**THE SPREADING WAVE**

**From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth**

**A Survey of the Book of Acts**

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Waves are everywhere. We encounter waves on a daily basis. Sound waves, visible light waves, radio waves, water waves, stadium waves, and slinky waves are just a few of the examples of our daily encounters with waves. For many people, the first thought concerning waves conjures up a picture of a wave moving across the surface of an ocean, lake, pond or other body of water. A wave can be described as a disturbance (energy) that travels through a medium from one location to another location. The waves are created by some form of a disturbance, such as a rock thrown into the water. The waves may appear to be plane waves which travel as a front in a straight-line direction, perhaps towards a sandy shore. Or the waves may be circular waves which originate from the point where the disturbances occur; such circular waves travel across the surface of the water in all directions. A wave transports energy. I use the concept of a wave analogically in the exposition of the Book of Acts to refer to the transport or spread of the kingdom message from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Rome in Acts) in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Book of Acts demonstrates how the early church fulfilled its commission from Christ to carry the kingdom message to the ends of the earth. A synthetic analysis of this book and an application of its principles will help us do the same in our day.

1. Purpose of Acts: The Book of Acts shows how believers spread the kingdom message from Jerusalem to Rome in a single generation providing principles for its spread in every generation.

The Book of Acts chronicles the spread of the kingdom message by the first century church through the power of the Holy Spirit from Jerusalem to Rome, from rejecting Jews to receptive Gentiles, despite persecution from without or problems from within, in order to motivate believers of every generation to keep spreading the kingdom message until the Lord Jesus Christ returns to establish the messianic kingdom. The kingdom message is that Jesus is the redeemer of the world and he will return to rule the world. Jesus is Savior and Sovereign. All who believe in him have eternal life. All who faithfully serve him will reign with him.

1. Plan of Acts: The Book of Acts shows how believers spread the kingdom message from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Luke structures the book to stress his objective for the book. Four keys reveal the structure. The first key is the mention of the kingdom at the beginning and at the end of the book which function as bookends emphasizing the main message (1:3; 28:30-31).[[1]](#footnote-1) The second key is the theme verse, Acts 1:8, which gives the geographical order of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.[[2]](#footnote-2) The third key is a focus on the leadership of the Apostle Peter in chapters 1-12 and then a focus on the leadership of the Apostle Paul in chapters 13-28. The fourth key is the use of seven progress reports distributed throughout the book which divide the book into seven panels or units of thought (2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31).[[3]](#footnote-3) Understanding this structural plan helps to resolve some theological problems such as the four extensions of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the function of miraculous signs.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Witness in Jerusalem: The church starts (1:1—6:7).

The Lord Jesus Christ tells the disciples what he intends for them to do in Acts 1:8. This imperative presents a three-part outline for the entire book. The first part of the book shows how the early church completed the first aspect of its commission. Acts 5:28 says that the disciples filled Jerusalem with their teaching.

1. Panel 1 with Progress Report 1: The church is established in Jerusalem (1:1—2:47).

This panel marks the inauguration of the church. It comes into being through the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke is careful to list all of the Jewish representatives in Jerusalem. Through Peter’s sermon 3,000 come into the fellowship of the church. The first of seven progress reports closes the panel.

1. Panel 2 with Progress Report 2: The church is extended in Jerusalem (2:48—6:7).

The Jewish church flourishes in Jerusalem in spite of opposition from the Jewish leadership and internal difficulties. There is an alternation of opposition (3:1—4:31), internal problems (4:32—5:11), persecution (5:12-42), and internal strife (6:1-7). The panel concludes with another progress report. Luke is showing the expansion of the church by the Holy Spirit despite opposition from without and obstacles from within.

1. Witness in all Judea and Samaria—Panel 3 with Progress Report 3: The church scatters (6:8—9:31).

The second part of the book shows how the early church completed the second aspect of its commission. Acts 9:31 says that the church throughout all Judea and Samaria was being built up.

The church proclaims the kingdom message in Jerusalem with the result that many devout Jews receive it while the leaders reject it. The rejection of the Jewish leaders climaxes with the stoning of Stephen, a Christ-like figure. This gives rise to a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem which leads to a scattering of the believers throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

God uses the persecution to providentially direct the spread of the kingdom message into the new regions. The Lord Jesus Christ personally appears to the persecutor Saul and arranges for him to be brought into the church. Luke ends the panel with another progress report which points out that the second stage of the Lord’s command concerning the spread of the kingdom message was fulfilled.

1. Witness to the Ends of the Earth: The church sends (9:32—28:31).

The third part of the Book of Acts shows how the early church completed the third aspect of its commission. Luke traces the extension of the church and the kingdom message to Syrian Antioch, to Asia Minor, to the Aegean area, and to Rome. Acts 28:31 says that Paul was preaching the kingdom message unhindered in Rome.

1. Panel 4 with Progress Report 4: The church is extended to Syrian Antioch (9:32—12:24).

God prepares Peter for the extension of the kingdom message to Gentiles. Miracles confirm his ministry. He takes the kingdom message under the direction of God to Cornelius, a Gentile in Caesarea. Peter and the Jewish believers recognize that God initiated the incorporation of Gentiles in the body of Christ and that they should not stand in his way.

Unnamed believers take the kingdom message to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. This is a crucial event in the book of Acts. For the first time believers take the initiative to reach out to Gentiles in Antioch. The word gets back to the church in Jerusalem which sends Barnabas to minister in Antioch. The work grows so much in Antioch that Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch to help. It is at Antioch that believers are first called “Christians” (11:26). Christians were being recognized as a distinct group from Judaism. The believers in Antioch express their unity with believers in Judea by sending money with Barnabas and Saul to help with a famine.

The church in Jerusalem experiences severe persecution at the hand of Herod and the Jewish authorities (12:1-24). This confirms Israel’s rejection of Christ and sets the stage for the 1st missionary journey. A progress report (12:24) closes the section. The kingdom message will now go from Antioch to Asia Minor.

1. Panel 5 with Progress Report 5: The church is extended to Asia Minor (12:25—16:5).

Syrian Antioch becomes the center of missionary activity. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, will carry the kingdom message to the Gentiles. Paul goes forth under the Holy Spirit’s direction and God prospers his work. God authenticates the ministry of Paul through miracles as he had with Peter (compare Acts 3:4ff. and 14:9ff.).[[5]](#footnote-5) The Council of Jerusalem resolves the issue of the incorporation of Gentiles in the church as Gentiles. Luke relates the contention between Paul and Barnabas and the continued spread of the kingdom message in order to show that the Holy Spirit would ensure its spread in spite of human differences. A progress report brings the section to a close.

1. Panel 6 with Progress Report 6: The church is extended to the Aegean area (16:6—19:20).

God directs the spread of the kingdom message into Europe. This panel divides into three sections: (1) Macedonian call; (2) Ministry from Philippi to Corinth; and (3) ministry in Ephesus. The center for mission shifts to Ephesus.

1. Panel 7 with Progress Report 7: The church is extended to the ends of the earth [Rome] (19:21—28:31).

The beginning of this last panel sets the tone: Paul by the Spirit sets his sight on Rome (19:21). The panel divides into four sections: (1) completion of the 3rd journey; (2) captivity in Jerusalem; (3) captivity in Caesarea; and (4) journey to Rome and captivity in Rome. At the climax of the book of Acts the focus turns again to taking the kingdom message to Gentiles. Stanley Toussaint observes: “From Jerusalem to Rome most Jews rejected it and in city after city the message was then directed to non-Jews. Now in the capital of the Roman world the same phenomenon occurred; so it will be until the fullness of Gentiles comes.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Luke does not give a definite end to the ministry of Paul, suggesting that the task of preaching the kingdom message would continue to the end of the age. This moving account of the expansion of the kingdom message to the end of the earth should motivate believers of any day to rely upon the Holy Spirit and take the kingdom message to the world until the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

1. Principles for our Acts: The Book of Acts provides principles for how we can spread the kingdom message throughout our world in our day.

The story of the church doesn’t end with the book of Acts. It continues to this day. It continues in spite of persecution. It continues in spite of division and strife within. God the Holy Spirit who gave birth to the church on the Day of Pentecost, still empowers the witness of believers. What part are you playing in this ongoing story?

1. Be a witness.

Take the kingdom message to the world. Seventeen sermons in the Book of Acts unfold the message and various methods of presenting the message to different audiences.

1. Pray.

In the Book of Acts we see prayer before the witness began, prayer at the beginning of the witness, and prayer throughout the course of the witness. Prayer marked each transition and trial of the church in the fulfillment of its mission. Prayer is of vital importance in preparing us to function effectively in the fulfillment of our mission.

1. Rely on the Holy Spirit.
2. Be bold.
3. Organize for service and mission.

Function as a body. Serve in teams.

1. Expect obstacles and opposition and overcome them by relying on God’s providence, God’s wisdom and God’s power.

A church in Kansas city had as its slogan: Wake up, sing up, preach up, pray up and pay up, but never give up or let up or back up or shut up until the cause of Christ in this church and in the world is built up.” ***The mission of the church is to bear the message of Christ to the world. “Upset the world!”*** Keep casting the “stone” and watch the ripples go out?

*“These men who have upset the world have come here also.”* – Acts 17:6b

**THEY UPSET THE WORLD**

When one reads through the book of Acts, he cannot help but be impressed with the enthusiasm, diligence, dedication, and commitment of the first century Christians.

Despite a great persecution against them, they went everywhere preaching the Gospel

(Acts 8:1-4). As a result of their efforts, we find that they had a troubling effect on the world of that day and time. Notice what Luke records:

*When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also...” (Acts 17:6).*

Some translations render that verse, “*they have turned the world upside down...”* In other words, these New Testament Christians had a serious impact on the world around them. Their message of a risen Messiah was well-known.

They delivered a message that convicted men of their sin (Acts 2:37-38). The Jewish

people were told the Law could not save them (Heb. 8:7-13). All in all, the

Christians were an offense to the world. This is one of the reasons they were so

viciously persecuted. Their convicting message was not always gladly received.

That the followers of Jesus Christ were an offense is not surprising. It was prophesied of

the Christ that He would be a stumbling block to many (Isa. 8:13-15). The apostle Peter,

quoting from Isaiah, writes of the offense of Jesus:

*6 For this is contained in Scripture: “Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.”*

*7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “The stone which the builders rejected, This became the very corner stone,”*

*8 and, “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed* (1 Peter 2:6–8).

The word “offense” in those verses is the Greek word *skandalon.* It is the word from

which we get our English word, “scandal.” Jesus was scandalous to many of the Jews.

They were offended by Him (cf. Matt. 9:11; 15:12; John 6:66). The idea that the long awaited Messiah should die on a cross was offensive (cf. (John 12:34; Gal. 3:13). It is therefore natural that the followers of Jesus, in their teaching and conduct, would also be offensive.

Christianity today is still offensive to the vast majority of the people in the world.

Those who adhere to the Bible’s teaching are considered narrow-minded, insensitive,

advocators of hate, and out of touch with reality. After all, in our “enlightened” world

of today, who could accept the Bible’s teaching regarding the definition of marriage, the

roles of men in the home and the church, what is sexually immoral, or the fact that there

is only one way to God?

In being an offense, let us never be ashamed of the Gospel (cf. Rom. 1:16). Let us not

shrink back from declaring the wonderful truths of God’s word (Heb. 10:39). Let us

strive to have an impact on the world today, just like our brothers and sisters of the first

century.

1. The word “kingdom” is used eight times in Acts: Jesus taught about the kingdom of God (1:3); the disciples asked about the kingdom (1:8); Philip taught the Samaritans about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (8:12); Paul and Barnabas told the Christians in Antioch that we enter the kingdom of God through many hardships (14:22); Paul argued in the Synagogue for three months about the kingdom of God (19:8); Paul told the Ephesians elders that he had preached the kingdom (20:25); Paul preached to Roman Jews “the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus” (28:23); Paul “preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus” in Rome (28:31). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jerusalem functions as the epicenter of the kingdom message. The kingdom message is like the proverbial rock dropped in the pond. The impact begins in Jerusalem but doesn’t remain there. The influence spreads in outward fashion to the ends of the earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A. S. Valdes in the *Grace New Testament Commentary* on Acts suggests that these seven panels are arranged in a concentric pattern with the fourth panel at the center—“the granting of co-equal status to Gentiles directly through Jesus”. He writes, “The structure follows the movement from a Jewish beginning with the Twelve in Jerusalem to Paul—who pictures Israel in her historic mission as light to the Gentiles—as God’s witness in Rome, the contemporary capital of the Gentile-dominated world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts is a book of transitions. It is important to understand these transitions when it comes to doctrine and practice for the church today. The doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a case in point. The baptism of the Spirit is the operation of the Holy Spirit which takes an individual believer in Christ and makes that person a member of Christ’s body, the church (see Eph 1:13). The four accounts of the baptism of the Spirit in the Book of Acts mark major transitions of the church and teach that there is but one church into which all believers, whether Jews (Acts 2), Samaritans (Acts 8), Gentiles (Acts 10—11), or followers of John the Baptist (Acts 19), are united by the same Spirit. The presence of apostles and miraculous signs testify to this unity. These were unique occasions. Believers today are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ at the moment of believing in Christ for eternal life and without the presence of miraculous signs such as speaking in tongues. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter is prominent in Acts 1-12; Paul in 13-28. This reflects the change in the makeup of the church from being largely Jewish to being largely Gentile. The narrative reflects many comparisons between Peter and Paul: both healed a lame man (3:1-10; 14:8-18); both confronted sorcerers (8:9-25; 13:4-12); both performed miracles in a unique manner (5:12-16; 19:11-12); both conferred the Holy Spirit through the laying of hands (8:14-25; 19:1-10); both raised someone from the dead (9:36-42; 20:7-12); both were imprisoned and miraculously released (12:1-19; 16:16-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)