

Study Guide for the Acts of the Apostles

Approaching the Acts of the Apostles: Initial Reflections

Assigned Reading: Acts, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapter 10.

After you listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Powell, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in the Acts.
- 2) To provide focus questions for group discussion of the Acts in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about Acts.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

Read through Acts again in one sitting and do the following:

- Note carefully what steps are taken as the message from Jesus goes out “from Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). After the early days in Jerusalem, the number of new believers seems to grow much more slowly. Does Luke offer any rationale for this? Are there any stories that you consider especially important in understanding Acts?
- Make a list of important themes and some of the ways your own understanding of Acts is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Powell. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.
- What aspects of the growth and development of the early church do you wish Acts included?

Deeper Engagement with the Acts of the Apostles

Because the author of Luke’s gospel and the author of Acts are the same person a careful reader of both books is able to see some important Lucan themes as they continue to be explored in the life of early followers of “the Way” in Acts. One of these themes is hospitality.

Throughout Luke’s gospel beginning particularly in Luke 9:4-5 and 10:5-10 a combination of words occurs that will show up all the way through Acts. These words have to do with how God’s good news is shared: enter, welcome, stay (with those who welcome). Jesus uses them in Luke 9 and 10 to set a model for his disciples to follow when they come to new places where they would like to heal and speak the good news that God’s reign has come close. Jesus himself acts out this process in 10:38-42 and in 19:2-6. (Note also the warning to the “lawyers” who do not “enter” in 11:52.) The acceptance of hospitality is a necessity for those who are part of a “Way.” The acceptance of hospitality from those who are not one’s own religion or one’s own ethnic group was a problem that had to be overcome for the growth of the church among Gentiles to happen and to be legitimate. In Acts 10:48, Peter stays in the home of the Gentile

Cornelius. After that, in Acts 16:15 the connection of hospitality and faith is made by Lydia very forcefully with Paul. You can consider other instances where “staying” was an opportunity for extending a mission, including Paul’s stay in the house in Damascus before his baptism; the stay at the house of Mnason of Cyprus (in Caesarea) Acts 21:16; the stays in Malta and Rome in Acts 28. Two of the most important “stays” in Luke and Acts, a “stay” that gets things moving toward the mission in Acts, are Jesus’ stay in Emmaus at the inn and at table with Cleopas and his companion; and the “stay” in Acts 1:4 where Jesus abides with his disciples and others for 40 days. All these raise the theme of how God abides among humans and how we are called to stay with one another, welcome one another, and thereby not miss the presence of God among us.

You can see from the “stay” theme above that Jesus, his disciples, and finally Paul are models of the behavior that Jesus calls for. This is but one illustration of another theme, interwoven with the others: there is a kind of succession of discipleship to God as practiced first by Jesus, then the Eleven (especially Peter), in the life of Stephan, and Paul. The events in the lives of these men (and Jesus is also a human being as we know) have parallels that are part of Luke’s efforts to show that God’s plan requires and creates certain kinds of behavior both in those who enact God’s plan and those who resist it. Perhaps the clearest example of parallel realities is in the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen (Acts 7:55-60). The heavens open, Stephen prays that he may be received in heaven and that his murderers might be forgiven, all under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Of great significance in Acts are several passages in which Luke tries to explain the plan of God. Luke is able simply to state that something happened in accord with God’s plan by using the language of plan, for example in Luke 7:30 and Acts 2:23; 4:28; 5:38. (Additional occurrences of the word for “plan” connected with God include Acts 13:36; 20:27, 42, 43 and Luke 10:22; 23:51.) Equally important is the frequent use of a three-letter Greek word, *dei*, meaning “it is necessary.” The source of “necessity” is God’s will. This word shows up so frequently in Luke and Acts (Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 12:12; 13:14, 33; 17:25; 19:5; 21:9; 22:37; 24:7, 44; Acts 1:21; 3:21; 4:12; 5:29; 9:6, 16; 14:22; 15:5; 16:30; 19:21; 20:35; 23:11; 25:10; 27:24, 26) that it is a constant reminder that neither the activities of Jesus nor those of his followers were ever out of sync with God’s will and God’s long held plan for the restoration of all people to God. What a satisfying word for Luke’s hearers who may have wondered why the Jews, God’s own covenant people, did not trust that Jesus was the Messiah. What an important word for those who could not imagine why God’s messiah would endure the cross! How good to be reminded as the years after Jesus’ ascension wore on and there was no return! God’s plan helped to explain events and timetables from the beginning of God’s interactions with creation up to and beyond the days of the hearers of Luke’s gospel and Acts.

The idea that these things fit together as part of God’s plan also gave extra emphasis to the value of Scripture—still referring to what we call the Old Testament. God’s word, according to Luke, was valid and predictive because it referred to the plan that God was enacting. Notice, however, that not all of God’s word was equally predictive. New interpretations had to be made to explain new events as in Acts 15:16-18 where James quotes from Amos 9:11-14 as it appears in the Greek Old Testament. See also Acts 10:34, where the Levitical code takes second place to a new-found emphasis on God’s impartiality.

The connection between the Holy Spirit and the plan of God will be developed in the following exercise. Acts is particularly fruitful for exploring the ways in which God makes God's plan known and "gets it done" without the presence of Jesus to command, direct, and manage his disciples. It is this aspect of Acts that remains especially interesting for 21st century believers who seek to discern the most Godly directions for their own lives in a complex world.

An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation

Acts is filled with references to the ways in which humans are informed, led, and guided into some actions or directions by God. The presence of the Holy Spirit is by far the most important of God's means for prompting certain behaviors. There are also many dreams, visions, and prophetic words from human beings that have great weight in the way the mission was spread. To all these we might add the importance of human pondering—of thinking through the connections that have come together in our experience and trying to discern guidance through these events. In order to see how these function complete the following on your own:

- Look up in a concordance all the occurrences of spirit in Acts. You will have to ignore some uses of spirit that are not about God's Holy Spirit (e.g. 7:59), but you will find a large number that do refer to the Holy Spirit. Make a list of some of the things that Holy Spirit does or causes others to do. Take note of where the Holy Spirit comes from in the story of Acts. God's Holy Spirit was active in Luke's gospel before Jesus was even born, but there is a major turn in Acts 2.
- Look up in a concordance all the words you can find like "dream," "vision," "prophet." All these speak of information or direction coming from another power, another place than from ordinary human life. What kinds of responses are called for?
- Look up in a concordance all the words for "think," "ponder," "consider" that you can find. Note that humans often do this kind of mental activity in response to God's leading because it is not always immediately obvious to them what they are to do.
- Finally, review Acts 10, a chapter where it requires the work of the Spirit, the work of pondering, and God's sending of a vision and a heavenly voice to persuade Peter to a new way of reading Scripture.
- Pulling this together for yourself, write two or three paragraphs on how God communicates with humans in Acts and how well these processes work. You might consider the importance—or not—of human thought and interaction, the clarity or ambiguity of messages, and the risk of response in that one might be wrong.

Discussion Question

Given your learnings in the exercise above, discuss with one another:

- Any experience you or someone you know may have had of being led by God.
- Ideas you may have about how God leads us to know, including insights about discerning Godly leading from other kinds of promptings.
- Thoughts you may have about how God leads us—or not—in this time and place. What do you trust? Whose insights are helpful to you? What does "pondering" mean for us?
- What do we do in those times when we need to make decisions about life and we are unable to discern any particular guidance from God?