

how to read the Bible for all its worth

Laurence Crutchlow considers how to apply Acts today

*'The Holy Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God...'
CMF doctrinal basis.*

Acts: the question of historical precedent

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Almost everything previously written about Old Testament narratives¹ applies to Acts. But we often approach Acts in a different way to Exodus or 2 Kings. We don't often see Old Testament stories as models for Christian behaviour or church life - yet we often use Acts as the model for church today, taking the first century church as an ideal to be copied. Acts *describes* the early church. But does it *set a model* for the church at all times and in all places? What role does scriptural historical precedent play in Christian doctrine and experience?

exegesis

We commonly see Acts as being mainly about mission and church life. Considering Luke's purpose may broaden our view. Of course Luke's writing was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But he also wrote

an overview

Five brief summary statements² divide the book into six sections - each describing a forward movement of the early church, and marking a change of direction in the story.

- Acts 1:1-6:7 - The primitive (mostly Jewish) church in Jerusalem
- Acts 6:8-9:31 - Greek speaking Jewish Christians expand the church, mostly to other Greek speaking Jews
- Acts 9:32-12:24 - The first conversions of Gentiles
- Acts 12:15-16:5 - Geographical expansion into the Gentile world, via Paul - but Jews now often reject the gospel
- Acts 16:6-19:20 - Expansion westward into Europe - largely Gentiles accept the gospel while Jews reject it
- Acts 19:21-28:30 - Paul and the gospel move to Rome - effectively the centre of the known world at the time

as a first century Gentile. His style of writing aims not simply to chronicle the past - but also to encourage and engage. Luke would also have known the Old Testament, which may have influenced him. We need to ask 'why did Luke include that, and put it that way?'

Luke's purpose

The main theme is the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem (and a largely Jewish church), to Rome (and a largely Gentile church). What *doesn't* Luke say? There is little biographical detail; Peter is hardly mentioned once the church spreads outside the Jewish world. Not much is said about church organisation - nor about the eastwards and southwards expansion of the church. The communal life of the Jewish church is recorded,³ but there is nothing to imply that the Gentile churches followed this model. It seems that Acts should serve as a model in terms of the growth of the church; but does not lay down specific rules for every aspect of church life.

hermeneutics: general principles

A widely shared assumption is that unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something,

a simple description of an event does *not* oblige us always to do the same thing - unless there are clear grounds to believe the author intended it to do so.

Do the specific details of the narrative in Acts have the same teaching value as the main theme of the growth of the church? As the details are largely incidental to the main thrust of the story, and often vary in different parts of the story, they may not.

The general principles are:

1. What we draw from Acts relates to what the narrative was *intended* to teach.
2. Things *incidental* to the main intent of the narrative are useful, but don't have the same teaching value as the things the narrative intended to teach.
3. If the *purpose* of a given narrative is clearly to establish a precedent for all time, then we apply it for all time. But if this isn't the intent of a narrative, we don't.

Reading Acts this way doesn't give rules on some issues which divide believers. Yet people often baldly argue that 'this is what the earliest believers did,

therefore so should we'. Problems then ensue. Scripture implies that most baptisms in the early church were by immersion.⁴ But there is no direct command. How would immersion practically work in arid Samaria? It would be hard to be immersed in this mountainous and dry region! An early church manual (the *Didache*) suggested pouring water over someone in this situation. Not everyone immersed. Though we might imply that immersion was usual practice, it doesn't mean that to do otherwise disobeys the Bible.

specific principles

1. We cannot use analogy based *solely* on biblical narratives to give 'authority' to present day actions. The common misuse of Gideon's fleece⁵ to support testing God is a classic example. Gideon himself recognised it wasn't a right action.
2. Biblical narrative has illustrative value. Paul sometimes used Old Testament examples to teach directly,⁶ but we don't necessarily have God's authority to use the Old Testament this way. We might not be inspired, as Paul was. Precedent can only justify an action taught elsewhere - for

example present day speaking in tongues can't be justified solely from descriptions in Acts, but could be from the 'direct' teaching on the matter in 1 Corinthians 12 -14, which Acts backs up.

3. Patterns in Biblical narrative may be helpful, even if not binding on all Christians. If only a single way of doing things is recorded, and repeatedly, a strong case can be made. This case is less strong if patterns are ambiguous, or only occur once - but can still be made if consistent with other teachings in scripture.

Such issues are controversial, and a single article cannot solve all the problems. However, care over use of Acts, with clear thinking, should certainly help!

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REFERENCES

- 1 Zhang S. The Old Testament Narratives: their proper use. *Nucleus*. 2008, Summer: 38-39
- 2 Acts 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:4, 19:20
- 3 Acts 2:42-27, 4:32-35
- 4 Acts 8:38-39
- 5 Judges 6:36-40 -
- 6 1 Corinthians 10:1-13