

Dr. Robert Peterson, Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12, Dennis Johnson: How Should We Read Acts? Guidelines Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Peterson, Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12, Dennis Johnson: How Should We Read Acts? Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Robert Peterson's session on Luke-Acts focuses on guidelines for properly interpreting the book of Acts. He examines Dennis Johnson's perspective on reading Acts within the history of redemption, emphasizing its relevance for the church today in various states of spiritual vitality. **Peterson highlights two extreme but flawed approaches: that everything in Acts should be replicated, or that nothing is normative.** He stresses the importance of discerning God's moral verdicts within the narratives and identifying principles applicable across time. **The session proposes reading Acts in light of Luke's purpose, the New Testament epistles, the Old Testament, Luke's Gospel, and the book's structure to avoid misinterpretations and understand its enduring message.**

**2. 12 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Peterson, Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12 – Double click
icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (New Testament → Gospels → Luke).**



**Peterson_Theo_LkA
cts_Session12.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12, Dennis Johnson: How Should We Read Acts?

Briefing Document: Reading the Book of Acts

Overview: This briefing document summarizes Dr. Robert Peterson's lecture on how to read the Book of Acts, drawing heavily on Dennis Johnson's work. The central theme revolves around understanding Acts not merely as a historical account, but as a divinely inspired narrative that provides insight into God's design for the church. Peterson highlights the dangers of two extreme approaches to interpreting Acts: treating everything approved in Acts as a direct mandate for today, and dismissing Acts as having no normative value for contemporary believers. Instead, he emphasizes a nuanced approach that considers Luke's purpose, the relationship between Acts and the epistles, the Old Testament context, Luke's Gospel, and the structure of Acts itself.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. The Need for Acts Today:

- **Combating Complacency:** When churches become stagnant and inward-focused, Acts serves as a vital reminder of the vibrant and outward-reaching nature of the early church. As Johnson states, "When familiarity breeds contentment and complacency... 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."
- **Navigating Revival:** Conversely, when the church experiences rapid growth and intense emotions, Acts provides crucial guidance for nurturing new believers and addressing potential pitfalls like false teaching and self-centeredness. "When the fires of revival set the church alight... 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."
- **Understanding God's Design:** Regardless of the church's condition, Acts offers a "blueprint" for understanding God's intentions for His people. "Whatever our condition as the Church of Jesus Christ may be... Luke's second volume... 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."

- **Seeing Principles in Action:** Acts demonstrates how the instructions found in the New Testament epistles were lived out in real historical contexts. "As we return to those thrilling days of yesteryear, we see the New Testament epistles, instructions for living, fleshed out in real history."

2. The Challenges of Interpreting Historical Narrative:

- **Discerning God's Verdict:** Not everything recorded in Acts has God's approval. The narrative includes negative examples like the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira or the greed of the Ephesian silversmiths. "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..."
- **Identifying Normative Practices:** Determining which practices in Acts are intended as normative for all churches in all ages is a complex task. Just because God approved of something in the early church doesn't automatically mean it's a direct command for today. The example of the early church sharing all possessions raises the question: "Should we take this commendation of the early Church's readiness to share as God's hint that He desires radical economic communalism...? 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...?"

3. Two Extreme and Unreliable Approaches:

- **The "Everything Goes" Approach:** This view incorrectly assumes that every practice or event in Acts that God doesn't explicitly condemn should be replicated today. This leads to absurd conclusions, such as expecting modern churches to have apostles who walked with Jesus, experience literal earthquakes and roaring winds during the Spirit's coming, or practice divinely administered capital punishment. "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... or that those who are in the Spirit can handle snakes safely..."
- **The "Nothing Applies" Approach:** This equally flawed perspective argues that Acts describes only the unique infancy of the church and holds no normative value for contemporary believers. This view often arises when aspects of the early church's life challenge the status quo. "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." Peterson points out the inconsistency of this view, asking, "Would any church say we should not evangelize?"

4. Guidelines for Correctly Reading Acts:

Peterson outlines five crucial guidelines for interpreting and applying the message of Acts:

- **Read Acts in Light of Luke's Purpose:** Luke's aim is not simply to record history, but to provide a "thorough and orderly written account to confirm the life-changing message [Theophilus has] heard." He is writing about the climax of God's redemptive act in history. The focus is on God's saving acts and their implications for our response.
- **Read Acts in Light of the New Testament Epistles:** While Acts provides historical context, the epistles offer direct instruction and theological exposition. "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." If interpretations of Acts contradict the doctrines in the epistles, those interpretations are likely flawed.
- **Read Acts in Light of the Old Testament:** The Old Testament is foundational to understanding Acts. The speeches and sermons in Acts frequently quote and interpret the scriptures in light of Christ's coming. Luke's narrative style also echoes Hebrew prophetic history. "The prominence of the Old Testament in the speeches and sermons of Acts is obvious to any reader of the Bible..."
- **Read Acts in Light of Luke's First Volume (The Gospel of Luke):** Acts is a sequel to Luke's Gospel and should be read in continuity with it. Luke's overall theological concerns and narrative themes continue in Acts.
- **Read Acts in Light of Its Structure:** Understanding the literary structure of Acts can provide insights into Luke's intended emphasis and message.

5. Luke's Unique Contribution:

- Luke stands out as the only New Testament evangelist to write a sequel to Jesus' earthly ministry. This may be because he was writing for those who lacked direct contact with the apostolic eyewitnesses.
- Luke writes "prophetically interpreted history," aiming for his historical account to impact the faith and lives of his readers, similar to the ethical instruction found in Old Testament history (1 Corinthians 10:11, Romans 15:4). "Luke 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."
- Luke grounds the Christian faith in historical reality, distinguishing it from mysticism, mythology, and speculation. He cites historical details to emphasize the tangible nature of God's intervention in human history through Jesus' death, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

Dr. Peterson, drawing on Dennis Johnson's insights, argues for a careful and contextualized reading of Acts. We must avoid the extremes of applying everything literally or dismissing everything as irrelevant. Instead, by understanding Luke's purpose, engaging with the theological framework of the epistles, recognizing the Old Testament roots, considering the continuity with Luke's Gospel, and appreciating the structure of Acts, we can discern the enduring principles and normative guidance that this crucial book offers for the church today. Acts serves as a vital reminder of God's powerful work in the early church and inspires us to seek His design for our own fellowships and mission.

4. Study Guide: Peterson, Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12, Dennis Johnson: How Should We Read Acts?

Studying the Theology of Luke-Acts: Reading Acts with Dennis Johnson

Quiz: How Should We Read Acts?

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each, based on the provided excerpts.

1. According to Peterson, what are two scenarios that highlight the ongoing need for the book of Acts in the life of the church?
2. What are the two crucial questions we must ask when reading historical narratives in the Bible, according to the source material?
3. Give one example from Acts where the Lord clearly does not approve of the recorded actions. Why is it important to recognize such instances?
4. What are the two extreme answers to the question of how the historical portrait of the early church in Acts serves as a normative precedent for the church today?
5. Why is the argument that "everything in Acts that the Lord approves should be reproduced in the Church today" considered problematic? Provide one specific example mentioned in the text.
6. Why is the opposing extreme view, that "nothing in Acts is normative for the church today," also considered doubtful? Give one example to support this.
7. According to the guidelines presented, what is the primary lens through which we should initially read and understand the book of Acts?
8. How do the New Testament epistles help in our understanding and application of the book of Acts? What is their role in relation to Acts?
9. In what ways does Luke's writing in Acts demonstrate a connection to the Old Testament, beyond direct quotations in speeches?
10. What is the significance of the historical narrative genre of Acts, and what limitation does it impose on Luke's ability to communicate theological explanations?

Quiz Answer Key

1. One scenario is when churches become complacent and routine, losing their initial zeal and focus. The other is when churches experience rapid growth and

revival, facing challenges like false teachers and internal friction. In both situations, the church needs to revisit Acts to understand what is truly normal for Christ's followers.

2. The two crucial questions are: first, what is God's moral verdict on the events narrated? Second, what does God intend us to learn here and now from what happened there and then? These questions help us discern God's perspective and the enduring lessons from biblical history.
3. The hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira is an example of an action the Lord clearly disapproves of, demonstrated by the severe consequences they faced. Recognizing such instances is important because it shows that not everything recorded in Scripture is intended for direct imitation by the church today.
4. The two extreme answers are: first, everything in Acts that the Lord approves should be reproduced in the church today; and second, nothing in Acts is normative for the church today. Both of these perspectives are considered unreliable guides for applying the message of Acts.
5. The "everything" answer is problematic because it leads to absurd conclusions and is inconsistent with the broader theology of the New Testament, which highlights the unique role of the apostles. For example, consistently applying this would require every church to have apostles who walked with Jesus and witness the Spirit coming with an earthquake and roar of wind.
6. The "nothing" answer is doubtful because it would imply that fundamental practices of the early church, such as evangelism and forming churches, are not relevant today. It seems unlikely that any church would consistently reject the idea that people need to believe in Jesus.
7. According to the guidelines, we should primarily read Acts in the light of Luke's purpose. Understanding Luke's intention in writing this historical account is crucial for correctly interpreting and applying its message to the contemporary church.
8. The New Testament epistles, written to direct and correct church life, faith, and practice, provide a necessary check on the applications we draw from Acts. If our theological conclusions from Acts contradict the doctrine of the epistles, it indicates a misunderstanding of Acts' teaching.
9. Beyond direct quotations, Luke's narrative style itself echoes Hebrew ways of speaking, reinforcing his message in the tradition of Hebrew prophetic history.

Additionally, Old Testament themes such as the Spirit, the servant, and persecution are brought to new realization in the context of the early church.

10. The historical narrative genre of Acts provides a grounded account of God's intervention in history, distinct from abstract theories or mythology, by attesting to real events and witnesses. However, this genre limits Luke's ability to offer extensive commentary or theological essays to clarify every potential misunderstanding.

Essay Format Questions

1. Discuss the dangers of adopting either extreme view regarding the normative nature of the book of Acts for the contemporary church. Provide specific examples from the text to support your arguments for both extremes.
2. Explain the significance of reading the book of Acts in light of Luke's overall purpose in writing both his Gospel and Acts. How does understanding his intended audience and objective shape our interpretation of the events recorded?
3. Analyze the relationship between the book of Acts and the New Testament epistles in determining what practices and teachings from the early church are normative for today. How do these two parts of the New Testament complement and correct each other in guiding church life?
4. Explore the ways in which the book of Acts builds upon and fulfills themes and prophecies from the Old Testament. Provide specific examples of Old Testament connections and explain their significance in understanding Luke's theological perspective.
5. Consider the challenges and benefits of interpreting theological truths through historical narrative, as exemplified by the book of Acts. How does this genre both illuminate and potentially obscure direct application to contemporary contexts?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Normative:** Establishing a standard or model of behavior or practice. In the context of Acts, it refers to which actions and teachings of the early church should be considered binding or exemplary for the church today.
- **Historical Precedent:** A past event or action that serves as a guide or justification for subsequent actions or beliefs. The study of Acts involves discerning which historical precedents are intended to be normative.
- **Redemptive Act:** God's saving work in history, particularly through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Acts is presented as the continuation of this redemptive act through the Holy Spirit and the church.
- **Apostolic Testimony:** The eyewitness accounts and teachings of the apostles, who were chosen by Jesus and played a foundational role in the early church. Their unique position and authority are important considerations when interpreting Acts.
- **Church Polity:** The organizational structure and governance of the church. While Acts depicts aspects of early church life, it is not primarily intended as a manual for church polity.
- **Apologetic Strategy:** The method and approach used to defend and commend the Christian faith to those who do not believe. Paul's speech at Athens is an example discussed in the text.
- **Catechized:** Instructed in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Luke's Gospel and Acts are written to provide a thorough account for those who have already received some initial instruction.
- **Prophetic History:** A way of writing history that interprets events through a theological lens, seeing God's hand at work and drawing lessons for faith and life. Luke's writing is described as fitting within this tradition.
- **Cosmic Renewal:** The future restoration of all things when Jesus returns, a theme that the miracles in Acts are seen as providing a preview of.
- **Communalism:** A social system in which goods are owned in common and available to all as needed. The early church's sharing of resources in Acts raises questions about whether this is a normative model.

5. FAQs on Peterson, Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 12, Dennis Johnson: How Should We Read Acts?, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about Reading the Book of Acts

1. Why should contemporary churches and Christians pay attention to the Book of Acts? The Book of Acts serves as a crucial record of what is truly "normal" for Christ's church. When churches become complacent, inwardly focused, or lose their zeal, Acts provides a revitalizing vision of the early church's vibrant worship, bold witnessing, and active compassion. Similarly, when churches experience rapid growth and face new challenges, Acts offers guidance by illustrating how the early church navigated similar situations. Regardless of the church's condition, Acts is God's call to remember and reflect on His design for His church, providing a historical context for the instructions found in the New Testament epistles.

2. What are the two extreme and problematic approaches to applying the historical events of Acts to the present day? The first extreme approach is the belief that everything in Acts that God seemingly approves of should be directly reproduced in the church today. This view leads to absurd conclusions, such as expecting modern churches to have apostles who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection, experiencing the Holy Spirit's arrival with literal earthquakes and roaring winds, or practicing divinely administered instantaneous death for church discipline. The second extreme is the view that nothing in Acts is normative for the church today, often used to dismiss challenging aspects of the early church's life. This stance is also inconsistent, as most would agree that evangelism and the formation of churches, both clearly present in Acts, are still essential today.

3. How should we discern God's moral verdict on the various events and actions recorded in Acts? God's moral verdict on the events narrated in Acts is not always explicitly stated but is often signaled through the broader context of Scripture and the narrator's (Luke's) emphasis. We see clear disapproval in accounts of hypocrisy (Ananias and Sapphira), seeking power for selfish gain (Simon the Samaritan), greed (Ephesian silversmiths), and jealousy (Jewish leaders). Recognizing these negative examples helps us understand what the church today should *not* emulate.

4. When we read about an event or practice in Acts that God seems to approve of, how do we determine if it is a normative pattern for the whole Church in all ages? Simply because God approves of something in Acts does not automatically mean it should be replicated in the same way today. We must consider the broader theological context of the entire New Testament, especially the epistles, which offer more direct instruction for church life. For example, the early church's communal sharing of possessions is commended, but it might represent a call to a deeper commitment to costly fellowship and unity rather than a strict mandate for radical economic communalism in all contexts.

5. What is Luke's primary purpose in writing the Book of Acts, and how should this influence our reading of it? Luke's purpose in writing Acts was to provide a thorough and orderly written account of the things that had been fulfilled among them, particularly the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the early church. He was writing to Theophilus and others who had been catechized in the message of Jesus, aiming to confirm the life-changing message they had heard. Understanding this purpose helps us see that Acts is not merely a historical record but a prophetically interpreted history intended to shape our faith and life by highlighting God's saving acts and their implications.

6. How do the New Testament epistles help us in understanding and applying the Book of Acts? The New Testament epistles, unlike the historical narrative of Acts, offer direct address and straightforward exposition of the gospel's meaning and its behavioral implications for believers. They serve as a crucial check on the theological conclusions we might draw from Acts. If our interpretation of an event or practice in Acts contradicts the clear teaching of the epistles, we need to re-evaluate our understanding. The epistles provide normative guidance for church life, faith, and conduct that complements the historical examples in Acts.

7. In what ways does the Old Testament inform our reading of the Book of Acts? The Old Testament is deeply interwoven with the Book of Acts. The apostles and early believers frequently quoted and interpreted the scriptures to demonstrate how Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. Furthermore, Luke's narrative style echoes Hebrew literary traditions, and key Old Testament themes like the Holy Spirit, the servant of the Lord, divine judgment, and the persecution of prophets find new realization in the events of Acts. Understanding these connections enriches our comprehension of God's unfolding redemptive plan.

8. What are some key guidelines for correctly discovering and applying the message of Acts for the church today? To correctly understand and apply the message of Acts, we should: * Read Acts in light of Luke's overall purpose in writing. * Interpret Acts in conjunction with the teachings and exhortations found in the New Testament epistles. * Understand Acts within the broader context of the Old Testament and its prophecies. * Consider Luke's Gospel as the first volume and see how Acts continues and builds upon its themes. * Pay attention to the structure and literary features of the Book of Acts itself. By following these guidelines, we can avoid the extremes of either replicating everything literally or dismissing Acts as irrelevant, and instead discern the enduring principles for the life and mission of the church.