

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson 6: Acts – The Question of Historical Precedent

Introduction

The book of Acts is immensely important in understanding where we are right now, the age of the church. The way in which we understand and interpret the book of Acts significantly affects the way we work as a church and the things which we believe.

All about Acts

Author & Date

Acts was written in the late 50's or early 60's by Luke, the physician who often traveled with the Apostle Paul. Paul was probably still alive when this book was written and had not yet written many of his epistles or been imprisoned a second time.

Purpose

Acts is a history book (or a narrative as we have previously studied). The reason we are studying it separately is that we tend to treat it differently than historical books from the Old Testament. Acts records the history of the early church, and because we are living in the church era, we take it very seriously and look at it closely for practical guidance on what we should believe and how we should practice our faith.

The theme in the book of Acts is given in Acts 1:8: “but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (NASB) The book of Acts traces the church from its beginnings in Jerusalem through its spread into Judea, Samaria, and into the rest of the world (see outline).

Principles for Interpreting and Applying Acts

1. The Word of God in Acts that may be regarded as a command for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative intended to teach.
2. The incidental details given in a narrative that surround the primary intent of the passage may reflect the inspired author's understanding of things, but the details are not as important as what the passage was primarily intended to teach.

Example: Acts 2:37-47 – Does this passage teach us to sell our possessions when we become Christians or does it teach us something else? See also 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

Principles for Applying Biblical Precedents

1. It is probably never valid to use an analogy based on Biblical precedent as giving Biblical authority for present-day actions.
Example: Acts 10:44-48 – Does this passage teach us that all those who are saved will speak in tongues?
2. Although a Biblical precedent may not have been the author's primary intent, these narratives do have an illustrative and sometimes a “pattern” value. Biblical precedents are especially useful if the principle behind the precedent is clearly taught somewhere in Scripture.

Example: Acts 6:1-7 – Does this passage demonstrate a pattern for how deacons should be selected? See 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

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Outline of Acts

- I. Jerusalem (1:1-8:4)**
 - a. The empowerment of the church (1:1-2:47)
 - b. The expansion of the church (3:1-8:4)

- II. Judea and Samaria (8:5-12:25)**
 - a. The witness to the Samaritans (8:5-25)
 - b. The conversion of a Gentile (8:26-40)
 - c. The conversion of the apostle to the Gentiles (9:1-31)
 - d. The witness to the Gentiles (9:34-12:25)

- III. The remotest part of the earth (13:1-28:31)**
 - a. The first missionary journey (13:1-14:28)
 - b. The Jerusalem council (15:1-35)
 - c. The second missionary journey (15:36-18:22)
 - d. The third missionary journey (18:23-21:16)
 - e. The journey to Rome (21:17-28:31)

Assignments:

Read Acts 1:1 – 2:47 and answer the following questions:

1. Why does Luke start Acts with Jesus' ascension?
2. What did everyone do after Jesus' ascension?
3. How did they choose a successor to Judas Iscariot?
4. What is, "speaking in tongues" and why did God allow it to happen here?
5. What were some of the main points in Peter's sermon?
6. What did the people that were saved on Pentecost do?
7. What type of people (race or ethnic origin) were the people who were saved on Pentecost?