

## HOW TO READ ACTS

### (1) The challenge of reading Acts. The question of precedent.

#### Acts 8:14-17

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

#### Acts 11:27-30

<sup>27</sup> Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). <sup>29</sup> So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

#### Acts 15:2, 4-6

<sup>2</sup> Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." <sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

### (2) The unique role of the apostles.

#### Acts 1:1-8

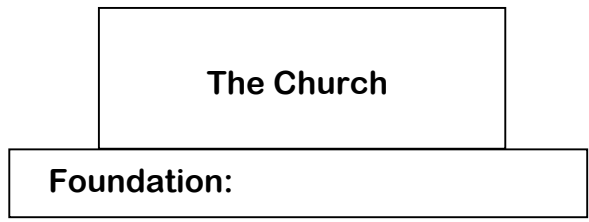
<sup>1</sup> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after **he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles** whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> 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; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." <sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive **power** when the **Holy Spirit** has come upon you, and you will be **my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

**Matthew 16:16-19**

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you **the keys of the kingdom of heaven**, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

**Ephesians 2:19-21**

<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on **the foundation of the apostles and prophets**, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.



**2 Corinthians 12:12**

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with **signs and wonders and mighty works**.

**Hebrews 2:3-4**

<sup>3</sup> It was declared at first by the Lord, and **it was attested to us by those who heard**, <sup>4</sup> while God also **bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit** distributed according to his will.

**Miracles in Redemptive History**

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## The purpose of miracles in Acts

### Acts 2:42-43

<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And **awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.**

### Acts 4:33

And **with great power the apostles were giving their testimony** to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

### (3) Case study: The story of Ananias and Sapphira

#### Acts 5:1-16

<sup>1</sup> But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And **great fear** came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." <sup>9</sup> But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> And **great fear** came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

<sup>12</sup> Now many **signs and wonders** were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. <sup>13</sup> None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup> And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, <sup>15</sup> so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. <sup>16</sup> The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

## (1) The challenge of reading Acts. The question of precedent.

**The challenge** is that Acts is filled with wondrous and sometimes strange stories. How should we as modern-day Christians read Acts? How much of Acts is a precedent for the church today? Should we try to model ourselves after the early church or should we simply read Acts as a distant history story with no guidance value for today?

Two extremes: we should be exactly like the early church and we should be nothing like early church.

**Acts 8:14-17.** Story of Philip preaching in Samaria and Simon the Magician. The apostles (Peter and John) arrive and lay hands on the Samaritan believers and they receive the Holy Spirit. From this example, some argue for the idea of the Second Blessing or Second Baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is a foundational teaching in Pentecostalism. The argument is that most Christians are merely saved, but they do not enjoy the special empowerment of the Holy Spirit – which you receive as a Second Blessing. This is a two-tiered view of the Christian life – where extraordinary holiness and passion are given with the Second Blessing.

**Acts 11:27-30.** A prophet in the church, Agabus, foresees a famine throughout the Mediterranean world. Do we still have prophets today? What should the role of these prophets have in the modern-day church, if any?

**Acts 15 – the Jerusalem Council.** The apostles and elders met to discuss whether Christians were bound to follow all the Mosaic Law and to be circumcised. In some ways, this was not directly addressed by Jesus – he never spoke on circumcision. And so the leaders of the early church got together and decided the matter authoritatively for all Christians. Does such authority continue to exist? – as in the Roman Catholic Church.

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## (2) The unique role of the apostles.

The full name of the book is “The Acts of the Apostles.”

**What is an apostle?** The word means messenger or ambassador. Jesus personally authorized his apostles to teach and govern the church. Because they have the Holy Spirit, they are able to know all that Jesus wants them to do. Apostles are those who have seen the risen Christ and received instructions personally from him. We see this in Acts 1:1-8.

**Matt. 16:19.** Peter is given the keys of the kingdom. The keys are a metaphor for having authority. And it is not just Peter, who is the leader of the disciples, but all apostles have this authority.

**Ephesians 2:20.** The apostles are the foundation of the church. Foundation means it is a once and for all layer; not to be repeated in subsequent years. What this means is that when the apostles died, their role and authority does not pass on to others. This goes with the very definition of an apostle – one who has seen and been commissioned by the risen Christ.

**2 Corinthians 12:12 and Hebrews 2:4.** These verses show us that miraculous signs, wonders and prophesy are apostolic signs. The purpose of these miracles is to authenticate and establish the early church. Once the church has been established, there is no further need of these apostolic signs.



**Miracles and the Bible (Redemptive History)**

<b>Exodus</b>	<b>Elijah/Elisha</b>	<b>Jesus &amp; early church</b>
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**The purpose of miracles in Acts**

The miracles in Acts served to authenticate the message of the apostles and to communicate in a powerful way the gospel. These great acts and signs were necessary for the foundation of the early church, but are no longer needed in the present. Some might argue it would be great to have miracles today. That might be true. But God in his wisdom only have miracles to the first generation of Christians. But we do have the testimony of these miracles preserved in the documents of the New Testament – something the first generation of believers did not have. Their NT scriptures were living and breathing in the apostles; ours are in the NT canon.

**Conclusion**

Returning to the earlier question of precedent. What this means is that we need to read the Book of Acts carefully. Acts is a precedent for us in the modern world. We should definitely strive to be the kind of joyful, dynamic, Spirit-filled church as it was during the days of the apostles. But, we need to read each episode in Acts with care, understanding that we cannot exactly replicate the authority and wonders of the apostles.

Thus how should we read the miraculous stories of Acts? We look for the principle behind the stories. So, for example, with Ananias and Sapphira, we see the underlying principle of the holiness and purity of the church. But obviously, we cannot exercise church discipline in the way Peter did.

With the Samaritan church story, we understand that the point isn't Second Blessing, but how the gospel can reach across ethnic and cultural barriers – even to the former enemies of the Jews, the Samaritans. With the story of Agabus, we don't have modern-day prophets, but we see how the early church was galvanized by the poverty and devastation famine would cause. With the story of the Jerusalem Council, we see the importance of a church government of elder (even if we don't have apostles); we see how churches are to be accountable to one another (so there is no such thing as a lone-ranger independent church); we see how obedience to the law is not the way of salvation.