

Dr. Robert Peterson, The Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12, Johnson – How Should We Read Acts? Guidelines

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on The Theology of Luke-Acts. This is session number 12, Dennis Johnson. How Should We Read Acts? Guidelines.

Having looked at F. F. Bruce's introductory thoughts to the book of Acts, I move to Dennis Johnson's work, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*, published with P&R Publishing. Listening to Luke.

Who needs Acts? Scenario one. Churches drift off to sleep. Small groups turn in on themselves. Bible studies and Sunday school classes tread predictable, time-worn paths.

Worship becomes routine. Witnessing becomes the work of specialists. And compassion? Let's see, I have an hour open next Thursday.

When familiarity breeds contentment and complacency, when good order calcifies into rigid regularity, people who love Jesus sense that something is amiss. They know that it was not always this way, and they turn to the book to see again what is truly normal for Christ's church.

In particular, then, when our red zeal flags and our focus blurs, we need to listen to Luke, apostolic associate and documenter of the deeds of the Lord, as he recounts the Spirit's acts in the Spirit's words. We need the acts of the apostles. Scenario two.

Emotions run at a feverish pitch, expressing the joy of restoration to God's fellowship. The birth rate of God's daughters and sons soars, and the infants cry out for food and care. Churches spring up faster than gardeners can fertilize, train, and trim them.

False shepherds slip in among the newborn lambs to cut them off from the flock. Living stones, newly hewn from pagan quarries with all sharp edges, rubble on each other in Christ's new spiritual house, and the friction generates heat. The Spirit's life breath blows with such force that everyone is thrown off balance.

When the fires of revival set the church alight, when the earthquakes at the holy and gracious presence of God, when the glad message of Christ's merciful power embraces people who have abandoned hope, then, too, we need to turn to acts. Sadly, the joy of salvation can be faked. There can be an empty high without lowliness of heart.

Passion can be fixated on itself rather than focused on the one worthy of all adoration. Spirit-filled authority can be counterfeited for personal profit, harming Jesus' little ones and his name. Seedlings of faith must be fed from the word and nurtured in the truth if they are to bear lasting fruit.

God's toddlers need to hear from him what church life in Christ is all about. When the Spirit shakes us up, no less than when we need shaking, we must go to the touchstone of the Spirit's word. We need the acts of the apostles.

Whatever our condition as the Church of Jesus Christ may be, and wherever we may be scattered among the nations, Luke's second volume, which we call Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, is God's call to remember and reflect on his design for his church and reconsider how our fellowship fits or fails to fit, the blueprint. As we return to those thrilling days of yesteryear, we see the New Testament epistles, instructions for living, fleshed out in real history. The history of Acts is, after all, real.

It is full of people who don't get along, who don't catch on, and who don't always rise eagerly to the challenge of discipleship. On the other hand, this history is also real in demonstrating the powerful impact of Jesus, risen and enthroned at work among those flawed people by the Spirit's quest, by the Spirit's quiet but invisible strength. How should we read Acts? Two crucial questions.

It is obvious we need light from the Church's early days to shine on our churches today. To learn from Acts what God wants us to learn, however, is not an obvious and easy matter. God's Spirit speaks in Acts not in the form of explicit instructions or answers tailored to 20th or 21st-century questions but in the form of historical narrative.

Whenever in God's Word, we find accounts of events that transpired in the past, we face two crucial questions. One, what is God's verdict on those events? Two, what does God intend us to learn here and now from what happened there and then? What is God's moral verdict on the events narrated? It is clear that God does not approve of every action and event that He calls to be recorded in His Word. Biblical narratives teem with accounts of the sordid, sensual, foolish, and violent acts of human beings, all of which God severely condemns as the biblical narrators signal the reader in various ways.

Old Testament history is intimately bound up with the Torah, the law for the covenant people of Israel. As the structure of the Hebrew Scripture shows, the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of His servants are set down in prophetic history as a solemn testimony and warning to coming generations. So, it is in Acts.

Actions are recorded of which the Lord of the Church clearly disapproves. For example, we read about the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira, the Samaritan Simon's quest for power, the greed of Ephesian silversmiths, and the jealousy of Jewish leaders. In such cases, we have little difficulty seeing that God does not want the Church today to duplicate everything we read in the pages of Acts.

Number one, what is God's moral verdict on the events narrated? Number two, what is normative for the whole Church in order to win all ages? This second question raises a more difficult issue. When we read about an event or a practice in the biblical history of which God does approve, should we assume that He wants that feature reproduced by us today? Abraham, for example, is commended by God for his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Should we then imitate Abraham or, more precisely, if we should imitate Abraham, how should we do so? Should we imitate his action by offering our child in sacrifice? Or should we imitate his attitude of unwavering faith and absolute loyalty to the Lord? Likewise, when we read in Acts and in the early Church, no one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had.

432 NIV. What lesson should we learn for our life together today? Should we take this commendation of the early Church's readiness to share as God's hint that He desires radical economic communalism, not communism, communalism in today's Church? Or does the culture-transcending lesson of this text demand a deeper response than mere imitation, namely a heartfelt and radical commitment to costly fellowship, whatever it may cost, to express our unity in Jesus? I might add that I know a friend who did a Master's thesis on those passages in Acts in which people shared everything and gave their money and gave their lands to help others. His thesis was that God is not demanding that the Church do that, but one of his conclusions was that it is a possible model for the Church at certain places and at certain times.

And he said I will just say that I thought that was interesting. Once again, he agrees with our brother here, Dennis Johnson, that that's not commanded. But perhaps he goes beyond Johnson when he says it is possible for a Church to follow that pattern temporarily, in certain contexts, and for certain reasons in certain times.

Two extreme answers. The first one is that our dilemma has been called the problem of historical precedent. How is the historical portrait of the early Church in Acts a normative precedent for the Church today? Two extreme answers might be given to this question.

Number one, everything in Acts that the Lord approves should be reproduced in the Church today. Some Pentecostal and charismatic portions of the Church have talked as if everything that is good in Acts would be seen in today's Church. If only we would take the Bible seriously.

Some conclude from Acts 2 that the baptism of the Spirit comes to believers long after we come to trust in Christ. Others believe that Church leaders must be chosen by Lot, chapter 1, or that those who are in the Spirit can handle snakes safely, chapter 28. However, I know of no one who applies this answer consistently.

If we did, we would have to conclude that all the following should be found in every Church. Two extreme answers Dennis Johnson is going over. Number one, everything in Acts the Lord approves should be reproduced in the Church today.

Now he is arguing the argumentum ad absurdum, giving arguments to absurdity for this stuff. If we really followed this principle in a strict way, that everything in Acts should be practiced today, we would have to conclude all the following should be found in every Church. A. Apostles who had walked Galilean trails with Jesus bearing eyewitness to his resurrection.

B. The Spirit is coming in an earthquake and the roar of the wind. C. Angels leading preachers out of prison. D. Church discipline by instantaneous divinely administered capital punishment.

We're kind of in the same boat here. The real difficulty is that the everything answer is itself inconsistent with the theology of the New Testament. Acts, along with the rest of the New Testament, indicate that there is something special about the apostles who were chosen by Jesus to give evidence that he has been raised.

Acts 1:2, and 3, Acts 1:22, Acts 2:23 and following. Acts 1:2 and 3. Jesus gave commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And then verse 22. When they choose a replacement for Judas, he must be one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us.

Acts 1:21, 22. 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.

Or how about 2:32? This Jesus God raised up, Peter says, and of that we all are witnesses. Acts 2:32. Together with the prophets, the New Testament prophets, the apostles formed the church's foundation.

Ephesians 2:20. Jesus is the most important one, of course. He's the cornerstone.

Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. Speaking to Gentiles who are not believers, who now have become believers, Paul says in Ephesians 2, 19. So then,

you're no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Built on the foundation, here it is, of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. Paul continues with that edifice metaphor.

Therefore, the apostolic testimony was confirmed by God himself through signs and wonders. Hebrews 2, 3, and 4. Second Corinthians 12:12 speaks of what F.F. Bruce had referred to earlier as the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. We should expect them to find some of the marvelous events associated with the apostles to be unique.

They are visible signs that, like the miracles of Jesus' earthly ministry, unveil a salvation that goes deeper and farther than the eye can see. These acts of power in the visible world illustrate the hidden healing of the heart and provide a preview of the cosmic renewal that will accompany Jesus' return. Therefore, a church today that does not only exhibit these foundational power signs that we see in Acts is not defective or unspiritual.

Rather, it may be a church that focuses on the uniqueness of Jesus' death and resurrection and respects the special role of the apostles as witnesses to that redemptive turning point. On the other hand, the uniqueness of the apostolic period should not be stressed to the point that Acts is denied any role at all in forming our life today as Jesus' disciples, as is the error at the opposite extreme. So what Dennis Johnson is talking about is how much of Acts can be duplicated today.

Two extreme answers. Everything should be reproduced. It's impossible, it's absurd, and it's unhealthy.

Two, also an extreme answer to be rejected is nothing is normative for the church today. Let's see how Johnson navigates this one. Again, it is doubtful that anyone holds this extreme view consistently.

Would any church say we should not evangelize? People don't need to believe in Jesus? Should we not form churches? But when the vitality of the early church's life challenges our own status quo, we may be tempted to argue that although Acts accurately describes the church's infancy, this description is not supposed to guide our lives today. Some, for example, would attribute the early Christian's pooling of resources exclusively to the unusual circumstances of the days just following Pentecost, when pilgrims who had believed Peter's sermon stayed on after the feast for instruction. Therefore, there's no challenge here to Americans' infatuation with their private property.

Others have critiqued Paul's apologetic strategy at Athens as a misguided use of intellectual argument, even though Luke and God's spirit include Paul's speech on Mars Hill as a positive example of gospel proclamation. Some say, no, no, you don't argue people into the kingdom. You don't argue people into the kingdom of God.

You don't do this kind of secular apologetic thing. You just preach the gospel. Well, you do preach the gospel, but Paul shows in his various speeches to different groups, to Jews, his speeches are very different than to pagans.

And the thing that is important, as Johnson shows, is that Luke and the Holy Spirit commend both patterns. This extreme answer is not invoked to let us off the hook when something enacts, makes us uncomfortable, or violates the purpose that emerges from Luke's writings. Luke is concerned with writing history to be sure, but he's not writing history dispassionately to satisfy historical curiosity.

He's writing to Theophilus and those like him who have been catechized in the message of Jesus but who needs a thorough and orderly written account to confirm the life-changing message they have heard. It is interesting; we mentioned earlier that scholars debate whether in the introduction, especially to Luke's gospel where Theophilus is first mentioned, of course, he's also mentioned in Acts 1.1 as the patron, if you will, of the book of Acts, the person to whom it is especially dedicated. The debate is, was he a believer already needing confirmation or was he an unbeliever? And so far our different sources that we have looked at have regarded him as a believer.

I am not an expert as they are, but I would tend to agree with them on that. Among the New Testament evangelists, Luke alone has written a sequel to the earthly career of Jesus. This may be because he's writing for people who lacked person-to-person contact with the apostolic eyewitnesses themselves.

At any rate, Luke's gospel is a great example of that. Luke takes a stand in the tradition of biblical narrative, that is, prophetically interpreted history. He writes history that must make a difference in our faith and life, just as his mentor describes the purpose of Old Testament history as ethical instruction.

1 Corinthians 10:11, these things, he writes, were written for our instruction. Specifically, he is warning the Corinthians concerning the sins of the Israelites in the wilderness in the book of Numbers, and he catalogs them as idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling. Now, these things happened, 1 Corinthians 10:11, to them as an example, but they're written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come.

Luke writes history that must make a difference in our lives, just as Paul, his mentor, described the purpose of Old Testament history as ethical instruction, as we just saw,

and teaching. Romans 15:4, see also 2 Timothy 3:16. Romans 15:4 is neglected and very important. For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

Certainly, the foundational apostolic period may have some unique features about it, just because it is foundational, but the foundation also determines the contours of the building to be constructed on it. We move from these introductory matters to guidelines for discovering and applying the message of Acts. We're to read Acts in the light of Luke's purpose.

I'm giving an overview. Two, we're to read Acts in the light of the New Testament epistles. Three read Acts in light of the Old Testament.

Four read it in light of Luke's first volume. Five read it in light of its structure. Guidelines for discovering and applying the message of Acts.

If neither the all nor the nothing answer is a reliable guide to the normative impact of Acts on the church today, how can we understand and apply the Spirit's message correctly? Number one read Acts in the light of Luke's purpose. Luke is writing about the climax of God's redemptive act in history, Acts in history. As in Old Testament history and the Gospels, what God has done occupies center stage in Acts.

God saving Acts always have implications for our response, of course. But in Scripture, the starting point of instruction on right behavior is not a list of our duties but a declaration of God's saving achievement, bringing us into a relationship of favor with him. Although Acts contains information on the early church's life and outreach, the book may frustrate us if we try to turn it into a manual of church polity or mission policies.

Its purpose is more profoundly practical and cross-cultural than so many of our questions about procedures and strategy. Here, God's Spirit unveils the identity of the church between Jesus' comings, the divine power at work in the church, the results of that powerful presence, and the environment in which we are to pursue our mission until Acts 1:11, quote, this same Jesus who's been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven, Acts 1:11 NIV. Two, we read Acts in light of Luke's purpose. We read Acts in the light of the New Testament letters.

Luke is both a historian and a theologian. As he records, quote, the things that have been fulfilled among us, Luke 1:1, he also makes sense of these events, indicating their significance as an interpreter guided by the Spirit of Christ. Nevertheless, the very fact that he communicates this significance through the genre of historical

narrative rather than a theological essay, for example, has both advantages and limitations.

One advantage is that as Luke demonstrates the interface between God's salvation and the details of Hellenistic history, he shows how different the Christian faith is from religions rooted in mysticism, mythology, or speculation. Luke 2:1, Acts 2:1, when the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all gathered together in one place. Acts 3:1 and 2, now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour, and a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the beautiful gate to ask alms of those entering the temple.

These are details from history that Luke cites. He does that to show the historical grounding of his message and how the Christian faith is different from religions rooted in mysticism, mythology, or speculation. Mysticism says we seek God directly through the Spirit.

We don't need books, for example, the Bible, we don't need teachers or pastors or others to help us. No, God communicates most profoundly directly by His Spirit to our spirit, maybe even bypassing the mind. Mythology, the Roman religion, was based on a whole mythology of the gods and their adventures and their sins.

It is quite absurd, and yet that was the mythological background of much. Speculation is a philosophy and human reason running rampant without the control of any revelation from God. Luke shows the Christian faith is different from mysticism, mythology, or speculation.

The gospel of Christ is not an abstract theory or poetic symbol. It is the account attested by witnesses of the personal God's intervention in history to rescue human beings. Jesus died on the cross.

Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus and the Father poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Peter witnessed the gospel in the house of Cornelius by divine direction.

Paul, who was Saul, is dramatically converted by God in history and became the great apostle to the Gentiles. One limitation, on the other hand, is that the genre of historical narrative itself permits theological explanation only indirectly through the placement of material, the recounting of sermons, and verbal allusions to Old Testament texts and themes. To stay true to its historical aim, Luke, the narrator, cannot jump into the story with extensive commentary or theological essays to clear up all possible misunderstandings.

He does make theological comments, but no essays. The epistle is the ideal genre for direct address and straightforward exposition of the gospel's meaning and its behavioral implications for those who believe it. Therefore, the New Testament epistles, written expressly to direct and correct a church's life, faith, and life, provide a necessary check on the applications we may draw from Acts for the church today.

So, the epistles have a place. If our theological conclusions from Acts run afoul of the doctrine of the epistles, we better go back to the drawing board. Something is wrong with our understanding of Acts' teaching.

Without minimizing the special contribution of Acts to the teachings of the New Testament as a whole, once we recognize the purpose of Acts, we'll be cautious about accepting as normative today any element of its narrative that is not confirmed in the exhortation of the epistles. I might say in my own experience of my work and other Christian theologians, I know I would say Acts is neglected. Should it be paramount? No.

The epistles are the place where the teaching is most plainly set forth, but we need to attend to the whole biblical story. That certainly means the gospels, Acts, and the book of Revelation, especially in this context, Luke-Acts. Third, we read Acts in the light of the Old Testament.

The prominence of the Old Testament in the speeches and sermons of Acts is obvious to any reader of the Bible, especially where their hearers acknowledge the scripture's divine authority. The witnesses of Jesus quoted and interpreted the scriptures in light of the Messiah's coming, demonstrating how his ministry, death, resurrection, and pouring out of the Spirit fulfilled these prophetic writings. Luke's debt to the Old Testament goes deeper than the citation of passages in sermons.

He has embedded in his own narrative style echoes of Hebrew ways of speaking, quietly but pervasively reinforcing the message he is writing in the tradition of Hebrew prophetic history, bearing witness to the climax of that tradition in the work of the Messiah. Moreover, the connection between Acts and the Old Testament is more than a matter of words and grammar. Repeatedly, we see Old Testament themes, the Spirit, the servant, holy judgment, dispersion, and persecution of the prophets, brought to new realization through the presence of the risen Lord in his church.

I'll just mention some of those themes again. The Holy Spirit, the servant of the Lord, which is Jesus, the holy judgment of God, dispersion, and persecution of the prophets, becomes the persecution of the New Testament prophets, apostles, and other servants of the Lord. In our next lecture, we'll continue on with Johnson's helpful instruction concerning the teaching of the book of Acts.

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