

Excerpt 4: Unit 2, chapter 4, section 5

Upwards, Onwards, and Outwards

We have already seen the Acts of the Apostles' overall design. It is the continuing story of God's purposes, starting from Jerusalem and ending in Rome. This is inherent in what Luke told Theophilus in the opening chapters of the Gospel. What Luke can see, and what he wants Theophilus to see, is the pattern of what God is up to as a result of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh.

This is not to suggest that Luke could do what he liked in telling this story. Like any historian, he was dependent on his sources and set out to use them accurately. However, he was also trying to see the big picture. In the case of Acts, unlike the Gospel, we have no external checks of exactly what sources Luke had at his disposal. However, there is also no reason to doubt that Luke has sought information about the church. It is even possible that some of this may have existed in written form before being used by Luke. The overall conception of the work, however, remains very much Luke's.

The work has traditionally been called the Acts of the Apostles. However, two figures dominate the work, Peter in the early chapters and Paul in the later ones. The next most significant characters are Stephen and then Philip. Others play smaller roles. So "Acts of the Apostles" is a little misleading. Acts is not a complete history of the early church's expansion - it never pretended to be. The work acquired its name later, which gave a somewhat misleading view of its contents. Luke himself did not give the work any title; after all, it was part of his complete account of how the good news came about and reached the ends of the world.

The first half of Acts shows the new community bursting out of the structures of Judaism and welcoming Gentiles into its midst (3:1-15:35). The second half traces the journey of Paul to Rome (15:36-28:31), which we looked at in the session on Paul. The first part can be divided into various stages of development. The first signs of moving beyond its primary roots in Judaism come with the Hellenists and the martyrdom of Stephen. The expansion was still within Judaism. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews from around the Mediterranean. Some of these had joined the church, but then complained that their widows were being treated as second-class citizens. The twelve apostles restored fellowship in the whole church by appointing some of the Greek-speaking Christian leaders to positions of responsibility. However, one of these leaders, Stephen, angered traditionalist Jews by suggesting that the temple no longer had any importance (7:48-50). Dragged before the Jewish court by the angry crowd, Stephen delivered a long speech (7:2-53) that ended with a stinging attack on the Jewish leaders:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it" (Acts 7:51-53).

Stephen was promptly stoned to death (7:54-60). What is of particular interest is that Luke makes this virtually a replica of Jesus' death. Both deaths take place outside the city; both figures speak of the Son of Man at the right hand of God; both pray for forgiveness for their executors; Jesus commends his spirit to his Father, Stephen commends his to Jesus. The faithful disciple continues the message of Jesus and at the same cost.

Up to this point, despite some difficulties with the authorities, the church leaders in Jerusalem were able to continue their work largely unmolested. Now the Hellenists were scattered. The result of this was simply the church's expansion. Philip and Peter go to Samaria (8:1-25). Philip then engages with an Ethiopian eunuch, i.e. someone from the ends of the earth (8:26-40). Paul, who had witnessed Stephen's death, goes to Damascus to stop further distortions of the Jewish faith, but instead becomes one of the new movement's staunchest supporters (9:1-30). Peter goes to Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea. The next stage of "to the ends of the world" is about to emerge. Peter accepts an invitation to baptise Cornelius, a pious Roman centurion, and his household (9:31-10:48). Cornelius is a god-fearer, a Gentile observer of Judaism. We have not quite got to a complete Gentile yet, but you can sense where Luke is taking the story.

The actions of Peter in baptising a Gentile god-fearer raised a number of questions for the early church. So far the church had remained within the shadow of the temple and observed Jewish customs. Two questions could no longer be avoided: did Jewish food laws remain obligatory? Was circumcision mandatory? On returning to Jerusalem Peter had to explain why he had eaten with the uncircumcised (11:3). Peter silenced his critics with an account of a vision he had from God that swept away the food laws, and he spoke of the Spirit of God coming on the household of Cornelius, which demonstrated that God acts outside Jewish boundaries. When God speaks, the church must obey.

Things settled down, but in Antioch the practice of including Gentile god-fearers continued. Barnabas was sent there, and he brought Paul from Tarsus to help (11:19-26). From there Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey, at the end of which the issue of Gentiles in the church demanded a definitive answer. A council was held in Jerusalem, and Paul's assertion that Gentile Christians were free from the requirement of circumcision and of observation of the Jewish ritual and ceremonial laws was upheld (Acts 15:6-29; Galatians 2:1-10).

The new faith had broken through the Jewish barrier and the story was now free to progress through Asia Minor, into Greece and finally to Rome, where Luke concluded his story, saying that Paul “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” (Acts 28:30f.).

SIDE TRACK

If Stephen is a role model for Christian discipleship I had better hand in my resignation right now! Finding himself in the lions' den (so to speak), he simply lays about him with a complete disregard for his own safety. He attacks the traditions of his people. Challenging cultural norms is a risky business. How can we proclaim an all-inclusive humanity in Christ as the good news without offending traditional understandings and cultural sensitivities?