

## **Dr. Robert Peterson, The Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 18, Marshall, 3. Progress Despite Opposition, 4. Gentile Inclusion, 5. Church Life and Organization**

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on the theology of Luke-Acts. This is session 18 by Howard Marshall. 3. Progress despite opposition. 4. Gentile inclusion, 5. Church life and organization.

We continue our lectures on Lukan theology, specifically in Acts, with Howard Marshall's commentary on Acts. Theology of Acts, God's purpose in history, the mission and the message, and now progress despite opposition.

Acts is much concerned with the opposition that surrounds the spread of the gospel. Acts 14:22. Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. 14:22. Luke recognizes that just as the way of Jesus took him through opposition, culminating in judicial murder, so too the path of the word of God is beset by opposition.

So, we're not surprised that Acts lists opposition to the gospel because Jesus surely had opposition. His whole ministry basically culminated in his judicial murder. Acts begins with the mockery of the apostles on the day of Pentecost and continues with the attempts of the Sanhedrin to force them to remain silent about Jesus.

It comes to a swift climax in the death of the first martyr, Stephen, and the wave of persecution that followed his death. A Jewish king attempted to curry favor with the people by putting James to death, and only a miracle saved Peter from the same fate. When the missionaries moved out into the Roman world, they were dogged by opposition.

Usually, it began with the Jews who viewed the evangelism of the Gentiles with disfavor. But in many cases, the Jews were able to gain support from pagan sympathizers in acts of violence against the missionaries. This led, on occasion, to the missionaries being brought before the magistrates.

The attitude of the latter was ambivalent. On occasion, they were quite prepared to administer summary justice against people who appeared to be responsible for breaches of the peace. At other times, however, they appear not so much as defenders of the missionaries, but rather as unbiased and disinterested upholders of the law, who recognize that the activities of the missionaries are in no way contrary to Roman law and custom.

The paradigm case is that of Paul, and it is Luke's interest in this theme that has led to the remarkable amount of space devoted to his period of captivity. Here, Luke makes it quite plain that Paul had not offended the laws of Rome and that, in a sense, only a legal technicality prevented his being set free by the Roman governor. At the same time, however, the story suggests that Roman governors were not free from blame in their handling of the affair.

So long as governors were prepared to buy favor from the Jews and to seek bribes from defendants, Christians must expect to receive less than justice. Luke thus shows an awareness of the hard realities of life. No matter how innocent Christians might be, they could still expect to be victims of injustice.

So far as the Jews were concerned, the charges against Paul were that he tried to profane the temple and, more generally, that he was promoting a Jewish heresy wherever he went. The first of these charges, which was little more than a pretext for his arrest, is simply denied. On the contrary, Paul was presented as a law-abiding Jewish worshiper.

The second charge is refuted by the argument that Paul was simply worshiping and serving God in the way that had been laid down in the Old Testament and that he was and remained a Pharisee in his convictions. In other words, Christianity is true Judaism. This basic point is made at length, but it is clear that it cut no ice with the Jews, although some of the Pharisees were sympathetic to it.

Here again, Luke can only present the hard reality that many Jews refuse to accept the Christian claim that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism. At the same time, Luke is using the motif to indicate that from a Roman point of view, Christianity should be regarded as a legitimate development of Judaism and should, therefore, receive the same privileged position as a tolerated religion within the Empire. The quarrels between Jews and Christians are theological in nature and do not come within the cognizance of Roman law.

In fact, in the face of this opposition, two important facts emerge. One, Christians are called to stand firm and be faithful despite the tribulations that they must endure. When they are commanded to stop preaching, their answer is a defiant refusal to do so.

True, they find it necessary to retreat from towns where they are forbidden to continue preaching, but they simply carry on evangelism wherever they find an opportunity to do so. The gospel command did not require them to continue to battle on in situations where they were unwelcome, but having faithfully borne their witness, they were required to move on elsewhere. Compare Luke 9:5. Jesus said, and wherever they do not receive you when you leave the town, shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.

So, they're simply following the master Jesus instructions in the gospel of Luke, when the apostles in Acts move on from places where they are very unwelcome. In the trial of Paul, a different feature emerges. Paul uses the courtroom as a place to bear witness.

His concern is not so much to defend himself as to proclaim the gospel. Luke 21:12 through 15. Luke 21:12.

When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Paul says, Agabus, the prophet, took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it and said, thus says the Holy Spirit, this is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns the belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Then Paul answered, what are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I'm ready not only to be in prison but even to die in Jerusalem in the name of the Lord Jesus. And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, let the will of the Lord be done. Opposition becomes an occasion for evangelism.

This, of course, was also true of Peter and Stephen when they appeared in court scenes. The other fact is that despite the opposition, the word of God continues its triumphal progress. The hand of God is upon the missionaries, even in the midst of persecution.

It does not remove them from danger and suffering, but on occasion, they find divine protection from their enemies. Here again, Luke's realism comes out. James dies, but Peter survives to fight another day.

Paul was brought safely from Jerusalem to Rome despite every kind of obstacle and danger. God's declared purpose will be fulfilled, no matter what the opposition. Acts is the story of the triumphant progress of the word of God.

Fourth, theological theme. And my, have we seen this one? Every author that we have consulted, treating the book of Acts and its teachings emphasizes Gentile inclusion, and well, they should. Because as Acts 1:8 is played out, you'll receive the Holy Spirit.

The implication is to empower you for witness, which will take place in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the end of the earth. As that purpose is played out, the Gentiles are included in the people of God. So the fourth theme is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God.

That's longhand, shorthand Gentile inclusion. Acts reflects the tremendous tensions which existed in the early church over the basis of the Gentile mission. Although the gospels record the commission given by Jesus that his disciples should take the gospel to all nations, at first, the church was composed of Jews and carried out its evangelism among Jews.

Contrary to a widespread popular belief, Luke makes no mention of Gentiles being present on the day of Pentecost other than Jewish proselytes, Acts 2:10. But within a few years, the church found itself preaching the gospel to Samaritans, uncircumcised God-fearers, and finally to pagan Gentiles. This progression is seen by Luke as divinely willed and prophesied. It was a turn of events that came about apart from any conscious planning by the church.

The church had to come to terms with this fact. The essence of the problem was whether the rise of the church had produced a new society that was different from Judaism. Since the first Christians were Jews, it was natural for them to live as Jews, to circumcise their children, and to live according to the law of Moses, although admittedly, there could be variations in the interpretation of the law, and Jesus himself had displayed considerable freedom with regard to certain aspects of it.

The same way of life could be expected of Jewish proselytes who were converted to Christianity. Christianity could then be seen as the true and proper fulfillment of Judaism. The promised Messiah had come and brought renewal to his people. Two factors disturbed this easy assumption.

On the one hand, it became increasingly obvious that the Jewish leaders and many of the people were not prepared to accept Jesus as the Messiah, and an easy evolution from first-century Judaism to Christianity simply by incorporating the Christian message of Jesus as the Messiah was ruled out. No easy movement. In fact, the Judaism of the early church's contemporaries had turned aside from the truth.

It was Stephen who voiced criticism of the Jews of his time, alleging they had failed to follow truly the law of Moses and that their worship of God in the temple was displeasing to him. Not surprisingly, this attack provoked strong opposition from the Jewish leaders, and we may suspect that Stephen's outlook was not immediately shared by all members of the church. Nevertheless, it was bound to become increasingly obvious that official Judaism was opposed to the church and regarded its views as heretical.

On the other hand, there was the problem of the entry of the Gentiles into the church. This not only intensified the opposition against the church from Judaism, it also raised acute questions within the church regarding its character and its way of life. There has been much discussion regarding the way in which Luke envisioned the nature of the church.

One view is that he saw it as essentially a Jewish institution. The people of God, consisting of Jews, and from which Jews who refused to repent cut themselves off, and to which believing Gentiles can be joined. The other view is that Luke saw God's purpose as the gathering of a new Israel, composed of both Jews and Gentiles and that he describes the progressive separation of the church from Judaism.

The truth probably lies somewhere between these extremes. In our view, Luke stresses the Jewish origins of the church and its roots in Old Testament prophecy but shows it is a people of God, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, in which Jews may find the fulfillment of Judaism, and Gentiles are not required to become Jews. Those two views, the first is associated with the name of a scholar named Jervel.

The church is essentially Jewish, people of God consisting of Jews, and from which Jews who refused to repent cut themselves off, and to which believing Gentiles can be joined into this Jewish movement. Other view that the church is a new Israel, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and that Luke describes the progressive separation of the church from Judaism. Marshall says the truth lies in between.

How is this possible on a practical level? The problem is twofold. First, could Jewish Christians have fellowship with Gentiles without becoming unclean through contact with people who did not observe the law of Moses? Secondly, could Gentiles come into a true relationship with God and his people merely by accepting Jesus as the Messiah? Were they not required to accept the Jewish law, including circumcision? Luke was quite certain that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised, but this solution led to searching struggles of conscience for Jewish Christians. For many years, a group of strictly law-abiding Jewish Christians continued to exist in Palestine in isolation from the rest of the church.

Luke depicts how the problem was solved in the early days. When God poured out his spirit on the Gentiles, Peter was prepared to accept them as members of God's people and to eat with them. The vision that he received from God showed him there was no longer a distinction between clean and unclean foods.

But it is doubtful how quickly other Jewish Christians came to share Peter's viewpoint. And even he found it difficult to maintain it consistently, as Paul criticizes him in Galatians 2 to his face for dissembling being with Gentile Christians. And when Jewish Christians came, he left the Gentiles and went with the Jews.

Paul says, Peter, you're not living according to the gospel. He was somewhat hypocritical and did not follow his own principles. May God guard us from hypocrisy.

When the Jerusalem church met with representatives from Antioch to consider the matter, the fundamental point that was accepted was that the Gentiles did not need

to be circumcised. At the same time, however, they were asked to avoid alienating their Jewish colleagues by abstaining from food, sacrifice to idols, and from meat not slaughtered in the Jewish manner, and by observing Jewish standards of sexual behavior. These requirements bear some resemblance to the rules already accepted by God-fearers who worshiped in the synagogues.

The only really difficult point was the rule about meat, and this may have applied only to common meals with Jews, Marshall notes. In this way, it was possible for strictly law-abiding Jews to recognize the validity of the Gentile mission. How long the regulations continued in force is not known.

They were probably taken seriously in Jerusalem under mounting zealot pressure in favor of the preservation of Jewish national and cultural identity. Paul himself lived as a law-abiding Jew among Jews, according to 1 Corinthians 9, although he strongly protested his freedom of conscience. He was not bound by conscience to live as a Jew when he was with the Jews, but he did so for the sake of the gospel.

He was free. Free means, Christian liberty means that you don't always have to exercise your liberty. You're free to conform for the sake of weaker brothers or sisters or for the sake of non-offending in evangelism, those who don't have the freedom of the gospel.

It is unlikely that the Jerusalem regulations had a long or wide currency, however, and they probably fell into disuse. When they are echoed in Revelation 2:14 and 20, the ruling about meat appears to have been quietly dropped. In the letters to the seven churches, the church in Pergamum, but I have a few things against you.

You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel so that they might eat food, sacrifice to idols, and practice sexual immorality. Not immortality, mind you, immorality. Verse 20, the church in Thyatira, but I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Alongside the acceptance of the Gentiles, Luke chronicles the increasing refusal of the Jews to accept the gospel. Paul's regular practice was to begin his mission in the local synagogue, and we almost gained the impression that only when the Jews refused the gospel did he turn to the Gentiles. Acts 13, 46 is an explicit case of it, as we saw.

The Jews stirred up the city in Iconium to oppose Paul out of jealousy, it says. That just gets me. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying they contradicted what Paul said, made fun of him, and made such a ruckus they couldn't even keep preaching, Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying it was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you, but since you thrust aside and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. It may be better to say that the Gentile mission took place once the Jews had had the opportunity to hear the gospel first. Paul recognized that the gospel was for the Jew first, but also for the Greek, Romans 1:16.

When the Jews rejected the gospel, they were rejected by God from his people, a fact symbolized when the missionaries shook off the dust from their feet against them and turned to the Gentiles. The point which is made in Acts 13:46, which I just read, is repeated with tremendous emphasis at the climax of the book in 28, Acts 28, 25 to 28. It sounds like much the same thing.

Let it be known to you the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen after quoting Isaiah's words about people with hardened hearts and blind eyes and deaf ears, and so forth.

So that does seem to be the pattern. Yet one factor strangely absent from Acts is any reference to the divine judgment upon Jerusalem, which figures so prominently in the gospel of Luke. Luke 13, 34 and following.

Lament over Jerusalem. Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jesus lamented. The city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Good question. Why is this absent from Acts? 19 of Luke 41 to 44. And when he drew near and saw the city, Jesus wept over it saying, would that you even you had known on this day the things that make for peace.

But now they are hidden from your eyes for the days will come upon you when your enemies set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground. You and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you because you did not know the time of your visitation.

Notice the heart of Jesus. Their words are of judgment, but they're mixed with pathos born out of a desire to save. Some cannot easily coordinate with God's sovereign will which the Bible puts together in sort of a paradox, not smoothing out all the rough places concerning those things.

Acts 21, the eschatological discourse, Acts 21:20. But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Let those who are inside the city depart. Let not those who are out in the country enter it. For these are the days of vengeance to fulfill all that is written.

Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days, for there'll be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Jerusalem, which figures in the gospel as the place of the Lord's rejection, becomes the place where he rises from the dead, where the spirit is poured out, and where the church begins its work. In Acts, it is official Judaism rather than Jerusalem, which stands under condemnation for refusing the gospel. The life and organization of the church, number five.

Could we reason that the destruction of Jerusalem is absent from Acts because it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem? Life and organization of the church. Luke is concerned to offer a picture of the life and worship of the church, no doubt, as a pattern to provide guidance for his own time. From the brief summaries in the early chapters of Acts, 2:42-47, and 4:32-37, we gain a picture of small groups meeting together for teaching, fellowship, prayer, and the breaking of bread.

Entrance to the church is by baptism with water. Luke particularly stresses the importance of the spirit in the life of the church. The spirit is the common possession of every Christian, the source of joy and power.

And Christian leaders are people who are especially filled with the spirit to perform their various functions. The spirit guides the church in its choice of leaders and in its evangelistic activity to such an extent that Acts has sometimes been described as the book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit. As F. F. Bruce famously did, quoting an earlier writer in the journal called *Interpretation*, volume 27, 1973, pages 166 and following, the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Initially, the leadership of the church was in the hands of the apostles in Jerusalem, together with the elders. And the church in Jerusalem occupied an important place in relation to the other churches, which grew up subsequently. There were elders in the local churches, and special significance is attached to prophets and teachers, some of whom appear to have been resident, while others were more itinerant.



Luke says so little about how such people were appointed and what they did that we can only conclude he did not regard this as important. Yet we are told how an apostle was appointed to replace Judas and how seven men to assist the apostles were chosen. We hear briefly how missionaries were sent out by the church in Antioch and how Paul appointed elders in the churches which he founded.

This is sufficient evidence to show that for Luke, the significant factors were the spiritual qualities of the persons chosen and the guidance of the spirit in the meetings that appointed them. We also learn something about the work of missionaries. The principle of teamwork was established from the start.

For the most part, the missionaries traveled in groups of three or more. Peter and Philip were exceptions to the rule. Chapters 8 through 10.

Luke's manner of presentation has suggested to many readers that we should think of Paul and his colleagues as carrying on missionary journeys. But a closer study of the narrative shows that, in fact, Paul stayed in important centers of population for considerable periods of time. Three years in Ephesus, for example.

Whether Luke fully recognized Paul's principles of working is not clear, but he certainly gives us evidence that Paul's journeys were far from being whistle-stop tours. Luke records several sermons as examples of the way in which the gospel was preached. And one example of Paul speaking to Christian leaders about their responsibilities, as we have seen, Acts 20:17 to 35.

His exhortation to the Ephesian elders gathered a kind of a proto-Presbytery at Ephesus. The variety in these missionary sermons and the speeches of Acts on trial before Jewish and Roman bodies is no doubt meant to illustrate the different ways in which the gospel was presented to different groups of people. Jews and Greeks, cultured and uncultured, and it is hard to resist the impression that the sermons are presented as models for Luke's readers to use in their own evangelism.

It is material of this kind that has led to the characterization of Acts as edifying. Although the term, as used by Hentgen, seems at least mildly derogatory, Hentgen is a very critical scholar who really questions the historicity of much of Acts; it is a proper and respectable word to use to describe this book. It is edifying, intended as it is to show the Christians of Luke's day what it means to be the church and how they should continue to live according to the pattern established in the early days.

Luke's story is very much structured on the careers of the two Christian leaders, Peter and Paul. There are interesting parallels between the two men and one can also trace some parallelism between the careers of Jesus and Paul. Some scholars have shown great ingenuity in discerning this parallelism in detail and have probably exaggerated its presence.

Howard Marshall is a scholar of moderation. He often says, here's one viewpoint, here's another one, and the truth lies somewhere in between. And he convinces me again and again.

In broad terms, however, the claim is persuasive and shows that Luke saw a pattern for the life of the church and its missionaries in the life of its earthly master. What he's saying is Jesus' example in the gospel of Luke serves as a pattern for the lives of especially Peter, but especially Paul. And that this is divinely ordained and given to us for our instruction.

In our next lecture, we will take up the historicity of Acts and the important lessons to be learned from that.

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