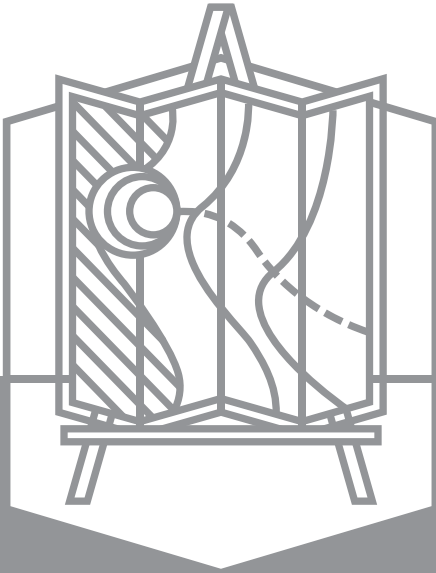


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A 9-SESSION STUDY
FOR DIALOGUE IN
COMMUNITY AROUND
THE SCRIPTURES



UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION

First Principles from Acts

BY JEFF REED

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These materials are designed to integrate with BILD International resources, which are designed to help churches train leaders.

All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from the New American Standard Bible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

05

UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION

07

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES:

Becoming Established in Our Faith - 7
Design of the Series - 8
Design of the Study Guides - 10

13

SESSION 1

ACTS: UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION

25

SESSION 2

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM: ACTS 1:1-6:7

34

SESSION 3

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA: ACTS 6:8-9:31

43

SESSION 4

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH WORLDWIDE: ACTS 9:32-12:24

50

SESSION 5

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH WORLDWIDE: ACTS 12:25-16:5

59

SESSION 6

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH WORLDWIDE: ACTS 16:6-19:20

69

SESSION 7

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH WORLDWIDE: ACTS 19:21-28:31

77

SESSION 8

THE CENTRALITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH IN GOD'S PLAN

88

SESSION 9

RESHAPING OUR LIVES

93

GLOSSARY OF KEY BIBLICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

95

LIFELONG LEARNING

96

ENDNOTES

ACTS: UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION

1

As we approach the book of Acts, or any book of the Bible for that matter, it is critical that we first seek to understand what the author intended to say. We need to discern Luke's intended meaning before seeking to understand the significance of the book for our own lives and ministries. In this session we will use the methods learned in *Handling the Word with Confidence* to summarize Luke's intention for writing the book of Acts. We will then attempt to understand how Luke put the book together—what its parts are and how they fit together. In this case, Luke chose a narrative (story) form of literature. We must find the storyline—the narrative structure—to understand how to draw principles and guidelines from it.

Luke wrote this story in two volumes. Volume one is the Gospel of Luke and volume two is the book of Acts. Therefore, we will begin by looking at passages at the beginning of each volume to attempt to discern Luke's intention for writing Acts as part two of this two-volume history. Then, we will look at a series of literary markers that tell us about the structure of volume two of this story. As you work through the whole book, section by section in the coming sessions, you will improve your understanding of Luke's intention in writing Acts, but you must make a first guess at this point. These passages will help you get a good start.



Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGES: LUKE 1:1–4; 24:44–49;
ACTS 1:1–8; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31

Think Through the Questions:

1. What was Luke's intent in writing his two-volume history? In what way is Acts a continuation of what he wrote in Luke?
2. Why do you think Luke stated that he carefully investigated everything, even the order of events, yet he gave us such a selected history in Acts—only telling us a few key events?
3. How does Acts 1:8 provide an outline for the structure of the book of Acts? How does this build off of the Great Commission in Luke 24:44–49?
4. Why do you think Luke threw in summary statements throughout the book? What clue was he trying to give us?

Summarize the Author's Intention of the Book:

Summarize Luke's intention in writing the book of Acts. Begin with a general intention statement—a long sentence—followed by six “by statements.” Each section finishes with a summary verse, which Luke used to mark each new section. Unless you have time to read the whole letter right now, you may want to wait to fill out the “by statement” for each section of Acts until you read that section in each of the future sessions of this booklet.

Author's Intention Statement for Acts:

To _____

by _____

_____ (by Acts 1:1–6:7)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 6:8–9:31)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 9:32:1–12:24)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 12:25–16:5)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 16:6–19:20)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 19:21–28:31)



Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

**Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on Luke 1:1–4; 24:44–49;
Acts 1:1–8; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31:**

There are four key passages that shape our understanding of Luke’s intent for writing the book. They also give us clues about how he unfolded his intent. These are the four key passages, in order:

1. Luke 1:1–4
2. Luke 24:44–49
3. Acts 1:1–8
4. Acts 28:28–31

Let's look at these four passages and attempt to reconstruct, from Luke's own narratives, his intent in writing these two volumes of Early Church history. We will first note the unity of these passages and then look at each one individually.

There is a very clear continuity within these passages. Acts 1:1 continues the introduction that Luke started in Luke 1:1–4. In the Acts passage, Luke refers to the first account, which is obviously Luke's gospel. And he addresses the same person—Theophilus. So Acts clearly is the second volume of Luke's history. The second thing to notice is the phrase “about all that Jesus began to do and teach.” It very directly implies that this second volume is what Jesus continued to do and teach. Some make the mistake of saying that the Gospel of Luke (volume 1) is more important than the book of Acts (volume 2) because volume one is directly Jesus' teaching while volume 2 is the teaching of Paul. This is not the case at all. Volume 2, Acts, is what Jesus continued to do and teach. Also observe the continuity between Luke 24:44–49 and Acts 1:1–8. In Luke 24:46–48 Jesus tells them that they are witnesses and that their witness will begin in Jerusalem and go to all the earth. They are instructed to wait for the Spirit in Jerusalem. In essence, He commissioned them, telling them that He would send them forth to all the nations. In Acts 1:8 Luke picks up the scene where Jesus left off in Luke 24. Here the commission begins to unfold, only now the unfolding of that witness to the nations gets more specific—it will unfold from Jerusalem, to Judea-Samaria, and then to the remotest parts of the world. Thus, the two books are structured around the unfolding of this commission to the disciples: to take the message of Christ to the nations. Luke leads up to the death and resurrection of Christ, and Acts unfolds the witness of the death and resurrection of Christ to the world. So, the salvation history of the *Great Commission*, as it is called, is the structure of these books.

Now, why did Luke actually write these books? In Luke 1:1–4 he states that it is so Theophilus would have an accurate eyewitness account of the things he had been taught. The Greek word for *taught* is where we get the word “catechism.” Theophilus had been taught the teaching of Christ. This teaching of Jesus was delivered to the churches by the Apostles, especially Paul. It is referred to as authoritatively “handed down” (see Luke 1:3) by the Apostles and was to be learned by the churches. Therefore, Theophilus was taught “the teaching.” Luke carefully wrote a two-volume history so that the teaching would be exactly understood and verified. Thus, what is written is the framework of the teaching and puts the teaching in the context of Christ's plan. The framework is part of the teaching and makes it all clear and exact. It makes the teaching more precise

and understandable. It is inseparable from the teaching. The teaching, delivered by the Apostles both orally and by letters, is all wrapped up in one package into what Roland Allen referred to, in personal conversation, as “the way of Christ and His Apostles.” Luke’s accounts, then, are not just a history of the Early Church, but rather a narrative of very carefully selected events that are intended to be catechetical in nature.

Only in this two-volume context can we sharpen our understanding of Luke’s intent for his second volume—Acts. In Acts 1:8 we see the major structure of Acts—Luke’s narrative of the progress of the witness of the Apostles. It progresses from Jerusalem, to Judea/Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. So goes the story of Acts, and the structure of the narrative unfolds. It then finishes rather abruptly and is open-ended, I might add, as the witness reaches the core of the empire, which essentially extended to “the ends of the earth.”

So the progress of the gospel and the establishment of the church, which is the heart of Christ’s plan (birthed in Acts 1 and 2), is traced from Jerusalem, to Judea/Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. In addition, six times along the way, Luke uses literary markers to comment briefly on the progress of the gospel: 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; and 28:30–31. This is intended to be all that we need to fully understand the plan of Christ, which encases and is woven together with the teaching that the Christians received. Thus, the essentials of Christ’s plan, when woven with the teaching, gave them the keys to the successful establishment and expansion of the Early Church. It is this foundational plan and teaching, woven together, that we are to build our ministries upon for all subsequent generations.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

The following quote is taken from “Acts—The Problem of Historical Precedent” by Gordon Fee.

“Let us begin our quest of *what* by noting the natural divisions as Luke himself gives them to us. Acts has frequently been divided on the basis of Luke’s interest in Peter (chapters 1–12) and Paul (13–28), or in the geographical expansion of the Gospel (1–7, Jerusalem; 8–10, Samaria and Judea; 11–28, to the ends of the earth). Although both of these divisions are recognizable in terms of actual content, there is another clue, given by Luke himself, that seems to tie everything together much better. As you read, notice the brief summary statements in 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections, or panels, which give the narrative a continually forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem with Peter as its leading figure toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal. Once Paul reaches Rome, where he once again turns to the Gentiles because they will listen (28:28), the narrative comes to an end.

“You should notice, then, as you read how each section contributes to this ‘movement.’ In your own words, try to describe each panel, both as to its content and its contribution to the forward movement. What seems to be the key to each new forward thrust? Here is our own attempt to do this:

“1:1–6:7. A description of the primitive church in Jerusalem, its early preaching, its common life, its spread and its initial opposition. Notice how Jewish everything is, including the sermons, the opposition, and the fact that the early believers continue associations with the temple and the synagogues. The panel concludes with a narrative indicating that a division had begun between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking believers.

“6:8–9:31. A description of the first geographical expansion, carried out by the ‘Hellenists’ (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) to diaspora Jews or ‘nearly Jews’ (Samaritans and a proselyte). Luke also includes the conversion of Paul, who was (1) a Hellenist, (2) a Jewish opponent, and (3) the one who was to lead the specifically Gentile expansion. Stephen’s martyrdom is the key to this initial expansion.

“9:32–12:24. A description of the first expansion to the Gentiles. The key is the conversion of Cornelius, whose story is told twice. The significance of Cornelius is that his conversion was a direct act from God, who did not now use the Hellenists, in which case it would have been suspect, but Peter, the acknowledged leader of the Jewish-Christian missions. Also included is the story of the church in Antioch, where Gentile conversion is now carried out by the Hellenists in a purposeful way.

“12:25–16:5. A description of the first geographical expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. Repeatedly the Jews reject and the Gentiles welcome the Gospel.

“16:6–19:20. A description of the further, ever westward, expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. Repeatedly the Jews reject and the Gentiles welcome the Gospel.

“19:21–28:30. A description of the events that move Paul and the Gospel on to Rome, with a great deal of interest in Paul’s trials, in which three times he is declared innocent of any wrongdoing.

“Try reading Acts with this outline, this sense of ‘movement’ in view, to see for yourself whether this seems to capture what is going on. As you read you will notice that our description of the content omits one crucial factor—indeed *the* crucial factor—namely, the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this. You will notice as you read that at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolutely leading role. According to Luke, all of this forward movement did not happen by man’s design; it happened because God willed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out.

“Luke’s Purpose

We must be careful that we do not move too glibly from this overview of what Luke did to an easy or dogmatic expression of what his inspired purpose in all of this was. But a few observations are in order, partly based also on what Luke did *not* do.

“1. The key to understanding Acts seems to be in Luke’s interest in this movement, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, of the Gospel from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon. On the basis of structure and content alone, any statement of purpose that does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit’s role in that mission will surely have missed the point of the book.

“2. This interest in ‘movement’ is further substantiated by what Luke does *not* tell us. First, he has no interest in the ‘lives,’ that is, biographies, of the apostles. James is the only one whose end we know (12:2). Once the movement to the Gentiles gets under way, Peter drops from sight except in chapter 15, where he certifies the Gentile mission. Apart from John, the other apostles are not even mentioned, and Luke’s interest in Paul is almost completely in terms of the Gentile mission.

“Second, he has little or no interest in church organization or polity. The Seven in chapter 6 are *not* called deacons, and in any case they soon leave Jerusalem. Luke never tells us why or how it happened that the church in Jerusalem passed from the leadership of Peter and the apostles to James, the brother of Jesus (12:17; 15:13; 21:18); nor does he ever explain how any of the local churches were organized in terms of polity or leadership, except to say that ‘elders’ were ‘appointed’ (14:23).

“Third, there is no word about other geographical expansion except in the one direct line from Jerusalem to Rome. There is no mention of Crete (Titus 1:5), Illyricum (Rom. 15:19—modern Yugoslavia), or Pontus, Cappadocia and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1), not to mention the church’s expansion eastward toward Mesopotamia or southward toward Egypt.

“All of this together says that church history per se was simply *not* Luke’s reason for writing.

“3. Luke’s interest also does not seem to be in standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity. When he records individual conversions, there are usually two elements included: water baptism and the gift of the Spirit. But these can be in reverse order, with or without the laying on of hands, with or without the mention of tongues, and scarcely ever with a specific mention of repentance, even after what Peter says in 2:38–39. Similarly, Luke neither says nor implies that the Gentile churches experienced a communal life similar to that in Jerusalem in 2:42–47 and 4:32–35. Such diversity probably means that no specific example is being set forth as *the* model Christian experience or church life.

“But is this to say that Luke is not trying to tell us something by these various specific narratives? Not necessarily. The real question is, What was he trying to tell his first readers?

“4. Nonetheless, we believe that much of Acts is intended by Luke to serve as a model. But the model is not so much in the specifics as in the overall picture. By the very way God has moved him to structure and narrate this history it seems probable that we are to view this triumphant, joyful, forward-moving expansion of the Gospel, empowered by the Holy Spirit and resulting in changed lives and local communities as God’s intent for the continuing church. And precisely because this is God’s intent for the church, nothing can hinder it, neither Sanhedrin nor synagogue, dissension nor narrow-mindedness, prison nor plot. Luke, therefore, probably intended that the church should be like them, but in the larger sense, rather than by modeling itself on any specific example.”¹



Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes:

— continued



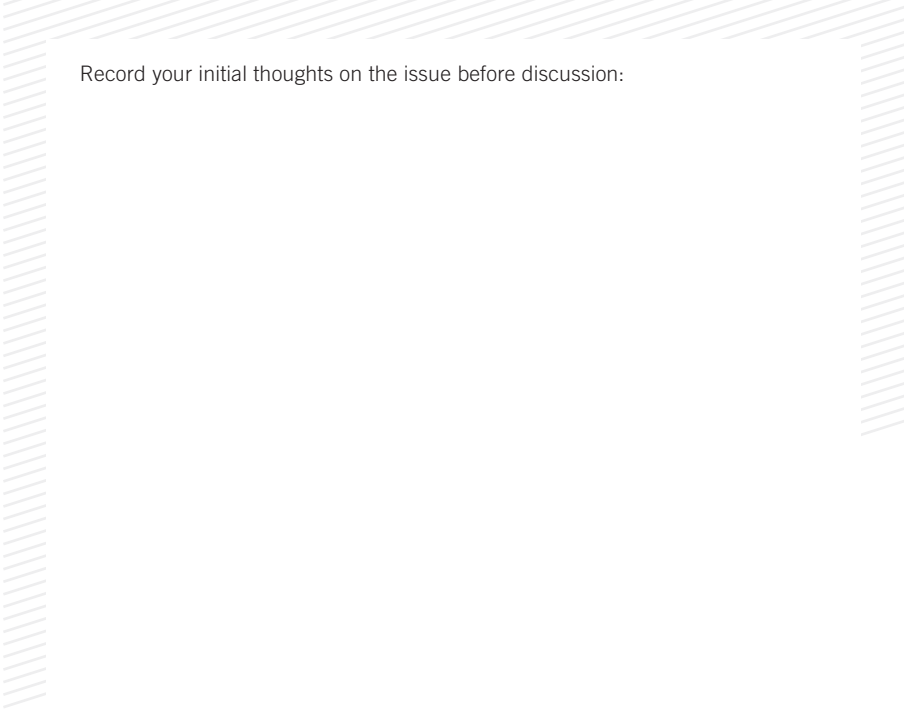
Think Through the Issues

As we stated in the introduction, it is common today for Christians to misunderstand the mission. Luke states it is critical that we accurately understand what happened in the Early Church. At this time, we want to explore the implications of not clearly understanding the unfolding commission and instructions to the disciples. Once we grasp this, we will approach our study of Acts with great anticipation, for it contains many of the keys to the phenomenal success of the first century church.

ISSUE: Accurately understanding the mission

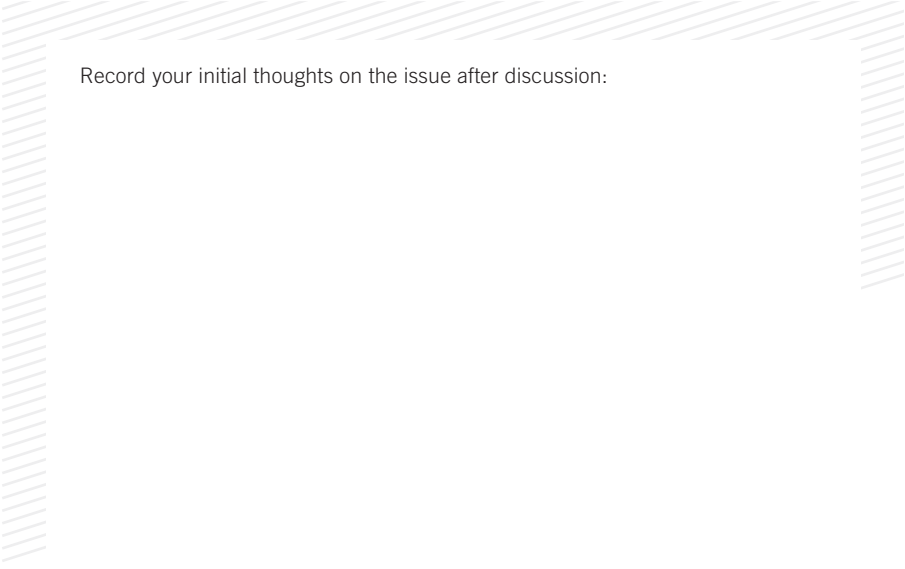
Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why do you think Luke thought it was so critical for him to write the book of Acts as a second volume to his gospel?
2. In what sense is Acts catechetical? How does it relate to the teaching of the Apostles, which is found deposited in the letters to the churches in much of the remainder of the New Testament?
3. How important is it to grasp the broad plan that is unfolded in Acts? How might it shape our understanding of our mission?
4. Why is it essential to understand this plan in order to accurately understand the teaching in the New Testament letters?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

Discuss the issue in your small group.



Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:



Apply the Principles


It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

Design an Application for Your Life.

Think through your understanding of the mission. Has it been built upon a careful reflection of the “books” of Acts? Most of us formed our understanding of the mission—the Great Commission, as it is often called—from very simplistic discipleship material, not from pouring over the account of the Early Church, as carefully recorded by Luke. Record your thoughts and commitment to carefully studying the book of Acts.

Record your thoughts on the importance of carefully studying Acts, along with your commitment to do so.



— continued