

# The Book of Acts

Lesson 1

The Background of Acts

Forum



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# The Book of Acts

## Lesson One: The Background of Acts

### Forum

With  
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Students  
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Ra McLaughlin

### Question 1:

#### Why focus on Luke as the author of Acts?

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, since the book of Acts was inspired by God, why do we spend so much time on a lesson talking about the human author, Luke? What is the benefit of dedicating so much time looking into him?

**Dr. Bayer:** Larry, that's a very good question. I would like to begin with just focusing on the fact that this is inspired by God, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and we could spend a lot of time seeing that what Luke reports particularly in the Gospel of Luke is apostolic eyewitness. And it goes back to the systematic instruction and teaching of Jesus, shaping the understanding and the memory of the disciples as they live with Jesus and learn from him, so that what we have as inspiration is also very much going back to Jesus himself. But your question particularly focuses in the human authorship, and I just want to say that the understanding of inspiration is not that the individuality and the person is sidelined, but that God speaks through his prophets in the Old Testament and here, in this case, through this eyewitness or this man who has access to eyewitness accounts, and he does not sideline the particular personality, the particular historical context, the cultural understanding, and that is a wonderful testimony to the fact that God speaks into our space and time. I think also it becomes apparent when you compare the Gospel of Luke with Matthew, Mark, or John, that there is a particular perspective, a particular point of view that does not detract from the truth, but it is a particular focus. And we know that Luke focused on the marginalized, on women, on the poor, and that is a particular testimony focus point in Luke, and we see that borne out also in the book of Acts.

**Student:** So you are saying that in some sense, God is using the personalities, the experiences, the language, the vocabulary, all of that, the writing style of the inspired writer in order to create the product that we have that we think of as the book of Acts, so that as we try to read and understand and interpret that, we kind of need to know where it's coming from so that we understand what he means when he uses certain words and why he is talking about certain things? Is that sort of what you are saying?

**Dr. Bayer:** That is exactly right, and it gives us the understanding that God speaks to the original audience and that is why we need to understand the historical setting, historical situation, to understand how that word, how that message is spoken into this particular original context. But that is a wonderful aspect to the way God makes himself known.

**Student:** If I'm hearing you right, then actually knowing who the human author is, is a big benefit. I mean, many books of the Bible we're not sure who wrote, and I wish we did, and we could maybe gain a lot of insight if did know who did them. But since we do know Luke is the author, I guess what you're saying is that understanding what he's saying, and from his point of view and his perspective, it really gives us a new angle on something we wouldn't have had otherwise.

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, I think that is an important point. When we know the author, we know what context he had. We know about Luke that he had very close contact with Paul, but also, as he says himself in the Lukan prologue Luke 1:1-4, that he consulted with eyewitnesses who had been with Jesus, and that gives us proximity to what is being testified to. It is a further indication of truth — not the only one — but it certainly helps in our understanding of what is being given to us.

## Question 2:

### Why should we trust church tradition about Luke's authorship?

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson says that we believe that Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts based on some inferences in Scripture and church tradition — that the Bible never actually comes out and says that Luke wrote these books. That feels a little weird to me coming from a Protestant tradition, relying so heavily on church tradition for these kinds of things. Tell me why I should be comforted in that. Give me a reason not to be so nervous.

**Dr. Bayer:** That is a valid question. The fact that Luke wrote the gospel and the book of Acts is not explicitly stated, as you have said. When we look at patristic information, particularly the Apostolic Fathers around 90-95 AD to about 130 AD, that is a very important phase in the history of the church where people still have access, or had access, to apostles, to people who had known apostles, and obviously this field of study is difficult. There are sometimes contradictory statements among the Apostolic Fathers and then certainly the Ante-Nicene Fathers, so we have to be careful. But in the case of Luke, it is particularly significant that there is no contradictory voice at any stage in that history from the time of the composition of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts all the way to the fourth and fifth century. So that is a significant point. One other factor that I would like to point out is that, as I mentioned in the lesson, Luke was not an apostle, and it would be very easy to discredit, to question why would he be considered to be part of the canon, his work? And so, since that is never questioned, it is a further indication to the reliability of that information.

**Student:** Right, because if somebody were going to fake it, if they were going to write an artificial book or put a false writing forth, they'd probably try to attribute it to an apostle as opposed to somebody else.

**Dr. Bayer:** Precisely. And it is very significant that the church father Irenaeus, who worked around 180 AD, most likely had access to a library in Rome during his travels, about AD 120, at which he had access to a library that had some markings for particular scrolls and writings, and there he says he found the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts attributed to Luke. Then further, there is a manuscript that probably goes back to 120 AD, a catena called, and that mentions in the so-called "we section," in one "we section" in the book of Acts, we, Luke, and the companions went somewhere. So actually, Luke is mentioned in that particular manuscript. So we have significant information that gives us a good basis to say this information is historically reliable.

**Student:** But getting back to the idea of tradition, isn't it true that what we consider secular history is often based on tradition, too? In other words, the Bible doesn't suffer in comparison in terms of its authority if we're looking at ancient history, because a lot of what we know from ancient Roman history is on a similar basis.

**Dr. Bayer:** Very true, very true. But it is a fair question that Ra asked — What do we do when there are contradictions among church fathers? —we have to be careful. But I think the heritage of critical scholarship, European critical scholarship, has been to discredit patristic information to such a high degree that it is time to give them a significant hearing, but cautious one, because we do know that there are some contradictions in patristic information.

### **Question 3:** **Why do people question Luke's authorship?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the evidence that you gave in the lesson for Luke's authorship really seemed compelling to me, and those things you've been saying here also seem to reiterate that. What basis do people have for ever questioning Luke's authorship?

**Dr. Bayer:** This is a very complex question that would require a lot of different tracks to answer. One would be the philosophical one, and perhaps we're going into that at a later point. But in the particular study of critical scholarship, particularly in Europe, the Lukan prologue was not really considered to be an introduction to the book of Acts as well. And I think that is a first start of a real critical approach to the book of Acts. The book of Acts was considered for many decades to be historically unreliable, and so there were prejudices against the book of Acts in that regard. The further arguments would lead us into different directions, and I can just pick out one example. One particular argument brought against the Lukan authorship of the book of Acts is that the portrait of Paul in the book of Acts to some indicates that the author

did not know Paul. And so the argument would go that what we know of Paul in the epistles is not reflected in the book of Acts. In the book of Acts, Paul sounds a little bit more like Peter or Stephen, and in Galatians or Romans, he sounds like Paul. The problem with that is that you are mixing genres. The epistles are addressed to churches, to strengthen them and to mature them in the faith, whereas the portrait in the book of Acts of Paul is one in the marketplace, one who evangelizes, one who speaks in debate house of Tyrannus. And there's a significant passage in the book of Acts one time where Paul does address leaders in the church, the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, and it is significant that that passage is full of what we would call "Paulinisms" or characteristic phrases of Paul that we find in the epistles. So I think the argument can be turned against those who would discredit the author of the book of Acts knowing Paul, actually, that he is carefully representing Paul in the marketplace, but when he does speak to church leaders, it sounds very much like what we know of Paul in the epistles.

**Student:** I guess I just have a philosophical problem with people who don't know Paul determining that somebody else doesn't know Paul.

**Dr. Bayer:** Well, that is a fair point. One other thing that I could mention that has been used to discredit the book of Acts is that some scholars assumed that the early church expected a near return of Christ, within weeks, within months, at the most within years. And the book of Acts particularly seems to have an understanding of far expectation, that there may be a delay in the return of Jesus, and some argue that that was the theology of Luke, the composition here, and discrediting a particular proximity to the original setting. So that would be another big area of questioning the authenticity of the book of Acts.

**Student:** I wonder, as you were talking, it made me think back to some of the authorship things that we mentioned earlier. You know, we see Paul described in one way and Luke coming across another way in his letters. I wonder if maybe some of that has to do with the fact that Paul wrote his letters and Luke wrote Acts. You know, it's one thing to listen to me talking to you, it's another thing to hear somebody describe me talking to you; they're going to use different language and different words and perhaps characterize me in a different way that somebody might immediately perceive watching our conversation.

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, I think that's a fair comment. That would certainly be part of the factors.

#### **Question 4:** **What if Luke didn't write Acts?**

**Student:** With regard to Luke's authorship of the book of Acts, we've talked a little bit about the history behind that and why we should accept that. Let's just hypothetically consider that evidence comes to light that, in fact, inclines us to think

**that Luke didn't write it. What do we do with Luke at that point? Do we keep it in the Bible? Do we still receive it as authoritative Scripture? Or does the challenge to its authorship somehow undermine its authority?**

**Dr. Bayer:** I would certainly say that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are canonical, and we have evidence that this canonical core of the Gospels and Acts and the major Pauline epistles is a historical fact that goes back about 180 AD. We can even see in Clement of Rome's work called *I Clement*, or 1 Corinthians, that he makes reference to the Gospels. So it is a historical fact and certainly a fact of the history of the church that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are part of the canon. So in a certain way, it would not affect the authority and the significance of the Gospel of Luke and of Acts were we to find out that Luke in fact did not write these two volumes. On the other hand, what we know internally and by statements in the patristics regarding Lukan authorship gives us proximity to the very events. And since Luke was a sojourner with Paul, that gives us an eyewitness perspective to the various journeys that Luke participated in. And the prologue again, to come back to Luke 1:1-4, makes the claim that this author, who was a companion of Paul, also is a very careful researcher, a very careful interrogator of eyewitnesses, etc., and knowing that this was Luke, a historical figure in the early church, places him in proximity to other apostles and other leaders including Peter, including Stephen, etc. So it gives us proximity, but it in the end would not affect its canonical authority.

**Student:** So in some sense, it sounds like what you're saying then is that even if Luke didn't write it, we still know that the author was a traveling companion of Paul, had proximity to the events, and is a reliable narrator and historian even if it isn't Luke? If it's somebody else?

**Dr. Bayer:** It is true, except some critical scholars have questioned the so-called "we sections" as a literary device rather than as a historical significance, and that would mean that an account would simply use that literary device to make it a little bit more interesting. And here, I think the significant argument can be made that in ancient documents where such a literary device is employed, it is much more conspicuous and clear, whereas in the book of Acts, it is very inconspicuous and abrupt when Luke moves from a third person description to the first person or first person plural "we traveled." So this weaving in and out appears to be much more a historical reflection of the events rather than a literary device.

**Student:** Well, questions of authority aside, then it just seems that Luke is such an integral part of church history, it would be really difficult to excise out of history as it is, isn't it? I mean, isn't he referred to by other people?

**Dr. Bayer:** He is referred to by other people, and in the New Testament itself, in Colossians. But certainly it would put a big question mark to patristic testimony because it is so unified on this point. So there would be questions that I would have to deal with personally if you came up with good evidence that would say somebody else... Barnabas, was the author of the book of Acts.



### **Question 5:** **How do we know Luke was a Gentile?**

**Student:** Doctor, our lesson states that Luke was a Gentile, but I've heard some people question that. Is there any way that can be determined? Or is it even significant?

**Dr. Bayer:** I'm going to deal with the question "determined." Can it be determined? There is good evidence in the New Testament itself, Colossians and extra-biblical information, that would indicate that Luke was indeed a Gentile. The patristic tradition locates him in Syrian Antioch as having come from there. There is some evidence that he was a physician. The point here is that a Gentile from Syrian Antioch would have had the possibility of exposure to Judaism. There was a good presence there in Syrian Antioch, a Jewish presence from Diaspora times. And so Luke as a Gentile, was he perhaps a God-fearer or perhaps even a proselyte? But a God-fearer would be my preference to assume he would have been exposed to teaching about the Old Testament. And we know particularly from those who lived a little further away from Jerusalem, they were particularly interested in the history of Israel, in the salvation history of Israel, and that seems to be a particular emphasis in Luke himself. So the focus on Old Testament focus on redemptive history actually would fit very well had Luke as a Gentile had connection and contact with Jews living in Syrian Antioch. It does make some difference in particular for our understanding of the first century history and setting, how much crossover was there between Gentiles and Jews? But I would say he was certainly very knowledgeable and exposed to the heritage and rich reservoir of Old Testament thinking and Old Testament understanding. And so I would say it would make some significant point, but that's how I would take the question.

### **Question 6:** **How does the historical setting help us understand Acts?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, as we've been thinking through the lesson in terms of historical setting and context, it makes me reflect on my own life when I'm certain that I read the book of Acts and learned from it and sat in Sunday school lessons and knew nothing about its historical setting. I'm wondering now if all of that was for naught. You know, what happens to us if we don't know the setting, and what value is it? What do we gain by knowing that historical setting?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would say that it is helpful and instructive to know the historical setting. I would not say that it is crucial for understanding the book of Acts. But you can see, I'll illustrate, how the understanding of the historical setting helps interpretation and also its veracity, it's truthfulness of its account. And let me just give you the example that I mentioned in the lecture that when Paul is being transported and under house arrest on the ship to Rome and they're experiencing shipwreck, that Paul actually as a

prisoner is allowed to speak, and that there was a discovery of the so-called Rhodian maritime sea law, and it provides the possibility of every member on the ship to speak, even if that person is a prisoner. So that piece of historical understanding helps us to see its veracity.

In terms of the importance of understanding the book of Acts when you study the historical context, let me give you this example. In the early speeches of Peter in the book of Acts, we actually can demonstrate that he uses the pattern of an Old Testament repentance speech. And when we're in the setting of Jerusalem, when we're in the setting of Jews listening to a man speaking prophetically who says, who follows the pattern of an Old Testament repentance speech, it puts us into that particular sphere in which the presentation of the recent events regarding Jesus are part of God's present work, ongoing work, with his people. And so it helps us to get the impact of the Petrine speech in a deeper way than we might have if we had not studied that historical context.

**Student:** Well, something that Ra said just reminded me of something. A lot of us, of course, read the Bible when we were younger, and my mother today when she reads it doesn't know much about the historical setting. But a lot of modern, I guess, experts or interpreters say that the historical setting really isn't relevant, that we can read it in terms of our own day and not take those into consideration. I mean, how prevalent is that? Is that a threat to accurate interpretation?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yah, it is a danger to deal with history as playdough and to formulate it and shape it according to our own expectations and our own perspectives and values. I think understanding the historical setting guards against this kind of arbitrary treatment of the biblical text, but I do sympathize with the modern need to have it speak to them, for it to be relevant. I would say the excursion to studying the biblical background is actually the most direct path to understanding its relevancy for today, because when you hear Peter speak in the format of a prophetic repentance speech, you do sense the impact, and so I would say they should not be played against each other. But I support and endorse the need of today's audience to understand the relevancy of the book of Acts and its message, and so I would say, do both. Understand the historical context. Do not play with history as playdough, but maintain the question as you study of what is the relevancy? What is the impact of this message on our life today?

### **Question 7:**

#### **From whose perspective should we read Acts?**

**Student:** Acts is a very old book. Millions of people have read it over the centuries. It was written to Theophilus. In our lesson, it was also written to the early church. And of course, we read it even today. Now when I read the book of Acts, that's sort of a puzzle for me, because should I put myself in the place of Theophilus when I

**read it, or should I read it as somebody in the early church would have read it, or should I read it as a 21st century American, for instance?**

**Dr. Bayer:** Larry, I think the important point is initially to understand the correspondence between the purpose that Luke pursues with the book of Acts and the original audience. I think there is a close connection there as we study the original audience. We can say that the early church did experience a degree of persecution. The early church experienced a degree of discouragement. And when you see that the purpose of the book of Acts is to demonstrate the unhindered progression of the gospel of liberation in Jesus Christ that breaks through all kinds of different barriers, that kind of hope-giving triumph not of the individual people but of the mission of God himself, that is a great encouragement in the midst of suffering and defeat and difficulty and opposition. So I would say that is very important. So initially, we should put ourselves into the shoes of Theophilus, but then also of the wider audience of the early church, before we proceed and ask the question, "How does it speak to us today?" It is still God speaking. How do we transfer that message spoken originally to that audience, how do we transfer that to us as 21st century people?

**Student:** So we need to do both then. We need to look at Theophilus and the 1st century audience to determine original meaning. You might say we need to look at ourselves to determine modern application? How that meaning then relates to us in our circumstances?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, I would say that. There are some basic transfers, and I'm illustrating that a little bit in the lecture in terms of the continuity of the Triune God being the same. There are human circumstances and weaknesses that are the same. There is still the mission of God that is the same. There are many elements of direct and wonderful transfer for our lives as we are now called in our generation to be messengers of God, living letters for the living God.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How did the Roman Empire influence daily life?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson mentions that the Roman Empire is a significant part of the historical setting of the book of Acts. I'm curious as to what role the Empire played in the lives of the early church and the life of Luke as he's writing, and the life of the leaders of the church. I understand that it's there and it's the context in which they live, but practically speaking, what real things did that do to their lives?

**Dr. Bayer:** There are many different aspects that we could go into to illustrate the interface between the grasp of the Roman Empire and this growing Messianic church of God. Let me take out one element, and that is the issue of emperor worship. The citizens and people who lived under the Roman Empire were required to give tribute to the emperor. At times, the emperor even demanded to be identified as *dios et*

*dominos*, as god and lord. And so when the confession in the early church is Jesus is *dios et dominos*, Jesus is God and Lord, he is the eternal Son of God, that is a point of friction and potential point of conflict of a very high mark. And so we see that the early church has to live within that context of submitting to the authority of the existing empire structure, while at the same time, really questioning the ultimate authority of the emperor. So that would be one area.

**Student:** How did they manage that in daily life? If I were a part of the early church and the government, the Roman Empire, imposed upon me, compelled me, to worship Caesar, and yet I know that only Jesus if God and Lord, how do I manage that in my life? What does that mean for me as a Christian? Do I have to go underground?

**Dr. Bayer:** I think that is one of the reasons why the church in the progression of persecution, particularly towards the end of the first century, did indeed have to go underground, and why there was rather large persecution and martyrdom of Christians who actually went all the way with that confession. So I would say there is at least initially a conflict and then a culmination in martyrdom.

**Student:** I think even consumers of popular culture know that the church had difficult times during the days of the Roman Empire — we've all seen the movies, Christians in the coliseum — and somebody might conclude maybe seeing that was a bad time, an inauspicious time to start a new faith. But is there any benefit that the church had from its beginnings in that time, being in that place and time?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would say so. There are many issues. For instance, the entire infrastructure that the Roman Empire developed throughout its conquered territories provided a means through which the gospel could be propagated and presented and taken to different lands. Another aspect that we see in the book of Acts is that Paul as a Roman citizen actually gains protection from the Roman authorities, and in the stage which I believe is the early 60s, there is still less conflict between this Christian-Messianic movement and the Roman Empire. So I would point out these two things, but there would be other elements, one being the fact that the Greek language was the lingua franca, the public language, the open language, general language of the Roman Empire.

### Question 9:

#### Was the church being persecuted when the book of Acts was written?

**Student:** I earlier alluded to popular conceptions a lot of us have about Christians and the Roman Empire, and I referred to motion pictures and the horrible tortures and deprivations we know they went through. But was that going on in that way at the time the book of Acts was written?

**Dr. Bayer:** There is much historical study on that question, particularly when you look at the Roman Empire. The persecution really was more widespread and broad towards the end of the first century into the second century AD. So prior to that time, there would be local, particular persecutions. The most well-known one would be the Neronian persecution about AD 64 in Rome, but even that would be localized, so that confessing Jews who confessed Jesus were expelled from Rome at that particular point. So we can see pockets of persecution and localized difficulties, and we can also see that from the Jewish side. If you look at Acts 8:1, you see that there was a persecution of Christians in Jerusalem at that time which led to the further expansion of the gospel ministry. So I would say particular but not general at the time of the writing of the book of Acts and what it describes.

### **Question 10:** **What do modern historians think of Luke's work?**

**Student:** I believe earlier you had made some reference to Luke as an historian and that early on there had been some questions about the historicity of the book of Acts or the book of Luke. Nowadays, how do historians look at Luke's writings when they compare them to, let's say, the writings of Tacitus in his annals or the writings of Josephus, for instance? Does he measure up?

**Dr. Bayer:** Well, there are two schools on this question. There is the school that says that Luke was in a pre-critical time where historians mixed myth and legend with historical fact, and they could not really distinguish the difference between those elements. And then there is a growing school of scholars today in the last 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years who have argued that that is a false representation of ancient historiography and later stages including the time of the New Testament. So that the school that is growing at this point that I believe is most historically convincing is that there were always two schools of historians at any stage in the history of mankind: Those who were conscientious and careful, who reflected themselves whether they were given authentic testimony, authentic witness, authentic narrative, or those who were driven by a particular motive that was questionable. So the question is not, was Luke pre-critical or not? The question is what company is Luke in? You mentioned Tacitus and Josephus, and I would say both of those are in good company. They are conscientious. Now, with Josephus, we can have some questions about exaggerations of numbers, etc. Tacitus may have gone wrong here or there. But they are careful historians. The growing school today with researchers such as Colin Hemer or F.F. Bruce would indicate that Luke is in excellent company, that Luke performs very well particularly when checked with incidental references in the book of Acts, and he has exposed himself to make many incidental historical, sociological references that are, when tested with archeological inscriptional information, that he performs extremely well.

### **Question 11:** **Did Josephus depend on Luke?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson mentions that some people believe that in writing Acts, Luke depended on some of the information that he read from Josephus, whereas in the lesson, you said, well, Luke is probably writing earlier. If Luke is writing earlier, and if some of the information in Luke's writings and in Josephus' writings are the same, is it possible that Josephus took his information from Luke?

**Dr. Bayer:** It is certainly possible. I would argue basically that Luke reports independently of Josephus, and Josephus reports independently of Luke. There are a good number of reports that interface between what Josephus writes and what Luke reports in the book of Acts. But when you look at these particular accounts, you see that Josephus has an idiosyncratic, a particular way of presenting these various events. And the same is true for the book of Acts. So that I would say they are independent historians referring to the same event, sometimes perhaps not even the same event. In the case of Theudas, I would argue that they are probably two individuals that are being described. But there is other events that would be the same particularly when Josephus writes about John the Baptist and Luke writes about John the Baptist. They are different vantage points that are actually dovetailing very well, very good, but independent. I would argue that that is probably the most convincing approach.

### **Question 12:** **Was Christianity attractive to the socially disenfranchised?**

**Student:** Doctor, years ago when I was sitting in a history class about Roman history, I remember the professor making a big point that Christianity had become very attractive to, I guess we would call them, the disenfranchised people of that era. Could you elaborate a little bit on if that's true, and if so, why?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would affirm that. You can look at different aspects of the book of Acts and the situation of the early Christians. You can think of the Neronian persecution that I've already referred to in AD 64, a little after the report of the book of Acts, in which Christians, the weakest member of the Roman society, was blamed for this massive fire that perhaps Nero himself instigated. So it makes a lot of sense historically to look at this growing Christian movement to be one of attraction for disenfranchised people. If you look at those who come from Greek philosophy, that was very exclusive and required a high level of education. If you look at the Roman aristocratic, higher level echelons in military and government, they were strongly influenced by Stoic philosophy, again exclusive. And then if you look at the realm of mystery religions, again it was an exclusive group of people who separated themselves from the rest of the populace. So those who were disenfranchised would not fit into the Greek, Roman or mystery religious societies, and here is a message

that breaks through the barriers and says before God you are valuable, Christ died for you. And so I would say very much so it would be very attractive. But as we see in the book of Acts, Paul also is able to speak to Stoics and Epicureans, so it reaches into other areas of society, but it would be very attractive to the disenfranchised.

### **Question 13:** **What does creation have to do with salvation?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks about world history as part of the theological setting of the book of Acts. I'm curious, what role does creation itself play throughout world history as part of that theological setting and particularly with regard to the salvation that's being proclaimed in the book of Acts. Is creation just a backdrop to that story or is there more to it?

**Dr. Bayer:** I think there's more to it. We can see that creation plays a significant role. In Acts 14 and Acts 17, there is direct reference to creation and to the seasons. A certain interpretation of Acts 17 would support that. So there is an understanding of the goodness of God as Creator of this universe and then salvation is within that framework as God as redeemer, as the one who provides a means of reconciliation for mankind, and with mankind, all of creation. So I would say that is already a big factor. But one thing that comes with creation is really the development of culture and civilization. And we see in the book of Acts that the various elements of civilization and culture are not denied, are not rejected but are transformed so that the gospel breaks through ethnic divides, breaks through injustice of rich versus poor, breaks through prejudices, etc. There are many barriers that could be described, religious barriers, etc., that the gospel breaks through and really forms a humanity, a Messianic church under God, a redeemed humanity that very much then is transformative in its effect. So I would very much say there is more to that.

**Student:** So an approach to Acts which is very common, I guess, to just stress for instance people's salvation or individual salvation, receiving Christ, becoming Christians. That would sort of short change their understanding of the book if they make that too heavy an emphasis?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would so if it reduced to a very small sphere. I have made the argument that Pentecost is the writing of the law of God through the Spirit of God. That there is an echo to the giving of the Mosaic Law at Pentecost and that is indicative of the fact that salvation is transformative in the human beings. So that is why I am emphasizing that these apostles and early prophets and ministers and Christians are transformed, authentic witnesses of the reality of God in their lives. They're not just speaking; they are being transformed under God, and as such, they are salt and light then in the culture. So I would say yes, salvation in a very broad sense and redemption in that way. And we see the consequences in social behavior, the interaction between rich and poor, in living together among people who would otherwise keep distance from each other. That is the transformative power of the gospel.

**Question 14:**  
**Is the world becoming less sinful?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks about humanity's fall into sin, the fall as being the catastrophic event that Jesus came to redeem us from, but you've just sort of mentioned to us how the gospel is spreading throughout the world and transforming the world, not just individuals, but creation in some sense. So does that somehow mitigate the effects of the fall? Is the world becoming less sinful as the gospel spreads out? Or are we really still in the same place that they were back then?

**Dr. Bayer:** Certainly we're in the same place of the world that the people in the book of Acts were in because the reality of sin is still with us. So I would say there is a sobriety that we need to adopt in understanding the effects of the fall and the effects of sin on all kinds of areas, individually and corporately. What the book of Acts does hold out and what is relevant for us today as well is that there is a transformation happening, that there is a way of being renewed. And the message in the book of Acts does indicate that this is the mission of God. And because of this being the mission of God, there is transformation in individual people's lives, in small communities of believers then and now, and yet the battle is still on individually and in small churches and certainly in the society at large. So I think realistic, sober, but with great hope is what I would answer.

**Question 15:**  
**Why does Luke refer to Old Testament characters?**

**Student:** Doctor, Luke often mentions many connections between Jesus and Old Testament characters. I was wondering if he was just using this as a literary device, or was he making some kind of statement about a connection to Israel when he does that?

**Dr. Bayer:** What is particularly significant in the Gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts, is a strong emphasis of Luke as a witness to the understanding of promise and fulfillment. The anticipation of God's work in the future among Old Testament prophets and in the Mosaic law, there is a great sensitivity in Luke to that anticipation and the fact that there is this significant and majestic fulfillment to much, not only particular prophesies, but an entire development of God bringing a people unto himself through Jesus Christ as the Messiah to Israel and to the world. So there is a very strong connection there. On a literary level, you could identify it as echoes. You could understand certain anticipations in the Old Testament being echoed in the New Testament, but it is more substantial than literary in the fact that God is in the process of bringing a people unto himself, culminating in the fact that Jesus is the one who brings together so many different strands of Old Testament anticipation, among them being the great exaltation of a Lord at the right hand of the Father in Psalm 110, and



one who is very humbled and suffers in Isaiah 53, and that he brings those two strands together. So there is a very rich content in Luke in terms of promise and fulfillment.

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, that makes me think in terms of...as God is gathering a people to himself in the book of Acts, he already did that before in the Old Testament. He did that with the nation of Israel. So does he now have two people? What exactly is the relationship between Israel and the church, these two peoples that he has gathered in these two different times?

**Dr. Bayer:** I would identify God's work with Israel as a blueprint for universal work. It is local and particular with regard to Israel, but the Old Testament anticipation of the Jews being a blessing, of Abraham's seed being a blessing to all nations, the anticipation that the light goes out to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42 and 49). This anticipation is always there so that blueprint of God's faithfulness to an unfaithful Israel is now being universalized in and through Jesus Christ. So that what is happening in the New Testament times in the book of Acts is that God is bringing a people onto himself that is composed of Jews and Gentiles who all find salvation, find purifications in and through Jesus Christ. One people.

**Student:** So there are no longer two people. There is not just the church which includes Israel but not all these Gentiles who we might say were grafted in or added to that people group.

**Dr. Bayer:** And in that larger, universal work, God keeps his covenant faithfulness to Israel in calling that remnant to that purity in himself. So that God's faithfulness to his promises are still realized in the blessing that Jews, ethnic Jews, receive now in the forgiveness in Christ.

### Question 16:

#### What's the relationship between Israel and the church?

**Student:** In listening to what you've been saying about the relationship of Israel and the church, I was wondering how we should understand that in light of, for instance, Jesus' charge to the apostles in the beginning of Acts. What does that mean?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, that's a very important question. In Acts 1:6, the disciples ask Jesus, When will the kingdom be restored to Israel? And then in Acts 1:8, there is Jesus' response of waiting for the Spirit of God to come on them and for them to be witnesses. I would say it this way: The anticipation of restoration of the kingdom to Israel is a small wave of an understanding of Old Testament prophesy. What Jesus speaks of in Acts 1:8 is a big wave. It is further developed in Acts 3:17 following, when Luke speaks of the fulfillment of all that has been prophesied in the Old Testament. So I envision Acts 1:6 and Acts 1:8, Acts 3:17, as these waves, and the

small wave of anticipation is being overtaken by the bigger wave but not annulled, not rejected. So that God is showing his covenantal faithfulness to Israel, but at the same time, he is drawing the Jews who find salvation in Christ to understanding that now this people is inclusive of the Gentile world and thus there is one people under God and under his Messiah.

### **Question 17:**

#### **How similar were the messianic groups in Luke's day?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, the lesson talks a lot about, or not enough for me anyway... it talks a bit about the messianic groups that were active at the time of the first century and their expectations for who the Messiah would be, what he would accomplish. But the lesson covered that ground a little quickly. I'd like a little bit more detail on who these groups were, what they were thinking, and whether or not they were sort of all on the same game plan and just approaching it from different angles, or whether they had different ideas and different goals in mind.

**Dr. Bayer:** There is much discussion about the messianic expectation at the time of the New Testament and at the time of the writing of Luke, Acts. I would say, generally speaking, the popular expectation among various disparate groups within Judaism was that there would be a political Davidic Messiah who would rule in Jerusalem on the throne of David. So while you have diversity, there is this unified expectation, and the emphasis there is on popular. That would be the general expectation. And I would argue that Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God and Jesus' teaching regarding himself as Messiah is much broader. It draws in many more elements of Old Testament prophesy and anticipation to really come to the point of a modified goal of the Messiah distinct from the expectation of political Messiah. Now I want to say that suffering focuses you, and the longsuffering of the Jewish people under the pre-Maccabean time and the Maccabean uprising, etc., focused the expectation of the Jewish people to that particular political expectation, while the Old Testament presentation is much broader. So I would say, when Jesus came, he broadened the expectation to include one of suffering and great exaltation. So he in some ways deepened and heightened the understanding of the Messiah of God who would be ruler over all creation, who would be the Lord over all of his church, and who would suffer in a very profound way. So that is the dynamic that I see happening in the New Testament and particularly in the book of Acts. So both the goal and the means were in some ways modified by Jesus.

**Student:** I'm leading a series in my church on Matthew, and it strikes me when you talk about expectations, that everybody had expectations for Jesus and he was constantly fighting it and saying don't tell anyone or don't do this or that. I was wondering, how does this affect the mission in Acts? Do those expectations hinder the growth of the church? Was there much infighting between the groups?

**Dr. Bayer:** That's a very good question. In terms of the expectation, I would say, generally speaking, the amazing nature of the Messiah of God being a much more exalted being than expected and having suffered in a much deeper way, is so revolutionizing that it unifies the early Christian church and is actually the dynamic force behind the confidence to go out and to suffer and to undergo persecution. So it would be a unifying element that gives great joy to the Messianic church of God to understand that the Messiah of God is the eternal Son of God who now rules over his people.

### **Question 18:** **Why should we focus on the kingdom of God?**

**Student:** Dr. Bayer, earlier I had made some reference, I think, of about how many people put the emphasis not only in the book of Acts but in the whole New Testament especially, on the salvation experience, the personal salvation experience, and that the gospel entails somebody receiving Christ as Savior. I mean, that's some of the buzzword terminology that we use in the United States. When I was a kid, that's the way, for instance, we looked at Acts. It was the beginning of the church and all these people came and they got saved, they received Christ. This lesson seems to stress something a little different. It talks about things like messianic expectations, and it talks about the kingdom of God. What are the benefits in approaching that from a slightly, or maybe a greatly different perspective than the one I was used to?

**Dr. Bayer:** Yes, I would say it's not a different perspective. There is no contradiction between what I say and what you have just referred to as the gospel of salvation. Gospel means good news, it is the good news about the mission of God in and through Jesus Christ to provide salvation, reconciliation, with God the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So there is a good bit of overlap. But what I would like to say is that there is a greater context within which this salvation, this redemption occurs, and it is the context of the Kingdom of God, of the rule of God, of the original creation design, of the unfolding of covenantal faithfulness of God to his people, that is, God is the King of his people. The triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Messiah then being the eternal Son of God. So that this context then of the rule of God leads us away from an individualized, personalized understanding, exclusive personalized, understanding of salvation, to the understanding of the people of God under the lordship and authority of God both individually and then corporately. And so it does not detract from personal salvation, but it gives it a context, a framework, which is much broader and which includes not only momentary salvation, but it includes an ongoing discipleship, an ongoing submission to the lordship of Christ individually and corporately. And so I think that helps us to understand the mission of God in a broader sense.

**Student:** That seems to have a lot more impact on me emotionally as I hear you say that, that when I think about me and Jesus, my individual salvation, that is a

wonderful thing and I would die for that. But as you describe it, it's so much bigger. It's a much broader restoration of creation and of all people into this giant salvation of which I'm a part. It makes my individual salvation feel so much more significant as I view it that way.

**Dr. Bayer:** It is. It is because it is your salvation; it is your transformation. But it is also breaking through cultural barriers. So it has an incredible consequence in terms of culture, in terms of the society at large, and that is part of salvation. That is part of the work of God. And so I would affirm what you're saying as a broader understanding of what God is about that includes the personal salvation. But it goes beyond. It gives us a framework and a context.

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