

Introduction

This small commentary covers the first eight chapters of the book of Acts, up until the persecution that scattered the Jerusalem Church and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch but prior to the conversion of Paul. I have called the book *The Primal Church*, to distinguish it from ‘the Early Church’ (29-313AD) or the Apostolic Church (29-95AD) both of which are much longer time-spans. The dating of Acts 1-8 is a matter of much contention but the years 29-37 AD or so seem likely dates for the time period from Pentecost to the martyrdom of Stephen.

In these chapters the gospel goes from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, and finally with the Ethiopian eunuch “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Christians start off as loyal Jews but gradually are rejected by the Jewish Temple authorities until the tension erupts with the stoning of Stephen and the persecution that causes the disruption of the Jerusalem Church. At this point the Jewish authorities clearly no longer regarded Christians as truly Jewish, though undoubtedly many of the Christians still felt their Jewish heritage very deeply. Thus a new religion is born, a religion without a temple or a caste of priests, a religion that is wholly “from faith to faith” and which has as its central dynamic the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

These are perhaps some of the most radically anti-establishment chapters in Scripture. Twice we hear the phrase ‘we must listen to God not men’ and Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin makes very clear that Temples and religious authorities are not necessary for the Abrahamic life of true faith.

At the same time these chapters explore a new way of communal living in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians ate together, shared their goods together and prayed together and powerful miracles occurred in the community in unity. Many today are searching for new clues to community in the fractured isolation of the Church in the West. Acts 1-8 is a good starting point.

There is an abundant sense of miraculous as it becomes obvious after Pentecost that the powers of Jesus Christ are being exercised through His body the Church which now heals in His Name and does mighty miracles and exorcisms. This healing power starts with the apostles, and then moves also to the deacons via the laying on of hands.

The Church is not without her problems though – there is the greed and lying of Ananias and Sapphira, the problem with the distribution of food to the Greek-speaking widows, the attempt by Simon Magus to “buy the Holy Spirit” and various incidents of persecution and harassment chiefly at the hands of the Sanhedrin culminating in the martyrdom of Stephen. The apostles handle all these challenges wisely and the respect for their leadership only grew stronger. They give us many wise patterns for church leadership today.

Luke, the apostle, the beloved physician and the companion to Paul is the undoubted author of Acts, which is a continuation of his gospel and is addressed to the same person “Theophilus” or “friend of God”. This may be an actual person, possibly Roman official who Luke was assembling a defense of Christianity for. Or it may be just another way of saying “dear Christian reader”. This is explored at length in standard

Introductions to the New Testament - such as that by Guthrie. You may also find some valuable information on Luke-Acts in many of the better study bibles.

The main Bible version used here has been the MKJV or “Modern King James Version” - an older version that is well out of copyright. The commentaries quoted are mainly those included as modules in the E-Sword bible software and thus are older non-copyrighted works that still contain much wisdom. Modern commentaries on Acts worth noting are those by F.F Bruce for an exploration of the Greek and C. Peter Wagner for cultural and missiological perspectives.

However this is not a technical commentary for scholars, it is a commentary and exposition for Christians who wish to learn about Acts and find some of the keys to living the Spirit-led life. It is fitting that our chapters should end up with Philip being snatched away to Azotus by the Holy Ghost because Acts 1-8 is all about moving in the Spirit!

There is a lot of discussion about issues such as tongues, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, prophecy and receiving the Holy Ghost through the laying on of hands. This is because these chapters say a lot about these things and they cannot be avoided. I have been gentle in my treatment of these delicate matters as I do not wish to offend anyone of a non-charismatic persuasion - however we will explore these issues from the perspective that we are to live in the Spirit today.

There are some cultural and biblical subtleties that may escape the modern reader. One of these is the change of priesthood from Aaron to Melchizedek and the importance of Psalm 110 and Jesus being at the right hand of God. The fulfillment of Psalm 110 spelled out a return to Abrahamic faith, the end of the Mosaic covenant and the Levitical priesthood and a total loss of power for those administering the Temple. This was so controversial that when Stephen said he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, in fulfillment of Psalm 110 – they rushed on him and stoned him to death.

The other often unnoticed fact was the total grip of astrology and the doctrine of fate on the Hellenized (Greek influenced) members of the Sanhedrin such as the Sadducees who were pro-Roman and pro-Greek culturally. They had a “clockwork” idea of God and the notion of direct personal divine intervention was abhorrent to them as were doctrines about angels, the resurrection and the after-life which matters are constantly thrown at them by the apostles in their various replies to the Sanhedrin.

In the end the bad guys seem to win. The glory days of the Jerusalem Church are suddenly ended by a bloody purge of the Christians from Jerusalem inaugurated at the stoning of Stephen, the ten thousand strong community is dispersed in haste and the Christians are scattered. But the miracles do not cease! The Samaritans are gloriously converted along with an Ethiopian Jew and the gospel moves to the ends of the earth and the stage is set for the conversion of the Gentiles.

At Pentecost fire fell and no amount of human intervention has managed to put out that fire, and it burns still today! May you enjoy the following commentary.

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