The Unhindered Gospel in the Hindered Church

To understand the Book of Acts, you really need to pay attention to the last word in the Greek text of Acts. It is ακωλυτως, pronounced “ah-koh-LOO-tohs” by some and “ah-koh-LEE-tohs” by others, and means “unhindered.” The final verse in Acts (28:31) tells us that God’s Kingdom and what Jesus taught were being preached throughout the world with no barriers of race, geography or circumstances. Along with Dr. Frank Stagg, I firmly believe that this is the theme of Acts—overcoming barriers of race, resources, language, politics and opposition to preach Jesus.

To get the picture of how this works, I’ve provided two slides with maps. The first illustrates the progression as described in Acts 1:8 (we’ll come back to that when we outline the book) with circles of influence extending from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, then outward to Syria, and then to the known world. The second slide [made by Wailam] shows the church BEFORE and AFTER Paul in a vivid, graphical way.

So, how did that happen? The Bible gives us a clue at the very beginning of the book. Read verses 1-2. The Gospel of Luke was written to demonstrate how Jesus introduced the Kingdom of God and taught people how to enter it. The Book of Acts is about the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, coming to empower the apostles after Jesus ascended.

THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

Originally, neither Luke’s gospel nor what we call the Book of Acts had a title. It was entitled in a later century as “Acts” because it was about deeds, actions. This made very good sense in a Hellenistic Greek setting because books about heroes, leaders, and famous men were often entitled as the “Acts of…” these famous men. So, even later, it became known as the Acts of the Apostles. Of course, even though that is the traditional name given in most English translations, it isn’t very reflective of the text itself. The biblical book only mentions the apostles as a group a few times (1:2, 4:36-37, 5:12, and 8:1) and even then, more consistently refers to them as “The Twelve” (as in 6:2, 6).

It really ought to be called “Acts of the Holy Spirit” rather than “Acts of the Apostles,” as it is in many English editions. Look at how many times the words “Holy Spirit” or “Holy Ghost” are used in Acts compared to other books of the Bible.

* 52 references in 28 chapters of Acts
* 34 references in 68 combined chapters of Matthew, Mark and Luke
* 45 references in 32 combined chapters of Romans and I Corinthians
* 21 references in 28 combined chapters of John, I John, II John, and III John

The obvious take-away from this is that nothing happened in the early church without the activity of the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost in the KJV). This name for God appears 47 times as Holy Ghost and 5 times as Spirit (capitalized) in the KJV. As in the listing above, in the 28 chapters of Acts, that’s more than the 34 references in the 68 combined chapters of Matthew, Mark and Luke. That’s more than the 45 references in Romans and I Corinthians combined. Add together the Gospel of John and the three letters I, II and III John and you only find 21 references to the Holy Spirit.

What do all these numbers mean? I believe they mean that you cannot overcome the barriers to preaching the gospel without the power of the Holy Spirit. Some churches try to organize and some churches try to imitate successful churches. No church can succeed without depending on the Holy Spirit.

Second, note that the disciples are no longer called disciples. They are no longer “FOLLOWERS,” but they are commissioned messengers, deputized ambassadors—they are “apostles” – sent ones, people on a mission. That’s what the church is to be. And if the Holy Spirit is present in the lives of a church’s members and if they are following the Holy Spirit, those members will be SENT into the community and neighborhoods, the workplaces and the schools, the clubs and the athletic teams to preach, teach, share and disciple according to God’s word. That’s why it’s so important for us to study this book if we ever to expect have authentic revival in our church.

THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

Though some scholars are always skeptical of traditional authorship, there isn’t a lot of disagreement on Luke as the author of the bulk of Luke-Acts. There is a copy of a manuscript from the gospel which seems to date as early as AD 120 which has the phrase “But I Luke…” found in Acts 20:13. The oldest full copy of Luke is Papyrus 75, dating around AD 200, and it has the line “According to Luke” appended to the end of the manuscript [Garland, David E. *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), p. 30.] Since both the gospel and the Book of Acts are connected by subject matter and the dedication to Theophilus, as well as so much of an emphasis on Paul that Tertullian called the book the “gospel of Paul” in the early 3rd century, it makes sense that the Luke who was known as a close companion of Paul (Colossians 4:4, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24) would most likely be the author.

What we do know from the Greek is that the author was an extremely well-educated Greek speaker who knew the Old Testament through the Greek translation known as the Septuagint [Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 226.]. Since a manuscript from AD 175 known as “The Anti-Marcionite Prologue” claims Luke to be a native Syrian and a doctor who lived to the age of 84 [Garland, p. 30], this would fit the educated style, give him sufficient years to create such a massive work, and demonstrate why there is such emphasis on both Syria and, due to his association with Paul, the missionary journeys of Paul. Some even see him as the unidentified believer who was mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8:18 as proclaiming the gospel in all the churches.

Further, it helps with our understanding of the “We” passages in Acts where it seems like the author is including himself in the story. [NOTE: The “We” passages are those where the author of Luke-Acts uses the 1st person plural pronoun, we, to describe what was happening to Paul and company (presumably including the author) in Acts 16:1—17; 20:5-16; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16 as opposed to strictly narrating from an outsider’s view. While some believe that the author may have been reusing someone else’s account and merely left the reference there to indicate that he was using a source, and some suggest that an author who wasn’t there used the “we” to make the account seem more vivid, I personally believe that it is best to see these as eye-witness narratives in which Luke participated. This seems particularly likely since these sections “…appear and disappear in such an arbitrary manner that they cannot be attributed to some literary convention…” [Garland, p. 31.] and would better reflect how Luke may have joined Paul’s journeys at various times.

The first “We” section (also including the pronoun “us”) appears immediately after the Macedonian call of 16:9 where the group travels to Philippi. Philippi was a major commercial city from 360 BC to 1400 AD, being a specifically Roman city from 42 BC onward. The “we” and “us” references carry through the meeting with Lydia the seller of purple and all the way through the arrest when the narrative reverts to normal third-person description at 16:18. [The slide immediately after the map of Macedonia with the summary of the first “We” passage is an overview of Philippi we took from the Via Egnatia just above
the main city.]

Similarly, in Acts 20, Luke lists the group who went with Paul and waited at Troas (20:4) for Luke and company to join them at Troas. From 20:5 through the Eutychus story (note the cartoon about falling asleep in church) and continues until Paul gets to Miletus, the harbor where Paul met with the elders from Ephesus. [The slide after the Eutychus reference features the harbor structure at Miletus, no longer a real harbor because of the silt from the Menander River.] The last “we” or “us” reference in that chapter is 20:15.

The slide about Acts 21:1-18 shows that Luke used “we” and “us” while describing the prophecy of Agabus, but ceases using this first-person style after Paul goes in to see James in 21:19. The slide shows Agabus prophesying that Paul will be bond and imprisoned if he goes to Jerusalem (image on the right) while the other image shows the prophecy coming true (image on the left).

The longest “we” passage in Acts is found from 27:1-28 through 28:16. As you can see from the map on the slide, it was a long eventful journey which Luke portrays vividly by identifying with the traveling group. Similar to the way the 1st person narrator drops out when Paul goes in to see James in 21:19, that is how the narrator changes when Paul calls the Jewish elders to his place of imprisonment in 28:17. Why does he change? My personal hypothesis is that he doesn’t want to overshadow Paul’s actions and message with his personal experiences. These are critical events and Luke doesn’t force himself into the picture.

Raymond E. Brown is more cautious than I, but even he says: “This proposal for authorship has more to recommend it than other theories, but ‘not impossible’ is all that should be claimed.” [Brown, pp. 326-327.] The truth is that we can never be completely sure, but Luke’s authorship is a solid working assumption and works very well with our understanding of the text. For those interested in serious details, there are some differences between manuscripts that were preserved by the western church and those preserved by the eastern (Orthodox) church traditions. The western texts are longer and have more material, but the good news is that the western texts match the style of the rest of the book and offer additional details which are missing from the eastern text. IF the differences in readings are relevant, I will try to alert you as our study moves forward.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The easiest way to look at the structure of the book is through the lens of the aforementioned Acts 1:8. After the initial 11 verses of the book, we can easily see how the book divides into Jerusalem (1:12-8:1), Judea and Samaria (8:2-12:23), and to that unhindered spreading of the gospel to the rest of the known world (13:1-28:31). I’m providing the spreadsheet so you can change the English to Chinese for your own use.

A more detailed outline is provided by Raymond E. Brown, but it naturally fits the simple breakdown we just provided, offering slightly more detail.

1:1-26 Introduction: Preparing Jesus’ Followers for the Spirit
2:1-8:1a Mission in Jerusalem from Peter’s sermon to Stephen’s martyrdom
8:1b-12:24 Missions in Samaria and Judea from Philip and Peter to Herod’s Persecution
13:1-15:25 Mission of Barnabas and Saul to Convert Gentiles to Approval at Jerusalem (1st Journey)
15:26-28:38 Mission of Paul to Ends of the Earth (2nd, 3rd Journeys and Journey to Rome)

A FEW INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

The first few verses emphasize the continuity from Jesus’ teaching to the passing of the baton to the disciples (as I noted before, now known as “apostles”). When we read verses 3-8, we see that Jesus was present with the disciples for 40 days. During this time, He spoke with them about the Kingdom of God and gave them convincing proofs of His LIVING. In fact, the Greek verb that is translated “shewed himself alive” has the literal idea of being present with, being in the middle of that group.

And 40 days isn’t an insignificant number. Think about it. Noah’s flood -- 40 days and nights, Moses on the mountain -- 40 days and nights, Elijah in the wilderness headed for Sinai/Horeb to hear the still, small voice -- 40 days, Jesus tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. 4, the number of the created order in gematria (4 cardinal directions, 4 living creatures around the throne of God (birds, domesticated animals, wild animals and humans --the fish get squeezed out in the vision because of Dagon and Leviathan, I suppose, but biologically, fish and birds are really the same--birds fly in the air and often swim in the water, fish swim in the water and sometimes fly in the air), 4 rivers coming out of the Garden of Eden, > etc.) \* 10 (the number of sufficiency with 2 hands of 5 digits each and 2 feet of 5 digits each) = the amount of time sufficient for CREATION, the CREATED ORDER to understand that Jesus was ALIVE!

Yet, even after Jesus had stayed with them, worked with them, ate with them, comforted them, and trained them throughout this 40 days, they were still (verses 4 and 7) commanded to wait. Why? They needed to be sure that GOD was leading them. They needed the supernatural presence of God as well as the natural presence of God.

Worse yet, from our perspective, they were told to wait “in Jerusalem.” Note that most of these people were from Galilee. Wouldn’t you expect them to want to express their mourning for Jesus’ death, their loss at Jesus’ leaving to go to heaven by returning to the familiar environs of their own home? Don’t we withdraw within ourselves, return to the familiar and try to make ourselves comfortable when we hurt, when we mourn? Yet, Jesus ordered them to STICK TOGETHER and WORSHIP TOGETHER in Jerusalem, where the temple was, where the ministry needed to occur.

But don’t miss what we find in verse 7. Since Jesus was preparing these soon-to-be apostles for becoming part of the Kingdom of God, it is firmly stated that no one will know the times and seasons that God has established for the Kingdom by His own authority. We cannot rush the kingdom of God. We cannot put God’s kingdom on our timetables.

**In the rest of the book, try to notice how many times the sermons begin with an Old Testament background before they move on to speak about the significance of Jesus. Too often, we New Testament believers ignore the Old Testament and fail to build a background before we try to convince people of Jesus as Messiah and Savior.**

**We should also consider the emphasis on baptism and its relationship to church involvement (Acts 2:38-41). It is presumed that once a person believes, that person will announce that commitment through baptism and become involved with the church. We see a specific commandment to be baptized after believing in Acts 16:31 and we see testimonies of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the lives of the Gentiles after baptism. So, Acts should be a reminder to us to pay attention to the importance of baptism. Acts 1:5 summarizes this importance in Jesus’ own words.**

The Holy Spirit brings both fire and power. Water symbolized the cleansing that took place after one had repented and asked God for forgiveness. But water cleans without transforming. The Holy Ghost was going to dip us into the fire. Fire not only cleanses as its purification process, as when we cook food, but it also transforms by consuming—burning up impurities and refining, tempering, what is precious into something that is stronger or purer. So, the Holy Spirit fire works on God’s people FIRST—purifying and transforming. We cannot expect renewal and revival until we have been changed by God’s Holy Spirit.

**Finally, notice the emphasis on fellowship, community, partnership, and commitment. The Greek word is κοινονία = “koi-noh-NEE-ah” and it means much more than fellowship or enjoying each other’s company. It was used for marital understandings and business partnerships, as well. It is more than liking each other or cooperating in a small arena of life. It is a significant, overall commitment. Acts should help us to emphasize our church membership more, as well.**

**I look forward to going through Acts chapter-by-chapter, but I hope this helps us get just a little bit excited about why it is important to study.**