

# The temporary and unusual nature of the Acts of the Apostles

## Introduction

On one occasion I heard a certain Charismatic leader state that he read Acts several times a year so that he could learn the principles of church building and get it right. This is a severe mistake for several reasons.

The first is that Acts is history, and while one can gain certain circumstantial principles from historical narrative, it is not a good foundation to establish firm doctrines. Doctrines and life principles must be derived from doctrinal instruction – didactic teaching. This is why we have apostolic teaching throughout the NT. It is the final instructions of Jesus to the church through his apostles.

The second reason is the unusual nature of Acts, which includes many temporary features as the apostles gradually learned to understand the leading of the Spirit. The classic example is using Old Covenant lots early on, something never repeated.

To illustrate how widespread this temporary, unusual nature of Acts is I will herewith give several examples.

It is really important in understanding the New Testament to realise that the circumstances in Acts were temporary as the church gradually learned how things should be done. Acts is not a template for current behaviour.

## Guidance

### Lots

They cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.  
Acts 1:26

Lots are an Old Covenant institution to make decisions. A lot was a small stone, which was cast in a manner to determine the divine will. Thus the lot was used to determine the division of the land of Canaan among the tribes (Num 26:55, 34:13) or the choice of Saul to be king (1 Sam 10:20,21).

There is no mention of lots being used to make decisions after this in the NT because the church better understood that it was the indwelling Spirit that would guide the church, 'when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth' (Jn 16:13).

The disciples should have waited until the Spirit was outpoured before they made any important decisions. They were told by Jesus to wait.

For this reason there is great debate amongst commentators as to whether Matthias was the right person to make up the 12 or whether in fact the choice was actually Paul. Since there are only 12 apostles of the lamb (Rev 21:14, as opposed to ordinary missionary

apostles of the churches, 2 Cor 8:23)<sup>1</sup> and because there are only 12 apostles mentioned in Revelation (Rev 21:14) as foundations of the city, I believe that the apostles made a mistake and Paul must be the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle. If not, then Paul has no place in the 12, which is unthinkable since he was the greatest apostle and his words were equated with Scripture by Peter (2 Pt 3:15-16).

## Church matters

### Apostles

The dominant leaders after the cross were of course the apostles, though there were many others that walked with Jesus for a long period.

As the church began to be formed into congregations after Pentecost, it was obvious that the apostles would lead these congregations in Jerusalem.

This was a mistake.

Apostles do not lead an established church work, as the NT explains, that is the job of elders. The apostles should have realised this more quickly from their historical tradition of the synagogue, which they later copied.

The apostles also got very involved at first in practical matters of administration, such as dividing up the resources for the poor and needy. This was also a mistake as it is the job of deacons. It took until chapter six to sort this out.

It took the apostles quite a long time to understand that their job was outreach and missions. They were to: **'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you'** (Matt 28:19-20). They were only to wait in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Spirit at Pentecost, then they should have begun missionary activity far and wide. It took persecution in Acts 8 to thrust them into the wider world. *Apostolos* means 'someone sent'; instead the apostles stayed.

Apostles are missionaries and do not lead local churches. Only elders do that. If you only read Acts you would get a distorted view of apostolic ministry.

### Elders

There is no mention of elders in the church in Acts until 11:30, possibly 41 AD. Significantly this was in Antioch not Jerusalem where a very strong work was underway with Barnabas and Paul. We do not know the date that elders were appointed over the churches, but it was a fact by chapter 11 in Antioch. It was seen as an important feature in church development by Paul and Barnabas in mission work, **'they had appointed elders in every church'** (Acts 14:23).

We do not see any mention of elders in Jerusalem until chapter 15, **'Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders'** (Acts 15:2).

This seems a very long time for the apostles to realise that elders were needed in local churches, and it appears that it was triggered by the work in Antioch under Paul and others.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Messengers' is lit. '*apostolos*'.

If you just read Acts for church instructions, you could easily fail to understand the importance of elders as the only church leadership. Perhaps this is why the Charismatic apostles make so many mistakes – they focus on Acts' historical narrative and not dogmatic certainties.

### **Parties**

The early church in Jerusalem had two large parties. The first was the Judaic Party (Hebrews) and the second was the Hellenic (Grecian) Party. This represented the situation in Israel at that time.

Since the conquering of Alexander, Hellenic culture dominated the eastern Mediterranean area. This gave many advantages that the early church used: good road communications; safety from bandits; a lingua franca (Greek) for speech and writing; Greek cultural influences in art, poetry and literature; and much more.

Over time all things Greek became the dominant feature for very many Jews, especially outside Israel. The most popular translation of the OT was the Septuagint, a Greek translation.<sup>2</sup> Jews dressed in Greek fashions, built their homes in Greek designs and so on.

The Pharisees and others resisted this cultural change and insisted on strict adherence to Jewish norms. This led to some social clashes between the two parties, and this was also represented in the church.

Be that as it may, the fact is that there were at least two cultural parties in the church and this led to problems; for example: 'There arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution' (Acts 6:1).

This was wrong!

There are no parties in the church: 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all' (Col 3:11). We are all one in Christ and no human institution overrides that – including Jewishness. No Christian should celebrate their Jewishness or seek to be Jewish. All human partisan items have died in Christ and we are all one in a new creation. Parties are wrong.

Now if you concentrate on Acts as your guide, you will have no information to show that cultural and political parties are wrong in the church.

## **The Gospel**

Amazingly there was confusion about the content of the Gospel until the decision was made by the first church synod in Acts 15.

And certain *men* came down from Judaea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. ...

4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

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<sup>2</sup> Though some dispute this.

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8 "So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us,

9 "and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

10 "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

11 "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me:

14 "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

15 "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

16 'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up;

17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.'

18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

19 "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

20 "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.

21 "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

23 They wrote this *letter* by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "*You must* be circumcised and keep the law" -- to whom we gave no *such* commandment --

25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.

28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter.

31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

Antioch became troubled by Judaisers who demanded that Christians must keep the Mosaic Law, including being circumcised. This problem is explained and refuted at length by Paul in the letter to the Galatians.

Now the Hebrew party, which included some converted Pharisees, had clearly been teaching this for some considerable time in Jerusalem before it was eventually exported by visitors to Antioch. Why did the Jerusalem apostles not deal with this far sooner than Acts 15? Thus for 13 years or thereabouts this problem had been festering without resolution.

It took the determination of Paul and Barnabas to sort this theology out. Again the Antioch church was in better shape than the Jerusalem church.

## Tongue-speaking

Tongues as a sign of divine favour and the reception of the Spirit are mentioned five times in Acts<sup>3</sup> but hardly ever anywhere else. There is a discussion of them in 1 Cor 12 and 14 but they are not mentioned anywhere else. Even in Acts they stop being mentioned after the mid-50s AD. Also, 1 Corinthians is one of the earliest letters of Paul (about 56 AD).

We know that tongues died out generally as the church developed and there is only sporadic uncertain mention of them in history after 70 AD when the Mosaic Law and Judaism were terminated in practice by the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. There were also some claims amongst unorthodox ecstatic mystical groups.

We also know that tongues and miracles were specifically given by God to the apostles and their delegates in order to authenticate the divine origin of their authority:

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?  
Heb 2:3-4

It was only 'at the first' [lit. 'beginning'] that God confirmed the Gospel testimony by signs, including tongues. As great numbers flocked into the church from pagan backgrounds, it soon became unnecessary to require the authentication of signs. The whole world knew about Christ and the church with a decade or so.

Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. Rm 1:8

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:3, 4, 11, 10:46, 19:6.

Gradually the miracles and tongues began to disappear and thus none of the later letters of the NT after 1 Corinthians (i.e. after about 56 AD)<sup>4</sup> mention tongues.

In all the instructions about preaching the Gospel after 56 AD and bearing witness or establishing missions, the apostles never mention tongues. That is because they had already ceased as Paul said they would (1 Cor 13:8).

Now if reading Acts is the foundation for establishing church practice (as many Charismatics say that it is) then tongues is going to be a significant feature. Yet the NT as a whole, including all apostolic instruction, bar 1 Cor 12-14,<sup>5</sup> denies they even exist.

Tongues are no longer necessary to establish divine credentials. Therefore any examples of tongue speaking today are not of God.

In fact, since gibberish tongue-speaking is a common feature of occult sects, witches and false religions, how can any Charismatic be sure of the origin of his tongue? Furthermore, many Pentecostal practitioners of tongues later proved to be charlatans and occult inspired false teachers, and the origin of tongues in the Charismatic movement derived from Pentecostals passing it on.

## Communal living

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. Acts 2:44-45

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. Acts 4:32-35

A cursory reading of these passages would imply that all Christians should live in a commune and share all their goods in a communistic lifestyle.

Indeed, there have been many people in church history, and especially Pentecostal history, that have tried to establish Christian communes, villages and towns. In every case these went terribly wrong and caused appalling damage to the church. In most cases the leader involved become dictatorial and established an authoritarian administration. In the worst cases people were abused and often sexually abused.

Examples include:

- The original Jesus Army commune in Bugbrooke. [The Jesus Army, after the death of Noel Stanton, gradually deteriorated and recently collapsed amidst massive scandals and abuses going back many years.]
- John Alexander Dowie founded Zion City in 1900 north of Chicago. Already an eccentric faith healer, Dowie claimed to be Elijah and prophesied that in 1904 there would be a full restoration of apostolic Christianity and he was the first apostle. In fact

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<sup>4</sup> For comparison, John's Revelation was probably written about 95 AD; Paul died about 64 AD.

<sup>5</sup> And here Paul is arguing for their strict restriction of use because they are not for the church but a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22).

individuals in the city had suffered greatly due to financial mismanagement and Dowie lost control of the project, dying in 1907 in disgrace.

- Frank Sandford (1862-1948) was a Holiness teacher who established a healing community at 'Shiloh' in Durham, Maine. This is now understood to be a cult and Sandford was eventually arrested and imprisoned. Sandford became despotic and abusive. On one occasion he slapped his wife's face on the platform; on another, he threw his assistants off the platform, shouting angry judgments on them and then throwing their chairs after them. Sandford's anger, pride, control, greed, intolerance against questioners, and demands for loyalty dominated the community. He then began to call himself Elijah and one of the two witnesses of Rev 11 (a common fad). He demanded more and more money which he spent on personal luxuries while the commune went hungry. He also taught many heresies. Eventually, Sandford was arrested and charged with kidnapping and manslaughter. He was later convicted and sentenced to 10 years in an Atlanta prison, despite continuing to state that God directed him.

These are sufficient to make the point, but many more examples could be adduced, such as the catastrophe at Munster during the Reformation.

Now the apostolic teaching in the NT never instructs Christians to gather into a community. Communal living is not a necessary part of the Gospel. In fact, Paul tells disciples to work for a living and stay in their normal situations.

**Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. 1 Cor 7:20**

**Aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you. 1 Thess 4:11**

**For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labour and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. 2 Thess 3:7-10**

**For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. 2 Thess 3:10-12**

So there is no apostolic command to set up a commune but there are commands to live normally, work hard and not to unwisely change your circumstances.

But why the early church communal living?

This was a temporary situation that was a reaction to an immediate problem caused by success of the Gospel. It was not a pattern for all time.

On the day of Pentecost the apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel with authority. They immediately did this to the hordes in Jerusalem.

On this great festal day pilgrims from all over the Jewish Diaspora travelled to the temple to pay homage and stayed weeks. So Peter's first sermon miraculously preached to:

Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs -- we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God. Acts 2:9-11

To summarise: this included:

- Parthians: who lived east of Media and south of Hyrcania, which separated it from the Caspian Sea. A part of Persia but speaking Scythian or Persian.
- Medes: inhabitants of Media, south-west of the Caspian Sea. The language was probably Persian.
- Elamites: from east of Babylonia, later Persia, speaking Persian.
- Mesopotamians: from the country between the Tigris and Euphrates. The language was Syriac.
- Judaeans: the people of Judah, comprising both Hebrews and Grecian Jews speaking Aramaic, a type of Syriac.
- Cappadocians: from the easternmost and largest province of Asia Minor. Probably a dialect of Greek and Syriac.
- People from Pontus: a province of Asia Minor stretching along the southern coast of the Euxine Sea.
- Asians: Asia is used to denote Proconsular Asia, a Roman province which included the western parts of Asia Minor, where Ephesus was the capital.
- Phrygians: from a district in Asia Minor that included Pisidian Antioch, Colosse, Hierapolis, Iconium and Laodocia. They probably spoke Greek.
- Pamphylians: from a province of Asia Minor between Lycia and Cilicia. . They probably spoke Greek.
- Egyptians: inhabitants of Egypt. These spoke an Egyptian tongue called Coptic in those days (today it is Arabic).
- Libyans: Libya is the country of the Ludim in North Africa. It was often used to denote all Africa.
- Cyrenians: Cyrene was a city in Upper Libya. As a Greek colony the inhabitants would have spoken Greek.
- Romans (Latins): citizens of Rome which contained people of various heritage speaking Latin.
- Cretans: from an island in the Mediterranean Sea. These mostly spoke Greek.
- Arabs: people from Arabia speaking Arabic.

This is a huge miracle of communication. This represents the opposite of the confusion of tongues at Babel. At least seven languages are enumerated here,<sup>6</sup> not counting specific dialects; all understood what Peter, an uneducated fisherman, was saying in Aramaic.

The countries follow a great circle around Jerusalem starting in the east and swinging around westward to the north and then the south.

But this was just the first sermon when 3,000 souls were converted (2:41). Soon afterwards 5,000 men were converted (4:4). The numbers grew daily by addition (2:47) and multiplication in Jerusalem (6:7).

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<sup>6</sup> Greek, Latin, Coptic, Aramaic, Persian, Arabic, Syriac plus others that are uncertain.



Now these converts were probably mostly people from the foreign lands gathered as pilgrims. They were no doubt overjoyed and longed to be with their new brethren. While many would have been forced to go back home to attend to family matters and business – where they developed new churches, it is likely that a great many would have stayed.

This led to a massive problem of accommodation and feeding, which the apostles felt the pressure of in chapter six. The only way to deal with this short-term massive number was to feed them and house them communally. Gradually, the pilgrims would have found their vocation and either settled in Judaea or moved on somewhere that God directed them.

So the communal living was a short-term fix to an existential problem of unusual circumstances. It is not a template for normal behaviour. If you just read Acts you will get this matter wrong.

## Frequenting the temple

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple. Acts 2:46

Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth *hour*. Acts 3:1

Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. Acts 4:1-2

At night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 'Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life'. And when they heard *that*, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. Acts 5:19-21

Daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ. Acts 5:42

Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. Acts 21:26

It happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance. Acts 22:17

A cursory reading of these (and other) verses would seem to imply that Christians, like Jews, require a temple for their liturgy. Yet we know from multiple apostolic statements that this is not true at all (1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; Rev 3:12, 21:22).

Christians, being in Christ, themselves are the temple of the Holy Spirit and the gathered church is a temple, the household of God (Eph 2:19).

It was natural for the early Christians to gather in the temple to pray because that had been their custom all their lives. It was also natural for them to witness to Jesus in conversations with pilgrims there. This is not surprising.

As Jews some of them, like Paul, had also taken vows (such as a Nazarite vow) which required worship in the temple. Out of integrity Paul could fulfil his vow in the temple, even though he had taught that God did not dwell in a temple made with hands (Acts 17:24).

It was not possible for Christians to worship Jesus in the temple because this would have been seen as idolatry and the temple police would have arrested them. Indeed, the apostles were arrested for simply preaching Jesus without any ritual.

It took some time for the early Christians to realise that they no longer needed the temple as they no longer needed the rituals of the Mosaic Law. Paul wrote an entire book (Hebrews) explaining this.

To seal the matter, and to end Judaism, God decreed that the temple would be destroyed along with Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

Those Messianic Christians seeking for a new temple to be built in Jerusalem are heretics and blasphemers. Christ is the temple of God and we are complete in him.

## Conclusion

We must take great care in interpreting Scripture. Of huge importance is the fact that apostolic teaching is the final statement of Jesus regarding doctrine. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus directed the apostles to write his final words. Thus all Scripture must be interpreted according to NT dogma.

Now many heretics ignore this principle and isolate other parts of the Bible as authoritative. Jewish Root and Messianic Christians focus upon a literal interpretation of the OT and downplay the NT. This explains their many errors. Dispensationalists have a tendency to also centre upon a literal interpretation of OT prophecies. Some people centre upon the Gospels and ignore Pauline teaching. All these people will form a distorted picture if they ignore full apostolic doctrine. You cannot ignore apostolic teaching and form a true interpretation of Christianity.

Now those Charismatics that centre upon Acts to form their doctrine and church practice will fall into the same problem, as this paper demonstrates.

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