially the strong statement of Acts 10,41 in the light of v.32); and (D) only the exaltation of the living Christ can satisfactorily explain the phenomena which His saints have seen and heard (33). John 14,15; 14,7 should now be read.

The notion of the Lord's exaltation requires justification; and Peter finds this in Psalm 110,1. The dialogue is between God (in His O.T. name, the Lord—Yahweh) and His anointed, David (figured the Messiah to all Jews and Christians before; 2 Sam. 7,12-14), but David never ascended to heaven. He said, therefore, again "have been speaking of the Messiah, "great David's greater Son" (34,35).

The conclusion is irresistible (36). As Jesus of Nazareth alone fulfills both Psalms, He is the true Messiah Who is now installed in the place of honor. His Messianship, once concealed, is now displayed; and His title to worship, as Lord, is proved (Rom. 1,3, 4; Phil. 2,9-11).

*Exaltation: The Head that once was crowned with thorns
Is crowned with glory now.*

Acts 2,37-47

Vs. 37-42: On that day about three thousand persons entered the fellowship of the Church through the gateway of repentance, forgiveness, and faith, expressed outwardly by baptism and inwardly by the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8,15; 1 Cor. 12,3). St. Augustine, in a memorable phrase, described this day as the Church's *die natalis*, or birthday. Those who were thus introduced to the saving benefits of the Gospel remained in close association (42). Conversion was for them

no flesh in the pan, or ephemeral, emotional upsurge of religious excitement. Having begun the Christian life, they continued—and doubtless made good progress. Which of the Pauline churches does this remind you of? So unlike the Galatian Christians (Gal. 1:6; 3:3,4; 5:7).

Vs. 43-47 are verses which paint a cameo picture of the first Christian fellowship. Note who the leaders were (43). And how the "common life in the body of Christ" was expressed, both in social responsibility (44,45) and spiritual exercises (46). It is a travesty to set these against each other as mutually exclusive. Right at the beginning of the Gospel age, in a Church fellowship which had come straight from the Lord's hands, there was a "holy worldliness" and a "sacred worship" in the Temple. Both were important—and still are today! Let us notice too the spirit which prevailed (47a) and the popularity of the young movement (47b), with "a conquering new-born joy" suffusing it all.

Notes: V. 38: baptism "in the Name of Jesus Christ" means a calling on His Name (Acts 22:16) or, possibly, a claiming of the new believers for Him Who henceforth "possessed" them as their Lord (Acts 10:48). Faith in Christ is implicit in both meanings, leading to forgiveness and incorporation into the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). V. 39: allusions are made to Isa. 57:19 and Joel 2:32 to stress the inclusiveness of the appeal. The Gentiles will eventually be evangelized. V. 42: four aspects of church life are mentioned: "teaching"—a ministry of instruction; "fellowship"—like our church or parochial meeting; "breaking of bread"—a common meal, called later the *agape* (1 Cor. 11:20,21,31,34; Jude 12), with which was joined a remembrance of the Lord in His death; "the prayers"—the definite article shows that believers observed the Temple worship. V. 46: the common meal again practised in the people's homes.