

Introduction to the Book of Acts

Most students of the Bible look at the book of Acts as a history of the early years of the Christian church and community. It tells the story of how God, on the day of Pentecost, poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh. It details Peter's first sermon on that day, and how, with the conversion of thousands, the Christian church was born. The book of Acts tells us how signs, wonders, healings and miracles were business as usual for the early Christians, frequent and expected. It also depicts, in stark reality, the pain and horror of the persecutions that dogged the lives of the first century followers of Christ.

While Peter and John are significant in the story told by the book of Acts and other leaders of the early church are mentioned, it is the Apostle Paul who dominates it. One has to wonder why. If the book of Acts were merely a history, one would expect that the twelve original apostles would figure much larger than the latecomer Paul in its story. Equally mysterious is the way Acts ends. Luke leaves us hanging, with Paul imprisoned, awaiting Nero's judgment. Why didn't Dr. Luke resolve the story, bringing it to an end? We know from history that Nero did eventually order Paul beheaded, but church tradition says that Paul was released after his initial appearance before the Emperor. His execution came some time later, after he returned from a journey to Spain where he planted churches and extended the boundaries of the Kingdom of God. Why did Luke just break it off mid-story?

There are, of course, many possible answers to these questions, but the scenario that resonates best with me was put forward by lawyer John W. Mauck in his book *Paul On Trial*.¹ Reading the book of Acts from a lawyer's perspective, Mr. Mauck was struck by the book's similarity to a legal brief and came to the conclusion that that was indeed, its purpose for being written. It is from this same perspective that I approach Acts and comment on it. I highly recommend that you read Mr. Mauck's book as part of your studies of the book of Acts.

How does one approach Scripture and its interpretation? Peter said this of the Scripture: *"First, you must understand this: No prophecy in Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. No prophecy ever originated from humans. Instead, it*

¹ Paul On Trial, 2001 John W. Mauck, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN.

was given by the Holy Spirit as humans spoke under God's direction." (2 Peter 1:20, 21).² Peter's words make it clear that we do not have the right to interpret the Scripture as we please! The word of God was given to us through the agency of the Holy Spirit and it can be interpreted *only* through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, speaking to the disciples on the evening before His crucifixion, told them that he would send them the Holy Spirit who would teach them (and us) "all things" and lead them (and us) into "all truth" (John 14:26; 16:13). It is our Lord's intention that we should rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the meaning of Scripture and the truth it contains. Yet far too often – indeed, more often than not – we approach Bible study as an intellectual exercise. Scholars, both lay and professional, have devised methods whereby they dissect Scriptures, attempting to pull every last shred of meaning from every short phrase. Well-meaning and driven by their thirst for knowledge, they forget that the true life of the Scriptures is only found when the Holy Spirit *reveals* that truth to the heart. Bible study is not a matter of intellectual exercise! True Bible study uses the intellect as a tool to open the heart to hear what the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through the Word of God. Jesus, when speaking to that "small stone" called Peter, referred to the revelatory truth the Holy Spirit brings us as the "bedrock" on which He intended to build His church (Matt 16:18). The Christian church is built on revelation – revelation that the Holy Spirit brings to us, just as He did to Peter!

So, let me ask again, how should one approach the study of Scripture? By opening one's heart to the voice of the Holy Spirit as the Scripture is read and studied. My friends who seek to exegete every shred of meaning out of every passage they study are mistaken in their approach. I do not believe the Lord *ever* intends to show us *all* the truth that any portion of Scripture contains at any one given time. Instead, in His great wisdom He points us toward and reveals the truth He deems best and necessary for us. Perhaps, at some future reading of the same passage He will shed the light of the Spirit on some other feature, but it is for us to let Him direct our thoughts and allow Him to speak truth to us as He sees fit.

As I have read and studied the book of Acts, I have endeavored to be open to the revelation of the Holy Spirit in just the way described above. It is my hope that the notes, comments and articles of this commentary reflect that revelation. As you use them in your own study of the Scriptures, may the Holy Spirit speak and reveal His truth to your soul.

² GOD'S WORD Translation. 1995 (2 Pe 1:20–21). Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group.

The initial form of this commentary is written in study Bible format using the New King James translation. Thomas Nelson Publishers kindly gave me permission to use it in this limited fashion.

You will notice entries among the notes titled “More Study”. These notes serve two purposes: First, to remind me of a study track that I have not yet pursued. Their second purpose is to provide the readers with ideas for further study. It is my intention to leave most of these “More Study” notes intact in future revisions, even if I have pursued them between now and then. It is my hope that they will enrich the Bible study life of those using this commentary.