

"UNHINDERED"

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

(Chuck Swindoll)

"Unhindered." That's the very last word in the book of Acts. "Unhindered" is a fitting final word because it perfectly describes the central theme of Luke's historical account of the first-century church. That's not to say that the movement established by Jesus Christ and carried forward by His followers didn't meet with opposition. On the contrary, Acts describes opposition so ferocious and so deadly that any other organization would have folded immediately. "Unhindered" doesn't suggest that the first believers didn't experience challenges. They did, in fact, meet challenges so insidious, so unique, and so frequent that following conventional wisdom would have hastened their doom. "Unhindered" simply indicates that nothing would keep the church from fulfilling its divine purpose.

While Luke provides an accurate, detailed account of the first-century church and its spread across much of the known world, his book really does not focus on ideas or events, or even the people who served and led the church. In fact, the usual title, Acts of the Apostles, could mislead readers; the book primarily recounts the actions of two key apostles—Peter and Paul—though both were always in close cooperation with numerous gifted associates and ministry assistants. Perhaps a more apt title might be "Acts of the Holy Spirit." One of these Spirit-filled ministry associates, the physician Luke, has assembled a grand mosaic using facts like colored bits of broken pottery to display the work of God as He carries out His plan to redeem and transform the world.

Acts is a pivotal book in the great narrative of God's redemptive plan. The Old Testament introduces God to humanity and establishes His covenants with Israel, all in anticipation of Jesus Christ. The Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tell the story of how the God-man, Jesus, came to fulfill the Old Testament covenants and to establish a new covenant with humanity. Acts documents the launch of the new covenant community's phenomenal growth in the first three decades after Jesus' death and resurrection.

THE PURPOSE OF ACTS

Today, the books of the New Testament appear in a standardized order—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, and so on—that separates Luke and Acts. But the book of Acts was never intended to be read as a stand-alone document; rather, it is the second volume of Luke's two-volume work, which began with his historical account of Christ's life, the Gospel of Luke.

Nevertheless, the book of Acts is well placed after the Gospels. It is a book of transitions, documenting the period after the earthly ministry of Jesus when the church



began receiving the written treasures of the apostles. Consequently, it comes after the Gospels and before the Epistles in the New Testament. Luke's second volume narrates an era like no other in history, a time when God had much to say but spoke less through individual prophets and more through a growing, Spirit-filled community.

As with the first volume of his work, Luke dedicated the second volume to "Theophilus," whose identity remains a mystery (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). The name means "one who loves God," which could be the nickname of Luke's patron. In ancient times, wealthy people typically commissioned histories, usually for self-serving reasons. The head of a family might want to establish a credible family line in order to claim a title or give the family name a higher standing. Or he might commission a history to vindicate the actions of his ancestors or to glorify his family's achievements. In other words, the patron would have had a specific reason for paying a historian to compile a history that others would read. In the case of the first volume, Luke states his purpose, which likely reflects that of his patron: "so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught [concerning Jesus]" (Luke 1:4). We can therefore say with reasonable certainty that Theophilus commissioned Luke to research the life of Jesus and to meticulously set down the facts to undergird the faith of the church.

The purpose of the second volume most likely follows that of the first, with a slight variation in emphasis. Perhaps prompted by the recent challenges the church was facing, Theophilus may have commissioned Luke to chronicle the rise and expansion of Christ's body by focusing on a recurring theme: "unhindered" growth despite overwhelming opposition, with special emphasis given to the role of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout this narrative, Luke shows the church challenged, the church guided by the Holy Spirit, and the church triumphant. Therefore, I would state Luke's purpose this way: *to demonstrate, from the facts of history, that the church has become God's instrument for stewarding the new covenant, that the church is guided by His spirit, and that nothing can prevent Christ from building His church.* The book of Acts opens with a question about the kingdom of God and Christ's commissioning and empowering of the church (Acts 1:6-8), and it closes with the assurance that, even under arrest in Rome, Paul continued "preaching the kingdom of God...unhindered" (28:31).

I don't see this open-ended conclusion as an accident. Luke didn't foresee Nero's persecution, which led to Paul's second imprisonment and execution, but God was not surprised by it. Could the Lord have left the narrative open intentionally for others to complete—not in writing, but by continuing the commission Jesus gave His first one hundred or so witnesses in Jerusalem? When you think about it, there's no good place to conclude a history of the church. For two millennia, each generation of believer's has met the challenges, responded through the power of the Holy Spirit, and perpetuated the gospel. They have continued to "write" the history of the church—and now that duty falls on us. Throughout the twenty centuries of church narrative, nothing could stop its inevitable expansion, and it continues today—unhindered.