

The Purpose of Acts

While there is no consensus on Luke's overall purpose in writing Acts- and no way to be certain- there are a number of themes or repeated threads of thought throughout the book that allow us a glimpse of Luke's "purposes" in writing this book. Most, if not all, of these themes can be placed under two categories related to Luke's stated purpose in Luke 1:1-4. In Luke 1:4, he says he is writing, "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." This statement of course covers both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, but for our purposes, we will observe how Luke works this out in Acts only.

First, Luke wants his reader(s) "to know". We don't know how much of the material was already known to Theophilus and how much was new information. Nevertheless, much of the material was meant **to inform-** to give *information and explanation* about the Christian faith and the events surrounding its beginnings to its arrival in Rome. The whole of the book explains how a predominately Jewish religion from the backwaters of Judea and Galilee, with Peter as its main spokesman, became a largely gentile faith in Rome championed by the Apostle Paul. Within this larger framework, Luke offers information and explanation regarding a wide variety of phenomenon. For example, many speeches and sermons are recorded, chronicling what was proclaimed and taught in a wide variety of contexts. (Note how the preaching differed from a Jewish environment to Gentile, hostile to responsive audience, etc.) The connection of the Christian faith to the Jewish religion is explicated as well as the reasons for opposition, both from Jews and Gentiles. Many of the practices of the early churches and Christian leaders are also recorded. One must read carefully to discern what Luke wanted his reader to do with this information, but it is clear that one of Luke's purposes would be to answer the question, "What is Christianity? What is it about? Where did it come from? And how did it come to be what and where it is?"

Secondly, from Luke 1:4, he wants the reader "to know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Not only did Luke want his reader to know about the Christian faith, he wanted them to be persuaded that the Christian faith was true, reasonable, real and powerful. Therefore, much of the material in Acts is **apologetic-** to *persuade and defend* the truth of Jesus and the innocence of His people. Thus Luke portrays Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism, making it a "legal religion." In every controversy and trouble, the Christians are shown to be innocent, law-abiding citizens while their opponents are shown to be unreasonable, immoral and the instigators of trouble. In many instances, Jesus' representatives are brought before judges and magistrates. Just as the crucifixion of Jesus is shown to be a complete miscarriage of justice, the Christians are *officially* proclaimed innocent. Throughout Luke makes pains that his readers see the Christian faith as "true and reasonable" (Acts 26:25). The resurrection is demonstrated by many proofs. The Christians always prove their position from the scriptures and their opponents are unable to stand against their wisdom. Most importantly, the truth of Christianity is proved by the changed lives of people, as thousands are converted from all walks of life. Even the chief antagonist Saul is irrefutably converted and becomes one of the faith's chief proponents. This has led many to postulate that Acts was written as part of Paul's defense before the emperor in Rome and that Theophilus would have part in that trial. Whether or not this is the case, Luke certainly wanted his reader to see the truth of Christianity and the uprightness of the Christians.

One further theme that plays large in Luke's apologetic purpose is the working of God's hand in all that is done. Throughout the book of Acts, the principal instigator of all forward movement is the Holy Spirit of God. Nothing is accomplished in Acts without the hand of God. And because God is the power behind the Christian faith, nothing can hinder its growth and progress. The gospel is triumphant in every circumstance. It is superior to Judaism, It is superior to the demonic, the philosophic, the magic and the pagan. (It is truly ironic that those who worship Artemis complain that by the preaching of the gospel, Artemis "will be robbed of her divine majesty." (Acts 19:27) Such a "divine majesty" that can be so easily lost is far inferior to the power and majesty of the God of the Christians) It is powerful to heal the sick and raise the dead. The Sanhedrin cannot stop it, Herod cannot stop it. Jewish opposition, magicians, rioting artisans, angry mobs, assassination plots, even shipwrecks and snakebites cannot stop it. Luke subtly (or not so subtly) invites his reader to take both solace and warning in the sentiment expressed by Gamaliel, "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." (Acts 5:38-39)