

Expounding Narrative: Acts 2

Introduction

In order to consider a correct approach to expounding scriptural narrative (such as Acts 2) it is necessary to begin with some background. In summarising the background brief attention is given to the relationship of Acts to other scriptures, particularly Luke. Reference is also made to the unique role that Acts plays in the scriptural canon and Luke's reasons for writing Acts. The basic outline of Acts, Christian mission to the Jewish world and Christian mission to the Gentile world, is introduced and the idea of parallelism between Luke and Acts is mentioned. The narrative of Acts includes a high proportion of apostolic speeches. Acts 2 contains an account of the first Christian Pentecost and the first apostolic sermon. The basic structure of the sermon is outlined, including a suggestion as to what might be considered the main elements of the Christian message. The concluding narrative of Acts 2 is briefly considered.

The second part of Luke's two-part work

The book of Acts gives a picture of the church in action and gives an account of the ministry of the apostles. The narrative of Acts shows what it means to be a Christian, responding in faith to the grace of God. In this narrative the themes of personal evangelism, Bible study and engaging with the culture of the people around us are all important. Acts begins by summarising the contents of a 'first book'. The contents, style and structure of both Luke and Acts suggest that, even though they have been written anonymously, that they were written by the same author. Both books are written in good literary Greek, which has led to the conclusion that the author must have been well educated. It is commonly thought Luke, whom Paul describes as 'our dear friend, the doctor' (Colossians 4:14) wrote Acts as the sequel to the Gospel that bears his name and that Acts was probably circulated with the Gospel of Luke as the second part of one complete work. The natural association of Luke's Gospel with the other Gospels separated the two parts of the work, though it has always remained a mystery to me as to why the New Testament did not order its first five books John, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts. When the two-parts of the work became separate, the name *Acts of the Apostles* was used to suggest the advance of the gospel through the mission of the apostles, though in real terms only the work of two apostles, Peter and Paul, is dealt with in any detail. Even separately, Luke's Gospel and Acts are the longest and third longest books in the New Testament (Matthew coming second) and so Luke's writings account for between one-quarter and one-third of the New Testament, much more than the writings of Paul or John.

A unique piece of New Testament writing

At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke acknowledges the existence of other Gospels but at the beginning of Acts he makes no reference to any similar writing. 'Acts is unique in that it contains ninety-seven verses during Paul's journeys where the third person is replaced by the first person plural — the so-called "we passages," which claim to be the observations of an eyewitness' (Fernando, 1998:22). Luke's narrative of the expansion of the New Testament church is unique and merits our careful attention. As we expound Acts we must bear in mind that we are dealing with a particular style of writing and must learn how to treat it appropriately. One of the most interesting dimensions in Acts is the relation of the historical record of the expansion of the church to the preaching of the gospel (the proclamation of the apostolic

kerygma). If the purpose of Acts is apostolic proclamation, can it also be considered history? If the purpose of Acts is to present the historical record of the expansion of the church, can it also contain the original proclamation of the earliest Christians? Luke, a careful historian, is not a mere chronicler. Instead, he selects events and presents them in a particular way, according to his theological viewpoint. As in his Gospel, Luke writes Acts in a way that shows that he believes that as God was acting in Christ, similarly he acts through the apostolic ministry of the body of Christ.

Why did Luke write Acts?

There is little point in trying to establish just one reason for the existence of Acts or its inclusion in the New Testament canon. No doubt there are many reasons. Bearing in mind that Acts was originally the second part of a two-part work, we might draw some help from the opening of the Gospel, where Luke states that his purpose was ‘that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught’ (Luke 1:4). From an overview of Luke-Acts we might draw the conclusion that Theophilus, the original recipient, was concerned as to how the emerging Christian faith related to the ministry of Jesus, to Judaism and to Jewish Christians, as well as to Gentiles and the Roman law. While the Gospel recorded the death and resurrection of Jesus in considerable detail, the meaning and implications of his death and resurrection needed further explanation and the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit in power at Pentecost and the apostolic ministry, including Paul, needed clarifying. That said, the strong emphasis on the preaching of the apostles must lead to the conclusion that Luke’s main purpose was to show how the proclamation of the Word of God continued to challenge men and women. For Luke the message of salvation in Jesus proclaimed by the church is in direct continuity with the ministry and teaching of Jesus. The essential message (*kerygma*) was firmly rooted in history (Luke 1:5; Luke 2:1-2; Luke 3:1-2; Luke 23:1-25). Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Word of God had been freed from Jewish law and the universal proclamation of the gospel begun in Jerusalem must spread through Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Luke’s desire firmly to root the spreading of the gospel in history is shown as he carefully details that the gospel was proclaimed and spread through the Roman world in the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28; 18:2), when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12-17), when Felix and Festus ruled in Judea and Ananias was the high priest in Jerusalem (Acts 24-25), and between the times of the Jewish kings Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-23) and Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25:13-26:32). As Jesus spoke of a kingdom which was not of this world, Luke is keen to show that Christians are not a political threat to the Roman Empire but should be a permitted religion (*religio licita*) and not an illegal religion (*religio illicita*). The nature of Jesus’ kingship is raised at Thessalonica (Acts 17:7). The legitimacy of Christian worship is brought up at Corinth (Acts 18:13). Such matters must also be taken into consideration when looking at the charges brought against Paul and Silas who allegedly were ‘advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice’ (Acts 16:20-21). Although originally addressed to an individual, there seems little doubt that Luke intended his work for a much wider readership, a common literary device of the time. Luke’s portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel is of one who is the ‘Saviour of the World’ not surprisingly therefore Acts takes some interest in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and the difficulties that arose between Peter and Paul because of this. Undoubtedly, Luke would have known about the tensions in the local churches caused by those who would readily divide the ministries of Peter

and Paul and so, while recording their differences, he also had to show their ultimate unity in the gospel.

An overview of Acts

Luke-Acts is really a single continuous work that covers events stretching from the birth of John the Baptist through to the gospel message reaching Rome. Luke sees the history of the advance of the gospel as an integral part of the unfolding drama of salvation and shows that what Jesus 'began' to do and teach (Acts 1:1) is now continued by the apostles and the fledgling church. There are many similarities between Luke and Acts, some very subtle but others more obvious. In Luke, the ministry of Jesus begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit and Jesus preaching at Nazareth (Luke 3:22; 4:18-19). In Acts, the ministry of the apostles begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit and Peter preaching at Jerusalem (Acts 2:4; Acts 2:11ff.). In Acts, Luke includes six summary statements or 'progress reports' to conclude each section.

The first half: the beginning of Christian mission and proclamation to the Jewish world

The first half of Acts, about beginning of the Christian mission (1:1-2:41) and the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world (2:42-12:24), is made up of three short accounts, each with a summarising concluding statement. The first account concerning the earliest days of the church at Jerusalem is summarised with the statement, 'so the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith' (6:7). The second part of the section concerning the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world includes an account of critical events in the lives of three important figures (6:8-9:31) and summarises this with the statement, 'then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord' (9:31). The third part of the section concerning the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world includes an account of the advances of the Gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24) and summarises this with the statement, 'But the word of God continued to increase and spread' (12:24).

The second half: Christian mission to the Gentile world

The second half of Acts, about the Christian mission to the Gentile world (12:25-28:31), is also made up of three short accounts, each with a summarising concluding statement. The first account concerning the first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5) is summarised with the statement, 'so the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers' (16:5). The second part of the section concerning the Christian mission to the Gentile world includes an account of the widening Christian outreach through two missionary journeys (16:6-19:20) and summarises this with the statement, 'in this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power' (19:20). The third part of the section concerning the Christian mission to the Gentile world includes an account of the advance of the Gospel to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Rome (19:21-28:31) and summarises this with the statement, 'Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ' (28:31).

Parallelism between Luke and Acts

The idea of parallelism between Luke's Gospel and Acts might give a pointer towards explaining why Acts ends in the way that it does, with Paul under house arrest at Rome (28:30-31). Possible explanations include the death of Luke, which would have prevented him from writing any more; the hypothesis that Acts is a trial document for presentation before the imperial authorities; or the simple idea that no charges were brought against Paul and that, with the arrival of the gospel in Rome, there was now little more to say. As in the Gospel, Luke also has to present a balance between narrative (what happened) and speech (what was said) and the relationship between the two is important.

The narrative of Acts

Luke's approach is admittedly different from modern historians. For instance, he does not cite authorities, consider other viewpoints or consider future implications. Instead, he uses his narrative to proclaim the continuing activity of the ascended Christ in the world through his Spirit in the church but that does not mean that his narrative is historically unreliable. Nevertheless, even if we assume the historical reliability of the narrative, we still need to consider whether and how we should derive normal teaching from Biblical historical narrative. Perhaps as a reaction to Pentecostal use of the historical narrative of Acts, some notable evangelicals deny the possibility of recovering normative teaching from Biblical narrative concluding that 'the revelation of the purpose of God in Scripture should be sought in its didactic, rather than its historical parts' (Stott, 1964:8). However, that seems to be going too far for 'all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16). Instead, what the reader or expositor must do is to discriminate between what the author determined as normative and what he did not (Larkin, 2000). If Luke has written so that we may know the certainty of the things we have been taught (Luke 1:4) then using his narrative record for the purpose of teaching and evangelism is quite legitimate. A popular method of dealing with biblical narrative is allegorising that is seeing consistent spiritual parallels to the incidents presented and looking for what is sometimes called the "deeper meaning" of the text (Fernando, 1998:31). Although allegorising is a way of interpreting a passage, it is necessary to be careful that such interpretation was intended from the passage itself. The broad sweep of teaching might be true because it comes from other scriptural passages, but it is not faithful exposition to read things into the text.

The historical narrative is important not only in recording the essential facts of the nativity, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus but also in recording how the church (in terms of the community of believers) came into being. For Luke, this was also firmly rooted in the history of the time. It is this that explains the gospel was proclaimed first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. Acts also provides a framework for understanding the other books of the New Testament (Larkin, 2000) but the other books of the New Testament are also helpful for understanding Acts. Careful reference to other scriptures will enable the expositor to distinguish principles that are normative from those that are specific to certain situations and are therefore not applicable to all situations. William Larkin suggests six good topic headings for a short series on Acts: (1) The Risen and Ascended Lord and the Spirit (Acts 1-4); (2) A Caring and Racially Reconciled Community (Acts 4:32-5:11; 10-11; 15); (3) Good News of Grace (Acts 13-14); (4) The Risen Christ's Challenge to Culture (Acts 15:36-18:23); (5) Power for Everyday Living (Acts 18:23-21:17; and (6) Mission under God's Hand (Acts 21:18-28:31).

The Speeches in Acts

Speeches form a significant part of Acts and those of Peter, Paul and Stephen make up a quarter of the book. In 1922, Henry J. Cadbury wrote 'The Greek and Jewish Traditions of Writing History' and argued that, following in the tradition of Thucydides, the speeches reported by historians were pure imagination. Since then, others have suggested that Luke, as a Greek historian, followed the model of Thucydides. Nevertheless, many ancient historians did try to keep as closely as possible to the sense of what was actually spoken. One of the significant things about the speeches in Acts is their similarity. The account of Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12) suggests that it is extremely unlikely that we have the full text of the speeches but 'the brief summary paragraphs we possess do not purport to reproduce more than perhaps a précis of the distinctive highlights' (Hemer, 1989:418). No doubt the speeches originally included more detail and more illustrations, as there is hardly time to fall asleep in any of the speeches as recorded. A simple comparison between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do not lead us to the conclusion that Luke invented sayings for Jesus and there is, therefore, no real reason to suggest that Luke treated the speeches of the apostles (Peter, Stephen, Philip, James, and Paul) in a significantly different way. In studying the speeches in Acts we are in touch with the earliest Christian preaching.

Acts 2: Pentecost and the first apostolic sermon

Acts 2 contains both historical narrative and speech. The historical narrative provides the context for the speech, so that it is necessary for the expositor not simply to divorce the speech from the rest of the text. The preacher is Peter. This is probably significant for Peter has often been considered the spokesman for the disciples. The place is Jerusalem, the natural place for the apostolic proclamation of the Christian gospel to begin. The audience is a Jewish crowd (though from many nations because their return for the feast of Pentecost, broadly speaking a Jewish harvest festival, makes the crowd representative of the nations of the Jewish Diaspora). As the apostles spill out onto the streets with great joy, filled with Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, the immediate context is the crowd looking for an explanation and wondering what is going on. Already, we are faced with one of the significant questions regarding a faithful exposition of Acts. Namely, is the historical narrative of Acts normative for Christian practice and proclamation today? If every part of it is normative, then we can be painted into a corner by those who suggest that all we need for the proclamation of the Christian gospel today is more people behaving as if they are drunk (at the more moderate end of the scale, effervescent with joy and speaking in tongues and at the less moderate end of the scale, laughing like hyenas and barking like dogs). Often, however, the preaching in the New Testament is an opportunity to give an explanation of something which has caused a crowd to gather. The criticism that today the preacher is often answering questions that no one is asking is only surpassed by the allegation that the preacher is in fact not answering any questions about what is happening because as far as he or (as perhaps I should add) she is concerned absolutely nothing of any significance is happening.

The basic structure of the sermon

Peter's Pentecost sermon falls into three parts (though I doubt this really represents scriptural justification for the famous three-point sermon!). Nevertheless, there is something to be gained from Peter's homiletic style for first, he explains what has been going on (*apologia*, vv. 14-21);

then he proclaims the basic apostolic message (*kerygma*, vv. 22-36), after which he concludes with a call to repentance and a promise of blessing (vv. 37-41).

The *apologia*

The different languages they have heard have left many people bewildered. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost needs interpreting, and Peter takes the opportunity to show that all this has its origin in Jesus. The prime purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit was to bear witness to Jesus. In the opening verse there are signs of the apostles' passionate longing that all should embrace the good news of Jesus. It is different from the error of today. In Acts the content of preaching is fixed, the approach flexible. In our day a common error is that the content is flexible, the approach fixed. We need to restate the important principle that it is impossible to preach the gospel and not preach Christ.

Peter disposes of the obvious but erroneous explanation that the man are drunk. Jews did not normally eat at his time of day, far less drink wine. In any event there is no hint that they are incoherent! Instead, he shows that the correct understanding is based on another level (quotation from Joel 2: 28-32). Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. In fact the heart of the sermon is built around the Old Testament prophecies. Peter has no doubt as to the origin of Old Testament prophecy, introducing into the quotation the additional words 'God says'. Peter's interpretation is that 'this' (what the infant church is experiencing at the first Christian Pentecost) is 'that' which was spoken by the prophet. Peter concludes that these are the long awaited 'last days'. In the Old Testament the Spirit had been bestowed on a select few, prophets, priests and kings, but not so in these last days. The Spirit is 'poured out' (as in a heavy tropical rainstorm) upon people regardless of age, sex or rank. In a sense all God's people are now prophets (just as they are also all priests) though some will have particular callings and gifts. It is difficult to know whether Peter intends verse 19 (I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke) to refer to the upheaval of Good Friday or to something that is yet to come in the era of the 'last days', which has been inaugurated by Jesus Christ. In any event, apocalyptic imagery of the end of the world shows that the message of Jesus is about his ushering in a complete new order. Peter concludes this section by showing that salvation is all of God. Calling on the name is not about a label. It expresses the person - to invoke all the name stands for (Yahweh saves). We cannot and do not save ourselves. This scripture is the perfect introduction to Peter's *kerygma* or proclamation section.

The *kerygma*

The style of the preaching in Acts authenticates its originality. Fernando (1998:31-38) gives a comprehensive table of the contents of apostolic preaching in Acts, listing 32 items of specific content. Useful as the list is, a much shorter list of six main headings, used here, is helpful. Peter's message is addressed to Israel. 'Jesus of Nazareth' is a common title used by Luke. Peter launches into an account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The miracles, wonders and signs of Jesus are not debated. It seems as if they were familiar to all. Those who rejected Jesus denounced him as a sorcerer. Peter's first main point is that *Jesus was the promised Messiah* (or Saviour). His humanity is here affirmed and Peter will conclude this section by describing Jesus as 'the man who is both Lord and Christ' (v. 36). Peter's second main point is that *the death of Jesus was part of God's plan*. The paradox of God's sovereignty and human free will is

unavoidable. Men and women are accountable. Salvation, which is all of God, is accomplished through the cross. 'With the help of wicked men' points to the Roman authorities. The crucified Messiah is at the heart of the gospel. No great attention is given to the physical sufferings of Christ (these are perhaps just the surface of the real suffering and sacrifice of the cross). Peter's third main point is that *God raised Jesus from death as prophesied*. In contrast to the work of the wicked, God raised Jesus. Jesus was the Messiah and death could never hold him. Peter illustrates his preaching with quotations from Psalm 16: 8-11; Psalm 110: 1. The ancient historian Josephus attested a monument marking the tomb of David. Peter continues with an allusion to Psalm 132: 11 and concludes that David was uttering a prophecy about the Messiah. Peter's fourth point is that *the resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved*. The resurrection of Jesus is an act of God. The apostles bear witness not only to the resurrection of Christ but also to their relationship with him. (Jesus is not dead but alive and we know him - Christians spoke about Jesus from the scriptures and the difference knowing him had made in their lives.) Their testimony was not man-centred, or self-centred but Christ-centred. The modern message must bear witness to the Jesus of the Old and New Testament scriptures, with which our present experience weighs in.

In the second half of the sermon Peter jumps to the exaltation, salvation and new community of Jesus. Peter's fifth point is that *Christ is glorified now and in the future*. Peter seems to be alluding to Psalm 68: 18. Jesus is restored to his place at the right hand of God. The Spirit who is given is the Holy Spirit. He is the presence of Jesus among us now. Peter continues using a further quotation from Psalm 110: 1 (Hebrew literally) 'Yahweh said to my lord'. He concludes from all of this that the victory of Jesus is complete - over the world and all that is above (spiritual powers) and below it (death). The great climax of the sermon is introduced with 'therefore'. God's resurrection and exaltation of Jesus accredits him as the Lord of mankind and the Messiah (Christ, Saviour) of Israel (made in this context means 'appointed'). The messiahship of Jesus was the distinctive Christian witness to the Jews; the Lordship of Jesus was the witness to the Gentiles. It is easy to see ourselves on the side of Christ. This is no more the case for us than for the Jerusalem Jews. The condemned, crucified Jesus has the right to the name 'Lord' (the word often used of God himself in scripture) and 'Christ' (Messiah).

The call to repentance and the promise of blessing

From the preaching there is a quick reversion to the narrative. The listeners were cut to the heart, broken-hearted under conviction of sin. This cry would have no basis if there were to be no link between Christ's sufferings and our sins. The sensitised heart is a hallmark of genuine Christianity. Following the Christian way might mean sharing in these sufferings. If taking up the cross to follow does not mean the path of suffering, what does it mean? The fact that Peter has won over many of the people is reflected by the fact that they call the apostles 'brothers'. Peter calls upon them to repent, that is to have a complete change of heart and to confess their sin. The substance of his sixth and final point, therefore, is *all must repent and believe*. The seriousness of sin is not ignored. There must be repentance not only in name but also in deeds. It is a change of mind resulting in a change of direction. In the ancient world it was common to talk of noble ideals but still lead a disreputable life. Christianity does not allow the separation of belief and behaviour. The absence of the call to repentance in the contemporary church is bound up with our misconception (idolatry) of God - who is Holy. Only a Holy God can demand

repentance. Repentance is a divine gift. Without God's help the break with evil would be impossible. With God's help the break with evil is painful. It is a tearing, a parting (in a sense a bereavement).

Baptism and the Lord's Supper (the sacraments) are all about forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ. Baptism marked a decisive break with the old life. Baptism was familiar to Jews but this was baptism in the name of Jesus. This would later be seen as included in the formula 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. For the Jew it meant renouncing all claims to being a child of God on the grounds of birth or circumcision. It runs contrary to all biblical teaching to assume that outward acts (such as baptism) have any real value apart from inward change. Repentance, faith and baptism (receiving the Holy Spirit) were normally part of one transaction in New Testament times. There is a difference between receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (himself) and one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The 'promise' includes both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The invitation to salvation is for all, for the immediate hearers, for succeeding generations and for those in distant places. Finally, a short summary statement follows the main sermon. Peter pleads with the people. Sin deserves punishment. Sin leads to disaster. The teaching that men and women are basically good has no biblical foundation. The preaching in Acts was challenging and overflowing with conviction. We have here an outline of part of a sermon (about 3 minutes). Peter used many other words. What we need is better not necessarily shorter preaching and what is clear is that faithful gospel preaching in the power of the Spirit gave impressive results.

The concluding narrative

With three thousand new Christians added to the Christian community, Luke returns to his narrative in order to describe the community life of the young church. I don't think anyone would contend that it is wrong to treat this passage as normative for the Christian community. Believers are to be devoted to the apostolic teaching (cf. Matthew 28:20), fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. Everyone was filled with awe about the ministry of miracles performed by the apostles. Such miracles were signs to the Jews that the new age they were looking for was dawning. There was no enforced sharing in the church, as in communism, but what is important to note is that being a Christian affected the believer's stewardship of resources. The early believers went to the temple, as Jesus had done, but in the absence of any other reference to the daily meeting of believers it is unlikely that we should take daily meetings of believers and normative, though regular meeting together is vital for the nurture of the new believer. They also shared in fellowship meals with simplicity and generosity, a reminder of the importance of practising hospitality. Luke notes that it was the Lord who added to their number for, ultimately, it is God who is the evangelist (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

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