

(S) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today we introduce the book of ACTS. Today in part 1 we will learn about the writer and the recipients of the book of ACTS, the date, place and purpose of the book of Acts and the history recorded in the book of Acts.

POINT 1. THE WRITER AND RECIPIENTS OF ACTS

The introduction of the book of Acts says, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.” It is very clear that the author of the Gospel of Luke is also the author of the book of Acts. The author of the book of Acts was a travelling companion of Paul, as we can see from the sections in which he speaks of “we” (16:10-17; 20:6-16; 21:27; ch 28). He shows that he was together with Paul on his second missionary journey at Troas and Philippi. He was evidently left behind in Philippi, where he again joined Paul on his third missionary journey (16:17-19; 20:6). It seems probable that he was together with Paul throughout Paul’s imprisonment at Caesarea and he travelled with Paul to Rome just before Paul’s first Roman imprisonment. In his letters, Paul wrote about one very faithful companion, a beloved physician called Luke, who stayed with Paul during his first and his second imprisonment at Rome (Col 4:14; Philem 24; 2 Tim 4:11). The author was thus an eye-witness of much of the events he recorded in the latter half of the book of Acts. The book of Acts has a distinct Pauline point of view, that is, it is especially interested to show God’s dealings with the Gentiles (13:46; Eph 3:1). The fact that the name of Luke is never mentioned in the book of Acts, strengthens the position that Luke is the author. Although the name of Titus is also not mentioned in the book of Acts, the medical language of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts favour the conclusion that Luke was the author of the book of Acts. The early Christian tradition bears abundant testimony that Luke wrote the book of Acts.

The recipient was Theophilus, who was probably one of Luke’s highly respected friends. He was probably a Greek living in Rome and a person of high distinction. In Luke 1:3, he is addressed as “most excellent Theophilus”, which was the way in which the governors Felix and Festus were addressed (23:26; 24:3). Luke wrote the book of Acts to him and in general to all the Gentiles, that they may come to believe in Jesus Christ, or, when they already believed, that they may be strengthened in their faith.

POINT 2. THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING ACTS

There is nothing in the Gospel of Luke or in the book of Acts that presupposes the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70, because this destruction is predicted in Luke 19:41-44 and 21:20.

There is also nothing in the book of Acts that shows that the Roman authorities were officially opposing the Christians. The book of Acts speaks positively of the Roman government everywhere. The turning point was when the Roman emperor, called Nero, began to persecute the Christians in Rome, following the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64. From that time onwards, Christians were burned publicly on stakes or thrown before wild beasts in the arena. Before that time, the Christian faith was probably suspect, but after that date it was definitely denounced as dangerous and put outside the law. Therefore the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts must have been written before A.D. 64.

Luke had accompanied Paul to Rome before his first imprisonment in Rome, which lasted from the beginning of A.D. 60 to the end of A.D. 61 (27:1-28:16; Col 4:14). Thus, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts must have been written after A.D. 61. Although Luke probably made a lot of research for his Gospel and Acts and wrote preliminary notes in Asia Minor, Achaia, Jerusalem and Caesarea, he most probably wrote the Gospel of Luke in about A.D. 62-63 in Rome and shortly after that the book of Acts in A.D. 63 also in Rome.

POINT 3. THE PURPOSE OF ACTS

First. Luke’s first purpose was to write about Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel of Luke, his purpose was to write about the things Jesus Christ *began* to do and to teach. In the book of Acts, his purpose was to write about the things Jesus Christ *continued* to do and teach by his Spirit in and through his followers and his Church. The main purpose of Luke in the book of Acts was to describe the work of Jesus Christ in the extension of the Church from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (1:8). While the Gospels tell of *the crucified and risen Saviour*, the book of Acts tells of *the ascended and exalted Lord* and Leader. While in the Gospels we hear of the teachings of Jesus Christ, in the book of Acts we see the effect of Christ’s teachings on the acts of his apostles.

Second. Luke's second purpose was to give an accurate and orderly account of the origins of Christianity.

It was the custom in Rome for a group of people to gather to listen to a new work being read aloud by its author or someone else. Theophilus may have been the most prominent member of such a group of educated people in Rome and he may already have accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour. Luke's purpose was to provide such people with *a more accurate and orderly account of the rise and progress of Christianity* than they were likely to get anywhere else.

For *the earlier part of his narrative* Luke could depend on reliable first-hand witnesses, like the apostles at Jerusalem and Philip the evangelist. Luke was not the first to draw up an account of the life and work of Jesus and he himself could not claim to be an eye-witness of the earlier events recorded in his history of the church. But Luke did have access to the information that such eye-witnesses could supply. Moreover, his account is based on thorough and accurate research and it is arranged in a proper sequence.

For *the latter part of his narrative* he could largely draw on his own experiences and his intensive contact with the apostle Paul. Luke's first volume, the Gospel of Luke, is in essence a record of the apostolic witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ through word, deed, suffering and triumph. Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, carries the apostolic witness on for at least another thirty years! He traces the progress of Christianity, beginning from Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews, and he ends with the chief herald of the gospel, Paul, proclaiming the gospel in Rome, the capital of the Gentile Roman Empire.

Third. Luke's third purpose was to defend Christianity against the charges brought against it.

Luke's purpose may also have been to defend Christianity against the charges brought against it and to vindicate the innocence of Paul and the other Christians in relation to the Roman law before this educated public of Rome.

One. Christians showed respect towards the government. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke shows the respectful attitude of Christians towards the Roman government. As the Christian faith began to spread in every direction in the world, and especially within the Roman Empire, opposition against it also began to mount. In the eyes of the Romans, who loved law and order, Christianity started off with a serious handicap. The Founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, was condemned to death by a Roman governor on a charge of sedition. And the Christian movement, which he inaugurated, seemed to be accompanied by tumult and disorder wherever it spread. Luke tried to remove this view of Christianity by describing the history as it actually was.

Two. Especially Jews caused disturbances. The advance of Christianity was attended by so much strife and disorder, because it was *caused by the Jewish authorities* in the various centres where the gospel was proclaimed. It was the Jewish Sanhedrin that had condemned Jesus Christ and had falsely accused him before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. But Pontius Pilate pronounced Jesus not guilty of the charges. And king Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, agreed that there were no substance in the charges against him (Luke 22:66-23:2; 23:13-15). It was the same Jewish Sanhedrin that arrested and persecuted the apostles of Christ (4:1-5,15; 5:17-21). It was the same Jewish Sanhedrin that prosecuted the apostle Paul before the Roman proconsuls, Felix and Festus (21:27-29; 22:30; 23:12-15; 24:1-9,20; 25:1-8). And most of the disturbances that broke out when the gospel was proclaimed in the Roman provinces were fomented by the local Jewish communities. The Jews not only refused to accept the gospel themselves, but they also were annoyed when their Gentile neighbours believed it (13:44-52).

Three. Gentiles seldom caused disturbances. Only twice does Luke record disturbances caused by the Gentiles: At Philippi and at Ephesus the reason why the Gentiles persecuted Paul and his co-workers was the real or imagined threat to their vested property interests (16:16ff; 19:23ff).

Four. Government officials were favourably impressed by Christians. Luke makes it very clear that a variety of officials, both Gentile and Jewish, showed good will towards Paul and the other Christian missionaries, or at least admitted that there was no basis for the accusations brought against them by their opponents. In Cyprus, the distinguished proconsul was favourably impressed by Paul and Barnabas and their message (13:7). At Philippi, the magistrates of the colony apologised to Paul and Silas for their illegal beating and imprisonment (16:35-39). At Corinth, the proconsul of Achaia, Gallio, decided that the charges brought by the local Jews were related to internal matters of the Jewish religion and he pronounced them not guilty of any offence against the Roman law (18:12-17). At Ephesus, some leading citizens of the province of Asia, called Asiarchs, were Paul's friends and the chief executive officer of the city administration absolved Paul from the charge of public sacrilege (19:31,35-41). In Palestine, the two proconsuls, Felix and Festus, found him innocent of the serious crimes of which the Jewish Sanhedrin accused him (26:32; 28:17-19). Even the Jewish client king Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice agreed that he had done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment (26:30-32).

Five. The government allowed Paul to preach the gospel. And after Paul had made his appeal to be tried by the emperor in Rome, he carried on his missionary activity for two years in Rome, while he was under constant surveillance of

Roman guards and without anyone trying to hinder him (28:30-31). The purpose of Luke is to show that if Christianity were such a lawless movement as was widely believed, the imperial guards would certainly not have allowed Paul to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God and to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fourth. Luke's fourth purpose was to defend the Christian faith against Jews and Gentile pagans.

In three chapters, Luke appears to defend the Christian faith:

One. In Acts chapter 7, by reporting Stephen's speech, Luke defends the Christian faith against the Jews and its Sanhedrin. He demonstrated that *Christianity and not Judaism is the true fulfilment of the revelation given through Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament!*

Two. In Acts chapter 17, by reporting Paul's speech at Athens, he defends the Christian faith against the pagan Greek philosophers. He shows that the true knowledge of God is given in the gospel and not in the idolatry of paganism or the gods of other religions.

Three. In Acts chapter 26, by reporting Paul's testimony before king Agrippa, Luke defends the Christian missionary work of the apostle Paul.

POINT 4. THE HISTORY RECORDED IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

First. Acts chapters 1-7 describe the extension of the church in and around Jerusalem.

The events recorded in Acts 1-7 took place between A.D. 30-33/34. The sudden transformation of the early disciples of Jesus Christ from a group of thoroughly dejected individuals to a company of witnesses filled with joy and unshakeable conviction can only be explained by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That fact changed everything. Their main message everywhere became "the Lord Jesus Christ died as the atonement for sins, he arose from the dead and he ascended to heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God". The resurrection and ascension clarified the meaning of the cross. Moreover, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in May A.D. 30, Jesus Christ himself came to live in the hearts and lives of his disciples in order to give them courage, strength, joy and spiritual insight.

The preaching of the gospel resulted in the conversion of many and the first local church was established in Jerusalem. The Christians were characterised by their devotion to the teachings of the apostles, by their fellowship of love and sharing, by their prayers and their witnessing. Everyday the Lord added more converts to their number. Their rapid growth led to the persecution by the Jewish authorities. Although the apostles were threatened and flogged, Acts 5:42 says, "day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." When the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem stoned Stephen to death, a great persecution arose especially against Greek speaking Jews who had become Christians!

Second. Acts chapters 8-12 describe the extension of the church southward to Ethiopia and northward to Syria.

The events recorded in Acts 8-12 took place between A.D. 33/34-46. Thus, while the apostles remained in Jerusalem, the persecuted Greek speaking Jews were scattered and founded new churches everywhere they went. Philip the evangelist spread the gospel to Samaria in Lebanon and to an Ethiopian. About A.D. 34 Paul was converted and began preaching in Damascus in Syria. The apostle Peter spread the gospel to the cities on the Coastal Plain. God had to use extraordinary means to show Peter that the gospel was meant not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles and thus Cornelius and his family and friends were converted. When the apostles heard that Gentiles were also converted in Antioch in Syria, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. In about A.D. 44/45 Barnabas brought Paul into the ministry at Antioch. And in A.D. 46 they brought Mark into the ministry at Antioch.

Third. Acts chapters 13-20 describe the extension of the church to Asia Minor and Europe.

The events recorded in Acts 13-20 took place between A.D. 47-57. Paul made three missionary journeys.

Paul's first missionary journey was from A.D. 47-48 together with Barnabas and Mark. They went to Cyprus, Pamphilia, South Galatia and Cilicia in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey. In about A.D. 49/50, certain Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem to Antioch, saying that unless Gentile Christians were circumcised, they could not be saved. As a result, a council or conference was held in Jerusalem to speak about the relationship between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians. This conference is described in Acts 15 and Galatians 2. At this council, these Jewish Christians received a severe blow. They became known as "the Judaizing party", a Christian sect which tried to turn Gentile Christians into Jews. They believed that all Christians should keep the Old Testament ceremonial law, especially circumcision, Sabbath days and food rules. They immediately plotted revenge. Their plan seemed to have been to

follow the missionaries everywhere and oppose “the gospel of justification by faith alone”. They came to Antioch, but Paul vigorously opposed them. They came to the South Galatian churches in Asia Minor and succeeded to pull many new Christians into their legalism. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians especially to counter the false teaching of the Judaizing party.

Paul’s second missionary journey was from A.D. 50-52 together with Silas and Timothy. They went to Syria, Cilicia and South Galatia in Asia Minor and then crossed over to Europe and established churches in Macedonia and Greece. They spent one and a half years in Corinth.

Paul’s third missionary journey was from A.D. 52-57 together with Timothy. They worked for three years in Ephesus and they also worked in Greece and Macedonia.

Fourth. Acts chapters 21-28 describe the extension of the church to Rome.

The events recorded in Acts 21-28 took place between A.D. 57-61. Paul spent almost all this time in prison. From A.D. 57-59 he was imprisoned in Caesarea and from A.D. 60-61 he was imprisoned in Rome.

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read Acts 15-28. Next week we will introduce the book of Acts - part 2.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and preach God’s Kingdom” and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to “Discipleship training on the air”.