

ACTS - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. What does the book of Acts add to your understanding of God? Who wrote the book? (Acts 1:1; compare Luke 1:1-4) Where did he get his information? Why do you think the book ends so abruptly?

Tentative Chronology of the Early Christian Church

(Modified from 6SDABC p. 101,102)

A.D.

- 31 Crucifixion, Ascension, Pentecost (Luke 23; John 19; Acts 1,2; *5BC*, pp. 251-254)
- 34 Stephen stoned; church persecuted; gospel carried to Samaria (Acts 7:1-8:25)
- 35 Paul converted (Acts 9:1-19)
- 35-38 Paul at Damascus, Arabia, and back to Damascus (Galatians 1:17)
- 38 Paul escaped from Damascus during reign of Aretas; visited Jerusalem "after three years" (Galatians 1:18); went to Tarsus (Galatians 1:21)
- 44 James the apostle and brother of John martyred; Peter imprisoned at Passover time; Agrippa died (Acts 12)
- 44-45 Barnabas took Paul to Antioch; Paul remained there "a whole year" (Acts 11:26)
- 45 Barnabas and Paul took famine relief to Jerusalem (Acts 11:25-30)
- 45-47 Paul's first missionary journey; on return, Paul remained at Antioch "no little time" (Acts 14:28, *RSV*) (**James written**)
- 49 Jerusalem Council, "fourteen years after" (Galatians 2:1)
- 49 Paul started second missionary journey; preached in Phrygia, Galatia, and entered Europe (Acts 15:36-16:40)
- 50-51 Paul arrived at Corinth; stayed one and one-half years (**1 & 2 Thessalonians written**)
- 52 End of second missionary journey; Paul "some time" at Antioch (Acts 18:23)
- 53-58 Paul's third missionary journey: traveled through Asia Minor, stayed three years at Ephesus (**1 & 2 Corinthians written**), traveled through Macedonia, stayed three months at Corinth (**Galatians and Romans written**); left for Jerusalem (Acts 19&20)
- 58-60 Paul arrested in Jerusalem; imprisoned at Caesarea "two years" (Acts 24:27); left in autumn
- 60-61 Paul's journey to Rome; arrived in spring (Acts 28:11-15)
- 61-63 Paul a prisoner in Rome "two whole years" (Acts 28:30); (**Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians written; Hebrews may have been written at this time also**)
- 63-66 Paul released from Roman prison; traveled in Crete, Asia Minor, Macedonia (**1 Timothy, Titus written; 1 Peter probably also written; Jude likely written**)
- 66 First siege of Jerusalem; Paul re-arrested; (**2 Timothy written; 2 Peter written**)
- 67 Death of Paul and Peter; (**Acts written-or at least finished**)
- 70 Destruction of Jerusalem
- 90-96 John arrested and sent to Patmos by Domitian (ruled A.D. 89-96) (**Revelation written**); John released from Patmos (**the Gospel of John and the three letters written**)

Luke is the author of this two-part early church history. The way the book ends suggests that he intended to write a third volume to continue the history. He was a Greek physician who apparently first became acquainted with the gospel when Paul visited Troas on his second missionary journey. Perhaps Paul got sick and sought the services of a physician. In any case, apparently Luke began to travel with Paul and his group. First, they went to Philippi. After Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned, they moved on to Thessalonica and Berea. (See Acts 16 and 17) The book of Acts is the only truly historical book we have of the New Testament church. Details from Paul's other books, and occasionally from John's or Peter's writings, can be fitted into the historical picture of Acts to give a more nearly complete account.

No doubt, Luke learned many of the details of the early church history from Paul and his companions. But, it is also likely that while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for about two years, Luke had the opportunity to travel in Palestine and get information from many others who had had experiences with Jesus and the disciples. Thus, Luke suggested that he not only got accounts from others, but also he investigated those accounts himself. (See Luke 1:1-4)

Date [of writing]: While the date of some NT books is not crucial, it is more important in Acts, which is specifically a church *history*, and the very first one at that.

Three dates have been proposed for Acts, two accepting Lucan authorship and one denying it:

1. A second century date, of course, rules out Luke as author; he could hardly have lived beyond A.D. 80 or 85 at the latest. While some (liberal) scholars feel that the author used Josephus' *Antiquities* (c. A.D. 93), the parallels that they allege regarding Theudas (Acts 5:36) do not agree, and the similarities are not strong in any event.
2. A commonly held view is that Luke wrote Luke-Acts between 70-80. This would allow for Luke to have used Mark in his Gospel (probably from the 60s).
3. A strong case can be made that Luke ended Acts where he did soon after the time the book's history ends—during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome.

It is *possible* that *Luke* was planning a third volume (but it was apparently not in God's will), and so Luke did not yet mention the devastating events (to Christians) between A.D. 63 and 70. However, the following **omissions** suggest the early date: Nero's ferocious persecution of Christians in Italy after the burning of Rome (A.D. 64); the Jewish war with Rome (A.D. 66-70); the martyrdom of Peter and Paul (later A.D. 60s); and most traumatic for Jews and Hebrew Christians, the destruction of Jerusalem. It is most likely, therefore, that Luke wrote Acts while Paul was in prison in Rome, about A.D. 62 or 63. (*Believer's Bible Commentary* - article on Acts)

The book of Acts is the story of the spread of the gospel: 1) to the Jews at and around Jerusalem [Acts 1:1-6:7], 2) to Judea and Samaria [Acts 6:8-9:31], and 3) to the ends of the "earth" [Acts 9:32-28:31].

The question remains, what is the primary purpose of Acts? F.F. Bruce, a representative of those who believe the goal is an apologetic one, affirms,

Luke is, in fact, one of the first Christian apologists. In that particular type of apologetic which is addressed to the secular authorities to establish the law-abiding character of Christianity he is absolutely the pioneer (Bruce, *Acts*, p. 24; F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity*, 2, *Prolegomena II: Criticism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979, pp. 177-87).

There is much in Acts to substantiate the idea that the book was written to defend Christianity before Roman rulers.

By far the most popular view of the purpose of Acts is the one which states that it is a historical one. According to this approach Luke's goal was to record the spread of the gospel message from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Barclay asserts, "Luke's great aim was to show the expansion of Christianity, to show how that religion which began in a little corner of Palestine had in a little more than 30 years reached Rome" (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. xvii). This explains the transition from a Jewish ministry to a Gentile one, and from Peter to Paul. In addition, this view suits the historical outlook of Acts 1:1 with Luke 1:1-4. The prologue of Luke 1:1-4 is that of a historian like Herodotus, Thucydides, or Polybius. It is quite clear that Luke was writing history in both books...The purpose of the Book of Acts may be stated as follows: *To explain, with the Gospel of Luke, the orderly and sovereignly directed progress of the kingdom message from Jews to Gentiles, and from Jerusalem to Rome.* In Luke's Gospel the question is answered, "If Christianity has its roots in the Old Testament and in Judaism, how did it become a worldwide religion?" The Book of Acts continues in the vein of the Gospel of Luke to answer the same problem...

The outline used in this study is the result of using two keys in Acts. The first and most obvious one is the theme verse, *Acts 1:8*, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The second key is the use Luke makes of "progress reports" which are sprinkled throughout the book (*Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31*). Because Luke does not use a precise formula there is some debate as to the location of other progress reports (cf. *Acts 2:41; 4:31; 5:42; 8:25, 40; etc.*). However, these other statements either do not have the same sense of summary or they lack finality.

The beautiful correlation of these two factors—the key verse of *Acts 1:8* and the seven progress reports—form the basis of the following outline. (*Bible Knowledge Commentary* - article on *Acts*)

Acts

Because the story of Jesus is so impressive—God among us! God speaking a language we can understand! God acting in ways that heal and help and save us!—there is a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that—become admirers of Jesus, generous with our oohs and ahs, and in our better moments inspired to imitate him.

It is Luke's task to prevent that, to prevent us from becoming mere spectators to Jesus, fans of the Message. Of the original quartet of writers on Jesus, Luke alone continues to tell the story as the apostles and disciples live it into the next generation. The remarkable thing is that it continues to be essentially the same story. Luke continues his narration with hardly a break, a pause perhaps to dip his pen in the inkwell, writing in the same style, using the same vocabulary.

The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God—they are *in* on the action of God, God acting *in*

them, God living *in* them. Which also means, of course, in *us*. (*The Message* - Introduction to Acts)

2. **In the book of Acts, we come to the time in history when God was forced to abandon His people, the Jews, as His special messengers to the world because they rejected Him. (See John 1:11; Acts 8:1,4; Matthew 23:38) Thinking back over their history, what had God accomplished with and through the Jews? Should God have just ignored the Jews and instead, sent His Son to Tibet or Australia or the Incas?**

The history of God's involvement with the descendants of Abraham is a very colorful one. God had some shining examples of the kind of relationship that He wanted such as Abraham, Moses, Job, Joseph, Daniel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Each of those men had their problems, but they continued to grow in their "trust" in God. But the overall picture is not so good. Despite many revivals and times when they came back from their rebellions, the overall trend was down. This is particularly evident in books like Judges, 2 Kings, Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, and Jeremiah.

Then, God finally had to let them go into Babylonian captivity. After the captivity, only a small remnant went back to Jerusalem. But with strong urging and compulsion from Ezra and especially Nehemiah, they set out on a new course. Ezra established a new group of people in Jerusalem known as the scribes. Through their instruction in schools and synagogues, the scribes took it as their work continually to remind people of the requirements of the Lord. In time, there developed almost a competitive atmosphere to see who could be most detailed in observing the law. Different schools of scribes arose and disagreed with each other about many of the details of how best to keep the law. (See appendix)

Despite all of that, God did accomplish much through the Jews. Perhaps they were chosen because they would be good examples of all the things not to do! God did manage to communicate His Word, the Bible, to and through Jewish authors. Unfortunately, almost from the beginning, the Jews were most concerned about the special privileges that they believed they deserved because Yahweh (God) was their special property. They almost always tried to ignore the responsibilities that God had given them, i.e., to tell the world about Him.

The Jews never lost the conviction that they were God's chosen people. They interpreted that status to mean that they were chosen for special privilege among the nations. They were always a small nation. History had been for them one long disaster. It was clear to them that by human means they would never reach the status they deserved as the chosen people. So, bit by bit, they reached the conclusion that what man could not do God must do; and began to look forward to a day when God would intervene directly in history and exalt them to the honor they dreamed of. The day of that intervention was *The Day of the Lord*.

They divided all time into two ages. There was *The Present Age* which was utterly evil and doomed to destruction; there was *The Age to Come* which would be the golden age of God. Between the two there was to be *The Day of the Lord* which was to be the terrible birth pangs of the new age. It would come suddenly like a thief in the night; it would be a day when the world would be shaken to its very foundations; it would be a day of judgment and of terror. All over the prophetic books of the Old Testament and in much of the New Testament, are descriptions of that Day. Typical passages are Isaiah 2:12; 13:6ff.; Amos 5:18; Zephaniah 1:7; Joel 2; 1 Thessalonians 5:2ff.; 2 Peter 3:10. (*Daily Study Bible*, article on Acts 2)

After eighteen hundred years of working with them, God finally sent His Son to make one final appeal to the Jews. But, by that time, they were unreachable. Should He have come earlier? Nothing that He said or did seemed to affect the leaders of the people. Despite this, many of the poor people heard Him "gladly." (Mark 12:37) However, when God chose the leaders of His Own new Christian church, they were almost all Jews, as Jesus had been.

In actual fact, people have never been saved as groups. God has always worked with individuals to try to change their attitude and relationship with Himself. After the time when the

Jews began to persecute Christians quite severely, the Christians scattered all over the then-known world. But, that does not mean that God completely abandoned His former people. They still could be His people as individuals just as easily as could Gentiles.

In New Testament times, God focused His efforts on the small but growing Christian church as led by the twelve apostles. **If we regard the Bible primarily as a description of how God saves you and me, the Old Testament appears like a serious failure on God's part. But, if we understand the Bible as a history of how God deals with human beings, and thus, a revelation about God, then it could be regarded as a marvelous picture of our gracious heavenly Father.** God did not choose the Jews because they were already saints although Abraham may have been better than most in his day. It was God's intention that all of us should learn about Him by the way He dealt with those "chosen ones."

3. Look at Acts 1:6. What was it that the disciples were still expecting as Jesus was on His way to heaven? Compare Luke 24:21. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." (NIV) Would you have entrusted the work of spreading the gospel throughout the entire world to such a group with that type of thinking? What happened in the upper room and at Pentecost that changed things?

In this verse the disciples were reflecting the thinking of the Jewish people that the Messiah would one day come and make them a ruling class over the entire world. The idea that Christ was planning to set up a spiritual kingdom rather than a material kingdom was a rude shock to them. As long as Jesus was still with them, they were not even willing to consider that possibility. But, when Jesus ascended into the sky and they realized that He was not coming back, they returned to Jerusalem and spent ten days sitting down to give serious reflection on what they were going to do next. They confessed their sins to one another and developed a spirit of harmony and unity that had never previously been seen among them. They realized that even physical death would not spell the end of their dream. They began to comprehend the fact that the One who spent all of that time with them was actually God! All of their memories of Him, His conversations with them, even His sermons, suddenly took on new meaning. They realized that Jesus had not been making political campaign speeches for an earthly kingdom, but rather, He had been making promises and statements as the God of the Universe!

That caused a marvelous transformation to take place! Peter, who had been so distrustful that even the accusing finger of a servant maid had led him to curse and swear that he did not know this Jesus, (Matthew 26:73,74) was now ready to stand before the Sanhedrin, the rulers and judges of the whole nation, and denounce those leaders as the ones who had crucified the Son of God! (Acts 4:8-13) Then, the disciples knew that their Friend, Jesus, was in heaven and was in total control of all that happened. They knew He would not allow anything to happen that was not ultimately for the best good of the cause of God. Then, they could go forth without hesitation and with a great deal of "holy boldness" to approach the entire world.

4. What was it about the life and message of Jesus that most offended the Jews? Think of what the disciples and the crowds did at the feeding of the 5000 and at the triumphal entry. They were determined, if there was any way possible, to fulfill their version of the "gospel." Why do you suppose it was that the Jews, who should have been God's best friends, seemed to be the ones who opposed the spread of Christianity the most wherever it went? (Acts 13:50-14:5; 18:12-14)

The whole Jewish national pride was based on the idea that they were God's special people. That did not fit well with their status under the Romans. But, they had a "secret weapon." They were certain that the "Messiah" was coming and that He would successfully lead them against the Romans. Then, the wealth of the heathen would become theirs, and they would rule the world. (Zechariah 14:4) So, every opportunity to promote that vision was greeted with great enthusiasm. But, when the Messiah came and talked about a spiritual kingdom, and repenting of their sins, and giving up their cherished ideas, He was definitely not well received! So, they were faced with a terrible dilemma: Accept Jesus and give up all their cherished dreams, or

reject Jesus and hope that soon another “Messiah” would come and fulfill the dreams that they were sure were right. (See DA 700; John 7:25-31)

After Jesus had been crucified, the problem became worse. They were accused of murdering the very One they claimed to be waiting for! And then Paul said that all their “special” Jewish rituals that pointed forward to the coming Messiah had no further meaning! In order to accept what Christians were really saying, the Jews had to change their whole way of thinking, and that was not easy. Most of them refused to give up their national pride.

5. Is the first mention of the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts? What about Genesis 1:2; 6:3; 41:8; Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Numbers 11:29; 24:2; Judges 3:10; 6:34; 14:6,19; 15:14,19; 1 Samuel 10:10; 16:13; 2 Kings 2:9; 2 Chronicles 36:22; Ezra 1:1; Psalms 51:11; John 14:15-27; 16:5-15? Where is the clearest explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit? Why did Jesus say, “But I am telling you the truth: it is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go, the Helper will not come to you. But if I do go away, then I will send him to you.” (John 16:7, *GNB*) Has not the Holy Spirit been here all along? Even if He had not been, why would it be good for Jesus to go? Was it necessary for Jesus to be at the “right hand” of His Father? If so, why? Could it be that the Father was unable to handle things in heaven by Himself?

There is plenty of mention of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. But, the Holy Spirit apparently took on a whole new role with the personal relationships that He took up in the New Testament. There is a lot of discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in John 13-17. **The disciples felt no need of the special work and influence of the Holy Spirit so long as Jesus was with them. But, when the Master was gone, they began to see a new need for God’s care and direction on a daily basis. This role, the Holy Spirit was able to fill. No one could claim any special privilege by being geographically closer to Jesus once Jesus was gone.** The Holy Spirit was everywhere. Thus, Jesus needed to leave in order for the disciples to recognize their new role as church leaders under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

6. What do you think actually happened to the disciples when they received the “gift of tongues”? Or, was it the “gift of ears”? (Acts 2:1-13)

Obviously, God speaks and understands every language known to men and angels! (1 Corinthians 13:1) God had an important message to get to the peoples in Jerusalem who had come from many of the civilized areas of the Mediterranean world. He wanted each of them to understand the importance of what was being said, and He wanted them to know that the disciples were no ordinary group of men. Thus, God performed a miracle by blessing those men with an unusual talent:

“There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” During the dispersion the Jews had been scattered to almost every part of the inhabited world, and in their exile they had learned to speak various languages. Many of these Jews were on this occasion in Jerusalem, attending the religious festivals then in progress. Every known tongue was represented by those assembled. This diversity of languages would have been a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel; God therefore in a miraculous manner supplied the deficiency of the apostles. The Holy Spirit did for them that which they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime. They could now proclaim the truths of the gospel abroad, speaking with accuracy the languages of those for whom they were laboring. This miraculous gift was a strong evidence to the world that their commission bore the signet of Heaven. **From this time forth the language of the disciples was pure, simple, and accurate, whether they spoke in their native tongue or in a foreign language.** *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 39,40

7. What is the meaning of Acts 4:12? Does this mean that the only way we can “come to the Father” is through Christ? Would this mean that we must come pronouncing the right “name”

because if we pronounce the wrong name, the “Father” will not listen? If that is true, what language does God require?

The message of this verse is that the plan of salvation came through Jesus Christ. He is the One who died to answer the questions about God and His character and His government. This verse does not mean that there is “magic” in any particular name. If that were true, what name should it be? The name of Jesus is spelled and pronounced differently in many of the languages of our present world not to mention in societies or languages of the past. When Jesus was here on earth, He spoke primarily in the Aramaic language. In that language His name was Yeshua, or Joshua, not Jesus (which is our English transliteration of the Greek *Iesous*). We are not even sure that He was ever called “Iesous”! Maybe in John 12:20,21. He was not called Christ (Greek), but rather, the Messiah (Hebrew and Aramaic); and He did not die on “Calvary” (Latin) but on Golgotha (Hebrew and Aramaic).

What this verse means is that we need to come to God with the right attitude and a correct understanding of what our relationship to Him should be. If we do that, there is no problem He cannot deal with.

8. If we are supposed to pray in the name of Jesus, would that suggest that if we had prayed a wonderful prayer such that God was already planning how He would answer, but we forget to say, “in Jesus name we pray,” that God would have to cancel out the whole prayer? Or does that mean that only through Jesus, as He is manifest both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, are we able to understand anything about God? Or, might it mean that someone could approach God and just as he is about to speak, God hastens to say, “That is no good! Go back! You did not come to Me in the right way, and I can accept only those who come to Me in the right way”?

Praying “in the name of Jesus” simply means coming to God in the way and with the understanding that Jesus gives us in the entire Scripture, willing to submit to His best judgment. It means not asking for things that are obviously not in harmony with God’s Word. It also means recognizing that not every request can be answered in just the way and at just the time that we might desire. God (and we) are in the midst of a great controversy. Everything that God does is being scrutinized by the Devil and his angels as well as by the beings in the rest of the universe. God cannot appear to play favorites. He is too wise to grant us things which we might desire at some given moment but which, in His divine insight, in the long run might not be best for us.

God is more than ready to listen to everything we say and watch everything we do. There are no special “formulas” for approaching Him. When this great controversy is all over, we will be able to review the whole matter. At that time, we will be able to see that God has always led us in the best possible way if we have been willing to follow Him. (See appendix)

9. Did Jesus come to this earth in order to bring a revelation of God down to us, and then return to heaven in order to take the truth about us back to God? If so, how would He do that?

Christ came to this earth to reveal the truth about His Father. He said so repeatedly. What He is really saying is that we need to understand the truth about all Members of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But, They are Omniscient. They do not need to be told anything about us. (John 2:24,25) They understand us perfectly! Jesus did not have to return to heaven to explain to the Father something about us that He did not yet understand! This may seem to be the message of Hebrews 2:14-18 and Hebrews 4:14-16; but, the rest of Scripture indicates that is not what God intends for us to understand from those verses. Jesus came to help us understand that God does understand our problems.

10. What did Stephen say was God’s response when the people at Sinai turned from God to worship and celebrate around a fertility cult symbol? (Acts 7:42) Where do you suppose he got that understanding? Compare this with Romans 1:18,24,26,28. Is this God’s wrath?

Acts 7:42 is another of many examples describing **God’s wrath or anger as His turning away in loving disappointment from those who do not want Him anyway, thus leaving**

them to the inevitable and awful consequences of their own rebellious choice. We have seen this idea throughout Scripture. Compare the *Teacher's Guides for Judges #9; Nahum # 2,3; Hosea # 1,10,13; Romans #6.*

It is very significant to notice how many of the Bible writers managed to write about this issue. Did they all really understand the implications of what they were writing? We cannot know at this point, but deacon Stephen seemed to understand it quite well!

11. Is it possible that some people who have died as “examples” are actually savable and will be in heaven? Achan’s children? Some of the firstborn of Egypt? Some people who died in the flood? Ananias and Sapphira? Will not the behavior of each person at the time of the third coming clearly demonstrate that God’s judgment was correct? If, by some mistake some arise in the wrong resurrection and see the panoramic view of the history of our world and of the great controversy, and respond, “Hey, we like that!” would God say to those people, “Sorry, but it’s too late now, we cannot let anyone else in”?

God can and will save and heal all who trust Him! There are no verses in the Bible that tell us that every person who died in the flood or who died as one of the firstborn in Egypt was a wicked person and deserves eternal death! They only died the first death. Just as a child who dies in an automobile accident has nothing to do with the cause of his death, so those groups of people who lived long ago died because some important lesson needed to be taught or some important freedom needed to be preserved.

God does not look upon the first death as we do. We think of life as ending with the first death. God sees the first death only as a temporary interlude until He will raise each person back to life. Those who are righteous will rise in the first resurrection while those who are evil will arise in the second resurrection. (See John 5:28,29; Revelation 20:4-6) Each will be judged according to God’s infallible standard, and God has proven Himself to be a fair Judge of all things. One of the purposes of the millennium is to give the righteous an opportunity to review the records of God’s judgment and to see if all that He did was fair. God will not make any mistakes!

To understand what reasons there may have been for the death of groups of people described in biblical history, it is necessary to reconstruct, as far as possible, what was happening at that time in history. Such groups include the people who died in the flood (Genesis 6-8); the firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 12); the people of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the surrounding towns (Genesis 22); the 185,000 Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35); etc. In the context of each case, it is clear why God did what He did. And if we can think of even one reason why He needed to kill them, no doubt, He can fill in the details and tell us many more reasons when we get to heaven.

12. Why were Ananias and Sapphira struck dead for falsifying their report? (Acts 5:1-11) Shouldn’t Peter have worked with them to get them to repent and reform their ways? Why doesn’t God use more of the “early church methods” now? If someone who had cheated on their tithes or offerings dropped dead on the church floor, don’t you think the offerings would increase? Why doesn’t God perform a few miracles to improve attendance and participation?

The new Christian church was just getting started. Almost everyone who was involved was personally acquainted with all the other members. In such a situation, it was necessary for God to “nip in the bud” any tendency to cheat the group. God was not angry with Ananias and Sapphira, but He needed to remove the “bad apples” from the “barrel” so they would not corrupt the others. Sooner or later, the truth would have been discovered and others would have begun to wonder if they could cheat as well. So, God acted with apparent severity to maintain the momentum and purity of the early church. He knew that the church would become corrupt soon enough as it was without having some of the very early pioneers start the deterioration right at headquarters in Jerusalem.

13. What should the experience of the choosing of deacons (Acts 6:1-7) tell us about church organization today? Did the handing over of a portion of the work to lay people hinder the work?

In light of this experience, are we being reasonable in what we expect of our church pastors and leaders today?

The choosing of the seven deacons proved to be an enormous benefit to the church. And it was not just because they did such a good job of taking care of widows! Stephen gave one of the most powerful sermons recorded in the entire Bible, (Acts 7) and it was probably that speech that started Saul/Paul on the path toward becoming a Christian. The church has always benefitted from the carefully-thought-out involvement of lay people. Often, it has been the lay people who have seen the need more than the clergy. To suggest, or even to think, that it is appropriate for a few employed clergy to carry all the major responsibilities in the church is to severely limit its potential and growth. People of all ages would feel more loyalty to the church and the church would grow much more rapidly if more people were involved and committed to the mission of the body. That might lessen the “authority” of the “hierarchy” who are employed by the denomination, but it would be a great blessing to all.

14. Can you imagine a “conference committee” at the time of the “Damascus road experience” appointing Saul/Paul as the church’s main evangelist to the Gentiles? How long did it take Paul to get from his “Sinai experience” to the “mouth of the cave” experience? (1 Kings 19:11-13) Does it need to take a long time to “grow up spiritually”?

Saul as a young man had grown up in the family of a Pharisee. He knew the Old Testament inside and out. His family was so committed to seeing that he receive the very best education that they sent him to Jerusalem to train under Gamaliel, the foremost theologian of his day. (Acts 5:34; 22:3) But young Saul learned to interpret the Scriptures as the Pharisees did. Eventually, as still a relatively young man, he was appointed as a member of the Sanhedrin. That may have been because he was so zealous in persecuting Christians. Then came the “Damascus road experience”! All of Paul’s past training was effectively tossed into the air in a giant “fruit-basket upset”! After a short time in Damascus, Paul realized that he needed to get away for some time to think things through for himself.

He went away to Arabia. (Galatians 1:17,18) After returning to Damascus for a brief period and preaching with such conviction that the Jews wanted to kill him, (Acts 9:22-26) he returned to Jerusalem (after three years away) only to find that the Christians were still afraid of him and the Jews wanted nothing to do with him! Not knowing what else to do and being warned by God, (Acts 9:27-30) he returned to Tarsus and spent several years working in his old home town and the surrounding areas. No doubt, Paul was thinking and studying all that time. When he was finally sought out by Barnabas, (Acts 11:25,26) he was ready to go to work and became the foremost spokesman for the cause of Christianity.

It is important to note that Paul began preaching Christianity even before he left Damascus for Arabia. Even though he certainly had not gotten everything sorted out in his mind, when the “light” shone on him, he was ready to give his life for his Lord.

15. What was it about Paul’s theology that changed on the Damascus road and immediately thereafter? (Acts 9:1-31) Did he change “gods” or even the name of his God? Did he change his Bible, his Law, or his Sabbath? What made the difference in Paul that caused him to stop killing and imprisoning the “saints” and finally to write, “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind”? (Romans 14:5) Had Paul gone “soft” on all doctrine? (See Galatians 1:8,9)

The only thing that changed in Saul/Paul was his picture or understanding of God—his paradigm! But, that forced him to rethink everything! Instead of going from place to place torturing and imprisoning the “saints,” he then was their best spokesperson. He had not lost his convictions. Not at all! But, then he was absolutely committed to allowing people the freedom necessary to make up their own minds. (Romans 14:5) That did not stop him from presenting every bit of evidence that he could think of why they should worship and serve the true God. He did not change his convictions about the Ten Commandments or the Sabbath or many of the other Old Testament teachings from God. But, he did reorganize his thinking about these

matters (a paradigm shift) to place the truth about God as the central pillar in his collection of beliefs.

16. How should we handle apparent contradictions in Scripture such as Acts 9:7 and 22:9? Did the companions of Saul hear the voice? Or, did they not hear the voice?

This is a problem that can be answered quite simply by someone who understands the Greek language. In Greek there are two ways to “hear” something. In the Greek the speaker tells you which way of *hearing* he means by the grammatical form of the object that is “heard.” In this case the two options are as follows:

9:7 “...hearing, indeed, the sound, yet beholding no one.” (*Concordant Literal*)

(The object is in the genitive case in this sentence.)

22:9 “...they hear not the voice of Him Who is speaking to me.” (*Concordant Literal*)
(The object is in the accusative case in this sentence.)

9:7 “...they heard the [sound of the] voice but could not see anyone.” (*GNB*)
[brackets and content inside brackets supplied]

22:9 “...but did not hear [to the point that they could understand] the voice of the one who was speaking to me.” (*GNB*) [brackets and content inside brackets supplied]

17. Does the vision which Peter saw on the rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10:9-23; compare 1 Corinthians 10:25) mean that we are now “free” to eat whatever we like? Compare Mark 7:19; Romans 14:14,20.

The context of the vision in Acts 10 makes it very clear that the issue addressed there was not diet. God was trying to show Peter that his former ceremonial restrictions against associating with Gentiles were no longer valid. In fact, God had never given such restrictions. God had told them not to become involved with the heathen, meaning not to follow after their “gods,” but that was never meant as a prohibition against associating with them to win them to the gospel! Peter himself said what he learned from the vision in Acts 10:19,20,28,29, and 15:8. Peter never ate any of the food in the sheet, nor did he give any evidence that he changed his diet thereafter. For centuries, the Jews had regarded any association with Gentiles as defiling to them. They actually believed that it made them “unclean” to enter a Gentile’s home. In Acts 10, Peter recognized that God wanted him not only to enter the home of a Gentile but also to associate with them enough to give them the gospel. He learned that no person should be considered ritually unclean or defiled just because he was not a Jew, and he learned that God approved of the Gentiles joining the Christian church.

18. At the conference on evangelism of the Gentiles held at Jerusalem, (Acts 15) it was finally decided that:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. (Acts 15:28,29, *NIV*)

How could Paul later say, “Eat anything sold in the meat market [in Corinth] without raising questions of conscience”? (1 Corinthians 10:25, *NIV*) [brackets and content inside brackets supplied] Was Paul disagreeing with the Holy Spirit? Who inspired Paul to write?

Paul was in attendance at the meeting held in Jerusalem. He was present when the letter was prepared that stated that the “general conference” had agreed with the “Holy Spirit” that certain Jewish ceremonial restrictions should be placed on Gentile believers but that most Jewish ceremonial restrictions should be “lifted” from the Gentile believers. But, several years later in Corinth, he recognized the problems that would result from a literal and slavish obedience to even limited ceremonial restrictions.

In Corinth there were several main roads that entered the city. Each of those roads was “guarded” by a temple of one of the main “gods” of the city. At the temples it was expected that anyone bringing meat or wine to market would make an offering to the god on his way to market. It was implied by that offering that the entire load of meat or wine had been dedicated to that god. The implication was that if one ate that meat or drank that wine, one was honoring that god and supporting that god by purchasing a portion of the food which had been offered to that god. That meant that unless one was willing to eat only fruits and vegetables, (the best plan anyway!) if one wanted to buy anything in the market at Corinth, he would be thought of as “worshipping” one of the Corinthian gods.

Paul was faced with a serious issue to explain to the believers at Corinth. He did so in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. Look at the careful way he logically set things up so the reader can understand the problem and see the correctness of his solution. He pointed out clearly that those gods were actually nothing but pieces of rock or metal. Such a piece of rock or metal could not possibly have any significant effect on the meat or wine that was offered to it. But, that did not solve the problem of dealing with people who still “thought” that the gods had some power or real existence!

Paul ended up asking Christians to use their own heads when dealing with such matters. This is an enormously significant point for us even today. What Paul was saying was that even when the “general conference,” claiming guidance from the Holy Spirit, speaks on behalf of the entire church and takes an action as a group, when the situation calls for it, Christians may be required to think through the issues and set aside the decision made by the “general conference” in favor of a more carefully thought out, rational approach to a current problem. Thus, Paul recognized that the ultimate authority in the Christian church is not the hierarchy set up by the organization, no matter how prestigious they may be, but each individual Christian thinking carefully and responsibly through the issues that face him—in discussion with and collaboration with other believers. Does the situation—combined with a careful consideration of the implications of our actions with the guidance of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit—determine what is the “correct” course to pursue? Is that “situation ethics”?

If Christians had consistently done this down through the ages, the history of the church would be very different; and the saved would, no doubt, already be in heaven! Paul ended his thinking on these issues with the discussion and summary that he wrote in Romans 14 to the church at Rome. This kind of talk would shock many Christians today as it shocked many of the formerly-Jewish Christians in his day. When it finally comes down to the real issues and what we are going to stand for and be ready to die for, we must not allow that decision to be made for us by anyone else. **Our minds may be weakened by thousands of years of sin, and they may not always function perfectly, but they are all we have with which to comprehend and evaluate truth. We must never hand over that task to another, even to the church organization.**

19. How could Paul have told the jailer simply, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31, *NIV*) Isn’t it also necessary to have “faith,” live a faithful Christian life, know the doctrines of the church, etc? Was Paul indicating to the jailer that contrary to the practices of his heathen background—and even the thoughts of some of the Jews—that he did not need to do or perform any ritual or penance or sacrifice, but rather, just believe and have faith in God? (See Micah 6:6-8)?

Paul knew perfectly well that in the Greek language there is only one word for “faith.” It is translated into our English words: *faith*, *belief*, *trust*, and *confidence*. There was no difference in Paul’s mind between *faith* and *belief*. More than this, Paul also knew that:

Faith is just a word we use to describe a relationship with God as with a Person well known. The better we know Him, the better the relationship may be.

Faith implies an attitude toward God of love, trust, and deepest admiration. It means having enough confidence in God—based on the more-than-adequate evidence revealed—to be willing to believe what He says, (as soon as we are sure He has said it) to accept what He offers, (as soon as we are sure He is the One offering it) and to do what He wishes (as soon as we are sure He wishes it)—without reservation—for the rest of eternity. Anyone who has such faith would be perfectly safe to save. This is why faith is the only requirement for heaven.

Faith also means that, like Abraham and Moses, we know God well enough to reverently ask Him, “Why?” (A. Graham Maxwell)

20. For the first time, God was sending His followers out to “convert” people. (Matthew 28:19,20) Prior to that time, it was assumed that if one belonged to the special “group” that were considered to be the followers of Jehovah, that is, the descendants of Abraham, he would be “redeemed.” Since people were being asked and persuaded to join the “Christian” group, what criteria should have been used to decide who would be accepted as a member? Is it necessary to “receive the Holy Spirit and be baptized”? (See Acts 10:44-48) Or, must one follow certain of the customs of the ceremonial law? (Acts 15:28,29; 21:25) Or, is it enough just to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? (Acts 16:31) How do you reconcile these three experiences?

These experiences are not as different from each other as they might seem at first. After “believing” or “having faith,” the jailer and his family were baptized. Certainly, Paul and Silas must have thought that they had been accepted by the Holy Spirit before baptizing them. The restrictions discussed in Acts 15 have virtually nothing to do with accepting the gospel. They are restrictions that were put in place for those who wanted to worship together as Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had such long-held convictions about certain matters that for them to freely associate with those who paid little attention to their customs would be considered by them as defiling. Thus, to keep peace in the church family, these restrictions were put in place. There was, and is, a good basis for observing several of these restrictions for health and morality reasons. But, the purpose in this case was not to set up a new set of Jewish laws that had to be observed if one wanted to be a Christian.

21. God has started out working with several different groups down through the millennia. He first worked with all of Adam’s descendants. Then, He destroyed all but Noah’s family in the flood. After working with Noah’s descendants for some time, He apparently had to leave the majority and focus on Abraham and his descendants. After 1800 years of working with the children of Abraham, Acts describes the time when God left them and began working with the Christian church. At first, Christians did very well even under difficult circumstances, but the church gradually deteriorated into a religious-political organization that had little to do with true spirituality. Then, at the time of the Reformation, God turned to the Protestants. But, it was not that long before many of the Protestant churches had become “state churches” as well. Seventh-day Adventists came along and tried to convince people that Jesus was coming soon. What is the chance that God will have to abandon us as a church? Why do we think that this generation will succeed when every generation before us has failed?

This is a very serious thought question. What do you think?

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