

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, The Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 13, Johnson, Guidelines for Reading Acts, Structural Signposts.

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson and his teaching on the theology of Luke-Acts. This is session 13, Dennis Johnson, Guidelines for Reading Acts, Structural Signposts.

Let's pray together. Gracious Father, we thank you for all of your Word. We thank you for Luke-Acts and pray you would help us understand the message, especially of Acts now, and to obey your precepts, to trust your person and work in our lives. We commit ourselves and our families into your care and pray through Jesus Christ, the mediator. Amen.

We're using Dennis Johnson's book, The Message of Acts, in which we're learning how to read Acts. We should read it in light of Luke's purpose, he tells us, in light of the New Testament letters, in light of the Old Testament, and now in light of Luke's first volume.

The brief prologue of Acts 1:1 to 3, draws together Luke's two volumes. Of course, we have to read this. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up after he had given 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 while staying with them, he ordered 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 you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. The brief prologue of Acts draws together Luke's two volumes, summing up the content of the third gospel, even as it turns our vision toward what is to come.

Likewise, the gospel closes with Jesus' prophetic interpretation of the scriptures, a statement that anticipates the drama that unfolds in Acts, back to Luke 24. Luke 24 connects with Acts 1 in a very wonderful way.

Luke 24:46 to 49. Starting at 44, then Jesus said to them, these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them. Thus, it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things and behold, I am sending the promise of my father. Same words that we see in Acts 1:1 to 3. I'm sending the promise of my father upon you but stay in the city until you're clothed with power from on high. Parallels between Luke's gospel and Acts abound.

In the gospel, Jesus receives the Spirit when anointed in his baptism to proclaim good news. In Acts, the church receives the Spirit from the glorified Jesus and declares the wonders of God. Acts 2. In the gospel, Jesus is the servant of Isaiah's servant songs.

In Acts, the church is the servant witness foreseen by Isaiah, but so also is Jesus. Acts 3:13. It is true. Of course, Jesus is the servant, but also the church is the servant as well.

The God of Abraham 3:13. Peter speaks. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate when he had decided to release him. Peter plays hardball, man.

In the gospel, Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the Lord. In Acts, his glory and authority as the Lord are displayed by his resurrection from the dead. The centrality of the word, the welcoming of the Gentiles, the arrival of salvation, and many other themes bind Acts closely to Luke's gospel, demanding that we explore both volumes together in order to understand either.

As we said at the very beginning of these lectures, we're to read Luke and Acts separately, and then we have to read them together as Luke-Acts. We need to do both of those things. We're also to read Acts in the light of its structure.

Luke writes Greek well. He's at home with the written word, and his skill in the use of language is evident. In order to get his message, God's message through him, that is, we must pay attention to the way in which the craftsman has put his books together.

Are there overarching themes to guide us through the flow of incidents that we find in Acts? Is there a framework, a structure to help us see how one section leads to the next? We do well to note four structural signals by which Luke points our way through the account. Structural signposts in the narrative of Acts. I'd like to just read the summary, and read an outline of those.

Number one, putting together Acts 1:8 and 9:15. Number two, summary statements scattered throughout the book of Acts. Three repeated accounts are: the Spirit at Pentecost, the conversion of Cornelius, and, of course, Saul's conversion.

Every one of those is repeated. There are at least two accounts, sometimes three. And fourth, the prominence of preaching in the book of Acts.

These are structures within the narrative that serve as signposts. They enable us to feel our way. We put this structure in, and this one, and this one, and now we see better the whole and how the parts relate.

Number one, Acts 1:8 and 9:15. It is often observed that Acts 1:8, containing Jesus' promise of the Spirit and the Apostle's role as his witnesses, provides a preview of the phases of the gospel's proclamation. Acts 1:8, but you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That is, Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria combined, and to the ends of the earth.

Johnson does it this way. We note the gospel spread in Jerusalem, chapters 1 to 7, through Judea and Samaria, chapters 8 through 12, to the last part of the earth, chapters 13 through 28. One more time, Acts 1:8 sets this agenda, and the rest of the book of Acts follows this pattern.

There to be got Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, chapters 1 to 7, in Judea and Samaria, chapters 8 to 12, to the ends of the earth, chapters 13 through 28. This, of course, involves geographical expansion, but there is more afoot here than miles. Things begin in Jerusalem, quote, the city of the great king, Psalm 48.2, the site of the sanctuary, the temple, the center of Israel's worship of the living God.

By the close of Acts, Paul, bearer of the Lord's word, has reached Rome, the city of the Caesars, the center of Gentile world power. The word has crossed not only spatial distance, but also religious, ethnic, and cultural distance. The word of this salvation, Acts 13:26, in Pisidian Antioch, Paul says, brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.

The word of this salvation, Acts 13:26, has come not only to Jewish people within the Holy Land but also to those dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. Moreover, not only to Jews descended from the fathers, but also to Samaritans, to Gentile proselytes, to Gentile God-fearers, and even to Gentiles enmeshed in idolatry.

Let me say something about those groups. The word of salvation has come not only to Jewish people in the Holy Land, but also to Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. Moreover, not only to Jews descended from the fathers, referred to in Acts 13:26, the concept, if not the very words, but also to Samaritans, Johnson says, whose religious and ethnic heritage, though related to the Jews, was tainted by intermarriage and pagan syncretism. God brings the gospel to them.

They're partial Jews. They have Jewish blood and other kind of blood mixed together. The Samaritans' religious and ethnic heritage, though related to the Jews, is tainted by intermarriage and pagan syncretism.

It's the Babylonians' fault. They practiced a transmigration of peoples. That is wrong.

It's the Assyrians' fault. Northern Kingdom Assyrians. When they conquered, when the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, they took anybody capable of revolting against Assyria out.

They left the poor and others who were of no danger to them there, and they brought people. They practiced a transmigration of peoples. They brought foreigners in. The thought was, well, these people won't even be able to communicate for years.

They're not going to rebel against Assyrian rule like that. And so, the Northern Kingdom then became no more, but a satellite of Assyria, and the product of those aliens coming in with the poor Jews who were left produced the Samaritans, who were despised by, quote, pure-blooded Jews, close quote, and who Jesus made the heroes of his parables. To show, especially in Luke, where we have the parable of the good Samaritan, that the good news goes to everyone.

Acts shows the gospel only goes to Jews, to Samaritans, to Gentile proselytes. That is, Gentiles, attracted by Jewish monotheism and its ethical code, actually were circumcised and made a commitment to Yahweh, the Lord of Israel, and became Jews, as it were. They were Gentile proselytes who became Jews.

Gentile God-fearers were those also attracted to monotheism and Jewish ethics over against the Gentile polytheism and immorality, but they did not submit to circumcision and become Jews. And even the gospel even went to Gentiles mired in idolatry. In taking Jesus' word of promise for his outline, Luke highlights the powerful force of God's Spirit, propelling divine vitality, purity, and grace out from the ancient holy place to bring the nations under the redemptive rule of the Lord and his Christ.

In Acts 9:15, another statement of Jesus complements the promise of Acts 1:8. To Saul, who would become Paul, God says, to Ananias, who must have been scared to death, his job was to go talk to Saul, whom the Lord has humbled and brought to himself, Jesus had brought to himself. Lord, I've heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority, Acts 9:14, from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.

But the Lord said to him, go, for he's a chosen instrument of mine, to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. So what Johnson is saying is, these are key texts indicating the progress of the gospel in the book of Acts. In 9:15,

another statement of Jesus complements the promise of Acts 1:8, suggesting in more detail the contents of the third major section of the book, that is, the apostolic witness to the ends of the earth.

That statement describes Saul of Tarsus, the witness whose mission dominates chapters 13 through 28. “but the Lord said to Ananias, go, this man is a select vessel belonging to me, to carry my name in the presence both of Gentiles and of kings and of Israel's sons.” Acts 9:15. As in Acts 1:8, we see here three spheres of witness. One, Gentiles; two, kings; and three, sons of Israel.

This threefold description nicely sums up the targets of Paul's preaching. As Luke has recorded it, his primary focus is on the Gentiles, chapters 13 through 20. His speeches before kings and rulers, chapters 24 to 26, and also his testimony to his own people, the sons of Israel, chapters 22 and 28.

One more time. So what Dennis Johnson is saying, Acts 1:8 is programmatic for the whole book, and Acts 9.15 is programmatic for the second half, if you will, for the half dealing with Paul. It shows his witness before Gentiles, chapters 13 to 20, before kings, 24 to 26, and also his testimony to the Jews, especially in chapters 22 and 28.

Thus, Paul's final words of witness in Acts contain a rebuke to Israel, reminiscent of Stephen's prophetic testimony against stiffness of neck and hardness of heart and hearing. Chapters 7.51 to 53. Stephen is a godly deacon, and boy, he tells us, he gives a hard message, too.

It gets him stoned to death. Acts 7:51, you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. Whoo! Smoking hot preaching. Scalding preaching.

Man! Whoo! Good night. Paul's final words of witness in Acts remind us of those words of Stephen. 7:51 to 53.

Combined with an expression of hopeful expectation that the gospel will be welcomed by the Gentiles. Back to Acts 28. Seems to me we've spent a lot of time on Luke 1:1 to 4. Luke 24, Acts 1, let's take it down through verse 8 and then Acts 28.

So, it's the beginnings and endings of these things that are most significant for the ordering of the material. 28:25 through 29. 23, when they had appointed a day for him, they came to him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

We're talking about the Jews. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement. "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, go to this people and say, you will indeed hear, but never understand. And you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear. And their eyes they have closed, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn and I would heal them. Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles."

They will listen. He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. These are important signposts, indeed, are they not? These two promises of Jesus, Acts 1:8, Acts 9:15, trace out for us the overarching framework for the 28 chapters of Acts, in which Luke chronicles the spread of the word of salvation.

In chapters 1 to 7, Jerusalem, Peter, Stephen, and Saul approve of Stephen's death. 1 to 7, Jerusalem, Peter, Stephen, and Saul approves of Stephen's death. 8 to 12, Judea and Samaria, Saul initiates dispersion.

Philip to Samaria, Ethiopian, Saul and Saul converted. Peter initiates the Gentile mission. 1 to 7, Jerusalem, 8 to 12, Judea and Samaria, 13 to 28, the last part of the earth.

8 to 12, Judea and Samaria, Saul initiates dispersion. It wasn't his purpose, but it was God's purpose. God used a chief persecutor to spread the gospel by driving the apostles and witnesses out of Jerusalem, and then he converted him.

Philip to Samaria, to the Ethiopian, Saul converted. Peter initiates Gentile mission. 1 to 7, Jerusalem, 8 to 12, Judea and Samaria, 13 to 28, the last part of the earth.

Paul/Peter confirms Gentile mission. 13 to 20, before Gentiles. 24 to 26, before Kings.

22 comma 28, before Israel's sons. One more time, 13 to 28, last part of the earth. Paul/Peter confirms Gentile mission.

13 to 20, Paul before Gentiles. 24 to 26, before Kings. 22 and 28, Paul before Israel's sons.

Another set of structural signposts in the narrative of Acts is summary statements. Within the larger sections, Luke's method is to give us snapshots or vignettes of the development of the church's life and witness. Samples of the Spirit's work are then joined to one another by summary statements.

These statements, though perhaps lacking the dramatic appeal of the action narratives, are vital to the purpose of Acts. They show us the ongoing results of each incident, and they set the scene for the next event that Luke intends to recount. As they perform these tasks, the summaries quietly but constantly set the tone for our perception of the Spirit's presence and activity in the church.

The word of the Lord grew powerfully. Early in Acts, several extended summaries place Pentecost, the healing of the layman in the temple, and the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira in the context of the continuing manifestation of the Spirit's power in the church. Bold and effective evangelism.

Mutual compassion is expressed in practical help. Joy mingled with a healthy fear. Then, after the appointment of the seven servers, Luke introduces a theme on which he will present variations in the rest of his narrative.

Acts 6-7. Acts 6-7. Word of God was growing.

Numbers of disciples in Jerusalem was multiplying exceedingly, and a large crowd of priests were obeying the faith. Acts 6-7. As Luke's narrative expands to embrace Judea and Samaria, "the word of God was growing and being multiplied."

Acts 12-24. The word of God was growing and being multiplied. In Persia, "the word of the Lord was permeating through the whole region."

13-49. In Pisidia, I think I said something else. In Pisidia, the word of the Lord was permeating through the whole region.

Acts 13:49. Likewise, in Ephesus, "the word of the Lord was growing powerfully and exerting strength." Compare 19:20.

In Ephesus, the word of the Lord was growing powerfully and exerting strength. Luke introduced his two-volume narrative by referring to, quote, those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Luke 1-2.

NIV. Signaling from the outset the importance that he attached to the powerful word about Jesus. Now, in Acts, his repeated reference to the dynamic growth of the word underscores the theme that the Holy Spirit's power is focused on the glad announcement of salvation in Jesus Christ.

So, signposts. Acts 1:8 and 9:15, giving geographical directions, if you will, outlines. Summary statements are really important, especially in the earlier chapters.

Repeated accounts. A third feature of Luke's structure is a device borrowed from those who told the story of Israel in the Old Testament scriptures. Although modern readers have little patience for what seems to us to be needless duplication, biblical narrators prefer to underscore an event's importance by repeating the story with slight variations, like the repetition and development of a musical motif in a symphony.

If we compare, for example, Genesis 24 1-27 with Genesis 24 34-49, as we should, since they belong to the same story, we find that the narrator leads us step-by-step through Abraham's servants' successful search for Isaac's bride, not once, but twice. Why the wasted words? Because Isaac is the son of promise, through whose descendants God will keep his promise to Abraham, and therefore Isaac's marriage is crucial to the fulfillment of the divine promises. We are invited to marvel, yes, and marvel again at the astounding guidance and provision of God in giving the bride of his own choosing to the covenant heir.

Similarly, Luke uses repetition to underscore the importance of three pivotal events. Let's get them all out together. One is the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Two, the conversion of Cornelius and his associates. And three, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. One, the Spirit's coming at Pentecost is described in chapter two.

But it is also recalled by Peter in his report to the Jerusalem church regarding Cornelius, together with a specific reminder of the words of Jesus quoted by Luke prior to Pentecost. Then I remembered what the Lord had said. John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 11:16. That is what Jesus says in Acts 1:5. Wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, you heard from me. For Jesus says, Acts 1:5, John baptized with water, but you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. This was fulfilled when Jesus and the Father poured out the Holy Spirit on the church.

Again, at the Jerusalem council, Peter recalls the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. Acts 15:8. That makes a second repetition, although it's a summary statement. And so, three times we have a reference, the Spirit at Pentecost.

Acts 15:8. And God, Peter speaking, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them, the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. By these references, Luke, just as he did to us, recalls Pentecost. Through these references, Luke reminds us that the reception of the Spirit is the touchstone of the Christian experience.

No Holy Spirit, no conversion. It is that simple. Two, the conversion of the Gentiles at Cornelius' house is described not only by Luke as the narrator in chapter 10, but also by Peter upon his return to the church in Jerusalem, including the details of Peter's preparatory vision.

Again, 11:4-17. Peter refers again to the turning point in Cornelius' home when he speaks at the council of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Brothers, you know that some time ago, God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. Acts 15:7 NIV.

So, we have the event of the salvation of Cornelius' family and friends in chapter 10. Peter repeats it to the church in Jerusalem, chapter 11:4-17. And then, once again, a summary statement in 15:7 at the Jerusalem council. Why belabor the point, Johnson asks, because the pouring out of the Spirit, God's gift of welcome on the Gentiles in Peter's presence makes them the witness who can testify that God's salvation has burst the boundaries of Israel's cultic and cultural distinctiveness.

The risen Lord summons the ends of the earth to turn to him for salvation. And as they come, he sweeps from their path the ruins of the walls that have kept the unlawful aliens out of Israel's covenant privilege. Circumcision, sanctuary, calendar, diet, all are bypassed.

As the glory of God lavishes himself on outsiders. Three, finally we read three times of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. First from the narrator, chapter 9:1-30. Then twice in Paul's own speeches, 22:1-16, 26:2-18. The actual event is described by the narrator, 9:1-30. Paul, in his speeches, repeats it, 22:1-16, 26:2-18. Although intriguing differences in detail puzzle us, the account of the awesome Christophany on the road to Damascus is essentially the same in all three accounts.

We may find it odd that Luke did not economize papyrus by inserting a terse summary in chapters 22 and 26. Such as, quote, then Paul told about his conversion, close quote. But Luke's extravagant repetition is the better way.

He will not let us forget the world-changing significance of the call of the apostle to the Gentiles. He will have us listen to that call again and again. And with each repetition, he adds details that increase the luster of this conquest of grace.

The persecutor turned into a propagator. Paragon of self-righteousness reduced to penitent dependence on another's righteousness. An aloof zealot for Israel's purity sent to mingle with polluted pagans as the preeminent exhibit of God's cleansing mercy.

See 1 Timothy 1:12-16, where Paul says Jesus sets him forth as the greatest, a convert who is of the greatest of sinners, as an example of Jesus' patience, mercy, and grace. 1 Timothy 1:12-16 The fourth structural signpost is the prominence of preaching in the book of Acts. Luke illustrates his persistent reminders that the word was growing by preserving a substantial sample of Christian preaching.

At least 30% of the text of Acts consists of apostolic preaching either in fairly full form or in summary. Many miracles recorded in Acts are pretexts for preaching. Introduce sermons that interpret the miracle's true significance.

The preaching in fact receives more extended treatment than the related signs of power. For example, although the events associated with the Spirit's coming at Pentecost are recorded in 13 verses, Peter's sermon explaining the events takes up 23 verses. Chapter 2 Similarly, the healing of a lame man in the temple is described in 10 verses.

It is followed by two speeches of Peter's totaling 22 verses to explain its implications. Chapters 3 and 4 Luke has selected speeches strategically, including samples of how the gospel was addressed to various audiences in its expansion from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. In Jerusalem, Peter's speech at Pentecost shows the connection between the Spirit's coming and Jesus' exaltation.

Chapter 2 Peter's speech in Solomon's Covenant, Chapter 3, and its follow-up before the Sanhedrin, 4:8-12, focus on the power of Jesus' name to bring the blessing of the last days. Stephen's speech is a prophetic indictment of Israel's rebellion against the deliverers sent by God. Chapter 7 Leading to the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem The next phase in the expansion of the gospel in Judea and Samaria is transitional.

We have brief summaries of Philip's preaching to Samaritans and an Ethiopian, 8:12 and 8:32-35. But the major speeches center on the conversion of Cornelius and his friends through the proclamation of Peter. As the word moves to the ends of the earth, we hear it preached in a synagogue of the dispersion.

Chapter 13 Among superstitious pagans Chapter 17 To elders of the church in deliberation 15:13-21 And in farewell Paul's famous speech in Chapter 20 And in circumstances of legal defense chapters 22 and 26 at the close of Acts, Luke leaves us, in a sense, with Paul's preaching ringing in our ears. Quote, he was explaining, solemnly testifying concerning the kingdom of God and persuading them about Jesus from the law of Moses and the prophets from morning until evening. Close quote, Acts 28:23 Quote, he was preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Acts 28:31 If we are to understand Acts and its message for the church today, we must certainly pay careful attention to the sermons of Acts, those divinely given apostolic commentaries on the stirring events that mark the church's entrance into the age of the Spirit's power. A one-paragraph conclusion closes Dennis Johnson's good introduction. Our study of Acts will be enriched as we pay attention to the bridges that link God's mighty work through the apostles with other dimensions of his redeeming work and revealing word.

The bridge to Old Testament words of promise and deeds of anticipated deliverance. The bridge to the ministry of Jesus recounted in Luke's gospel. The bridge to the epistles of Paul and other apostles through whom the Spirit set his works in theological context and clear focus.

The bridges within the narrative of Acts itself, which signal turning points and interwoven strands of continuity as a message of salvation in Jesus Christ, bridge chasms and break down barriers to extend God's grace to Jews and Gentiles alike. In our next lecture, I will share my own study of the people of God in Acts, that is, the church in Acts.

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