

Lecture 2: The Acts of the Spirit: Gentiles, the Missionary Journeys, and the First Council

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 69 minutes

This lecture walks the book of Acts from Pentecost to Paul's arrest: why the apostolic age was extraordinary rather than normative, how God folded Gentiles into his people over the better part of a decade, what Paul's journeys actually looked like on the ground, and how the first church council defended salvation by faith alone. Keep a map of Paul's journeys handy; Busenitz works from one the whole hour.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Acts: the Spirit's record of thirty years

Luke wrote Acts as the sequel to his Gospel. The Gospel covers roughly thirty years ending at the cross; Acts covers the thirty years from Pentecost in AD 30 to Paul's first Roman imprisonment around AD 60. Though titled the Acts of the Apostles, it is really the acts of the Holy Spirit working through the apostles, and its first eight chapters concentrate on just the church's first two years.

02

Extraordinary, not normative

Acts records a transition in salvation history, so it contains unique and extraordinary things that should not be assumed for all of church history. Busenitz previews the charismatic question: in Acts, tongues are authentic unlearned human languages, prophecy (like Agabus's) is infallible and binding, and healings are instantaneous and undeniable. The modern movement, which traces itself to Topeka, Kansas in 1901, has redefined all three, so the same words no longer name the same things. Ephesians 2:20 is his pivotal text: the sign gifts belonged to the church's foundation age of apostles and prophets.

03

Why the signs were needed

Salvation has always been by faith, but for the first time since Moses, some fifteen hundred years, God was incorporating Gentiles into his people on equal footing with Jews, the mystery Paul unfolds in Ephesians 2 and 3. So massive a shift required significant, undeniable authentication, which is why God gave signs to the Messiah and then to his apostles.

04

Stephen's blood and Saul's rage spread the gospel

Stephen's stoning unleashed the first great wave of persecution, with Saul at its head, and God used the persecutor to scatter the church: Acts 11:19 traces believers fleeing to Cyprus, Cyrene, and Antioch, preaching as they went. Philip carried the gospel to Samaria and to the Ethiopian eunuch, a proselyte, so the Great Commission's own outline, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth, structures the book.

Damascus, Arabia, and the missing years

Acts 9's 'many days' hides three years or more. Galatians 1 fills the gap: after the Damascus road and the good Ananias, Paul spent three years in Arabia in communion with the Lord himself, returned to Damascus, made a quiet trip to Jerusalem to meet only Peter and James, then went back to Damascus, escaped over the wall in a basket, and came to Jerusalem, where Barnabas vouched for him. Luke notes wryly that when Saul finally left for Caesarea and Tarsus, the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed peace.

Cornelius and a decade of transition

Philip had settled in Caesarea and Paul had preached there, so the ground was seeded when the Spirit sent Peter to Cornelius, the first uncircumcised Gentile convert, sometime after AD 37. The Spirit fell on his household exactly as at Pentecost, giving apostolic, eyewitness authentication, and the stunned Jerusalem believers concluded that God had granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life. Full Gentile incorporation took the better part of a decade; it did not happen overnight.

Antioch, the first Gentile church

Scattered believers preached to Greeks in Antioch, the empire's third largest city at perhaps half a million people, and a church was born. The apostles sent Barnabas as its first pastor; he fetched Saul from Tarsus around AD 45, and some in that congregation were likely pastored by the very man they had once fled. Antioch joins Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and later Constantinople among the great cities of early Christianity, and it becomes the first missionary sending church.

Jerusalem interlude

Barnabas and Saul carried famine relief south, and uphill, to Jerusalem around AD 46, a date anchored by the known famine of the mid forties. Acts 12 records the martyrdom of James the son of Zebedee (not the Lord's brother, who remained a pillar in Jerusalem), Peter's imprisonment and release, and Herod's death. Returning, they brought along John Mark, Barnabas's young relative, whose mother's Jerusalem home hosted the church and who would later write the second Gospel.

The first missionary journey

Antioch's named prophets and teachers show a leadership structure that freed Paul and Barnabas to go, and leadership is the pattern of their whole method. On Cyprus, Saul begins going by his Greek name Paul, and John Mark turns back. Through Perga, where an illness seems to have struck Paul's eyes, to Pisidian Antioch (not Syrian Antioch), Iconium, Lystra, where Paul is stoned, left for dead, and walks back into the city, and Derbe. Then, instead of the easy road home through Tarsus, they deliberately backtrack through every city, strengthening the disciples and appointing elders in every church.

Synagogue first, creation for pagans

Paul's pattern was to begin in a city's synagogue, reasoning from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Christ, as in his long Pisidian Antioch sermon of Acts 13, which is actually longer than Mars Hill. Before pagan audiences, as in Athens, he began instead from creation. Either way the message drove to Christ crucified and risen, and to the claim of Acts 13:38 and 39: through Jesus everyone who believes is freed from what the law of Moses could never free them from.

The Jerusalem Council: the gospel on trial

Around AD 49 men from Judea taught that without circumcision according to Moses no one can be saved, and the first church council met over nothing less than the heart of the gospel: faith alone, or faith plus works. Galatians 2 gives Paul's side: seventeen years after his conversion he laid his gospel before the pillars, Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, false brethren had sneaked in to spy out gospel liberty, and James, Peter, and John added nothing but the right hand of fellowship. In Acts 15 Peter appeals to Cornelius: God cleansed Gentile hearts by faith, made no distinction, and it tests God to lay on disciples a yoke no one could bear.

Galatians: the council's echo

Judaizers dogged Paul's churches for the rest of his ministry, and when they reached the young congregations of southern Galatia, Paul wrote his first epistle, pronouncing a curse on any other gospel even from an angel. Busenitz frames the heat of the letter by the cost of the journey: the man nearly killed planting those churches was not going to watch a false gospel take them. He adds that the Reformation fought the same battle, Rome having become a sixteenth century version of the Judaizers, with baptism cast as the new circumcision.

The second and third journeys

Both later journeys begin as return visits to the same churches; the Macedonian call comes only while Paul is revisiting. Philippi, Thessalonica, noble Berea searching the Scriptures, Athens provoked by idols, and a long stay in Corinth; then Apollos, the disciples of John receiving the Spirit in Acts 19, the Ephesian riot over the collapsing idol trade, and the tearful Miletus farewell to the Ephesian elders. Paul was no hit and run evangelist: he planted, appointed leaders, prayed, wrote, sent emissaries, and went back in person. The 2 Corinthians 11 catalog of sufferings covers only the first half of his missionary life. Convinced his road to Rome ran through Jerusalem, he arrived there around AD 56, knowing arrest awaited.

How the New Testament grew alongside

James was likely the first New Testament book completed, with Matthew soon after; Galatians was Paul's first letter and 1 Thessalonians his second, written on the road. The order in our New Testament is canonical rather than chronological: the four Gospels and Acts as histories, Paul's letters from longest to shortest, the general epistles, and the Apocalypse. Knowing when each letter was written, Busenitz argues, gives the preacher the story behind the text.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Acts 8 · Acts 9 · Acts 10 · Acts 11 · Acts 13 · Acts 14 · Acts 15 · Acts 17 · Acts 19 · Acts 20 · Galatians 1 · Galatians 2 · Ephesians 2 · 2 Corinthians 11

KEYTERMS

Normative versus historical narrative

The question of whether Acts prescribes what every age should expect or records what God did once; Busenitz reads its sign gifts as foundation age events.

Sign gifts

Tongues, prophecy, and healings as Acts presents them: unlearned real languages, infallible words, instantaneous cures, given to authenticate the apostles' gospel.

God-fearer

A Gentile like Cornelius who worshiped Israel's God without becoming a circumcised proselyte.

Judaizers

Professing believers who taught that circumcision and law keeping must be added to faith for salvation; the council's opponents and Galatians' target.

The Jerusalem Council

The church's first council, about AD 49, which ruled that Gentiles are saved through grace by faith alone, with no yoke of the law added.

Pisidian Antioch

The inland Antioch of the first journey, not to be confused with Syrian Antioch, the sending church.

The Macedonian call

The vision that turned Paul's revisiting trip into the gospel's crossing into Europe.

Canonical order

The New Testament's arrangement by category and length rather than by date of writing.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. Whose acts does Busenitz say the book of Acts really records?
 - A. The apostles' alone
 - B. Luke's own travels
 - C. The Holy Spirit's, working through the apostles
 - D. Rome's
2. In Acts, what were the tongues the apostles spoke?
 - A. A private prayer language
 - B. Authentic human languages they had never learned
 - C. Symbolic speech interpreted later
 - D. Angelic speech
3. Which text does the lecture call pivotal for the timing of the sign gifts?
 - A. Ephesians 2:20
 - B. Romans 8:28
 - C. Acts 2:38
 - D. 1 Corinthians 13:8

4. Why did the new work of God in Acts require undeniable authentication?
 - A. Because the apostles were unknown
 - B. Because Rome demanded proof
 - C. Because for the first time Gentiles were included on equal footing with Jews
 - D. Because the Old Testament had been lost
5. What did Stephen's martyrdom and Saul's persecution accomplish, in God's providence?
 - A. The church went into hiding for a century
 - B. Believers scattered and carried the gospel as far as Antioch
 - C. The apostles left Jerusalem permanently
 - D. The Romans intervened to protect the church
6. Where did Paul spend roughly three years hidden inside the 'many days' of Acts 9?
 - A. Rome
 - B. Tarsus
 - C. Athens
 - D. Arabia
7. Roughly how long did the full incorporation of Gentiles into the church take after Pentecost?
 - A. A single day
 - B. About a year
 - C. The better part of a decade
 - D. Over a century
8. Who was the first pastor of the first Gentile church, at Antioch?
 - A. Paul
 - B. Barnabas
 - C. Peter
 - D. Apollos
9. Which James was martyred in Acts 12?
 - A. James the son of Zebedee
 - B. James the Lord's brother
 - C. James the son of Alphaeus
 - D. James the elder of Antioch
10. Why did Paul and Barnabas backtrack through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch instead of taking the easy road home?
 - A. They were lost
 - B. To collect the offering
 - C. To strengthen the disciples and appoint elders in every church
 - D. To avoid Roman patrols
11. What was actually at stake at the Jerusalem Council?
 - A. The date of Easter
 - B. Whether salvation is by faith alone or faith plus circumcision and law keeping
 - C. Which apostle would lead the church
 - D. Whether Gentiles could enter the temple

12. In Peter's council speech, how did God cleanse Gentile hearts?
- A. By circumcision
 - B. By the law
 - C. By faith
 - D. By baptism
13. Which letter did Paul write first, in the heat of the Judaizing crisis?
- A. Romans
 - B. Galatians
 - C. Philippians
 - D. 1 Corinthians
14. What does Busenitz stress about the sufferings listed in 2 Corinthians 11?
- A. They cover only the first half of Paul's missionary life
 - B. They are symbolic rather than literal
 - C. They were all in one city
 - D. They ended his ministry

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 C · 2 B · 3 A · 4 C · 5 B · 6 D · 7 C · 8 B · 9 A · 10 C · 11 B · 12 C · 13 B · 14 A

TALKITOVER

1. Busenitz argues the extraordinary events of Acts authenticated something new rather than setting the pattern for every age. How does that distinction help you weigh claims you hear about miracles today?
2. Gentile inclusion took a decade to sink in, even for believers. Where might we be slow to accept something Scripture makes plain, simply because it cuts against everything familiar?
3. Paul kept going back: letters, emissaries, return visits, elders appointed in every church. What would that kind of follow through look like in how our church supports missionaries and church plants?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

Peter's verdict at the first council, from Acts 15: God made no distinction, cleansing their hearts by faith, and we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they are.

GOFURTHER

The lecture's own commendation: the chapter on John Mark in Twelve Unlikely Heroes by John MacArthur, the story of the young man who abandoned the first journey and was later recovered as a writer of the second Gospel.

Lecture by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/historical-theology-1-2