

Suffering and the purpose of Acts

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What has been neglected in Acts scholarship is the fact that persecution, hardships, troubles, martyrdom, and disputes between Christians and non-Christians (sometimes even between Christians and Christians) provide the theological and literary framework for Acts. Suffering normally follows ministry. Then quite often suffering provides the opportunity for more ministry.¹

Through trouble the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Samaria (8:4-24) and finally to Rome (20:17-28:31). Paul and his coworkers seem to know when to move to other places through the opposition they arouse (cf. 13:48-52; 14:5-6; 14:19-20; 16:25-40; 17:10; 17:13-15; etc.). Indeed it is a rare thing for the first apostles or for Paul to have assurance of safety (e.g. 9:31; 12:1-19; 18:9-11; 19:1-20). Even in Corinth and Ephesus, where Paul has long stints, the gospel eventually receives virulent opposition and Paul leaves the area. Of course chaps. 20-28 demonstrate that God's purposes are served through Paul's problems. Only through imprisonment and unjust accusation does the apostle reach Rome with the gospel.²

If Acts presents an expanding message and Church, then it is through problems that the gospel was declared. If the book explains the worthiness of Christianity or Paul's ministry, that worthiness is proven by how Christians endured hardship and how Paul withstood personal and legal difficulties. In short, Acts has no purpose, no plot, no structure, and no history without suffering.³

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1 House, 320-21.

2 House, 321.

3 House, 321.

Suffering and the expanding gospel

After Pentecost the new Church seems to have few problems. There are many new Christians (2:47). The group is doctrinally sound (2:42), prayerful (2:42), generous (2:44-46) and eager to worship (2:46). Of the many summaries in Acts, surely this initial report is one of the most positive.⁴

Chapters 3-4 interrupt this relative bliss and introduce a ministry-persecution pattern that Luke uses throughout his work. Persecution first spreads the gospel in Jerusalem. Peter and John “err” by healing a lame man (3:1-10) and then compound their “mistake” by preaching salvation through Jesus (3:11-26). In their oration they blame the people and their leaders for Christ’s death (3:17). Angered by this accusation, the temple officials arrest Peter and John (4:1-4). Therefore the first witness offered under duress is aimed at those who arrested Jesus (4:5-22). Merely threatened, the apostles go free and pray for boldness to keep preaching the gospel (4:23-31).⁵ That chaps. 3-4 target the Jews’ need to hear the gospel becomes apparent in chap. 5, where a similar event occurs. Because the apostles’ ministry is so effective (5:12-16), the Sadducees are “filled with jealousy” (5:17), a somewhat common cause of persecution in Acts (cf. 13:45; 17:5), so they imprison the apostles (5:18). Miraculously God delivers them all from jail, and they teach the people (5:19-21). Once more the apostles promise to preach at all costs (5:27-32). Gamaliel’s resulting speech reveals not only that the religious leaders know that Christianity threatens their status but also that they are confident of their correctness. After all, they beat the apostles and censor them again (5:40). By Gamaliel’s standards the Church “is of God.” They are happy “to suffer dishonor for the Name,” and nothing can stop their preaching.⁶

Stephen’s defense before the Sanhedrin concludes Jerusalem’s exclusive opportunity to receive the gospel. Once more, effective ministry—in this case wonders, signs, and incontrovertible argumentation (6:8-10)—causes this deacon to be jailed. Stephen will die for his faith.⁷

22 House, 324.

23 House, 324.

Within Stephen's oration itself there is evidence of an emphasis on suffering. First he relates the suffering of Israel in Egypt (7:6). Then he says Joseph's suffering was caused by his brothers' jealousy, which echoes 5:17 and may refer to the charges against Stephen himself. Further references to Israel's suffering appear in 7:11, 19, 21, 34, while 7:39 comments on how Israel disobeyed Moses and 7:52 charges the nation with persecuting and killing the prophets. Of course he intimates that they also persecuted Jesus (7:51). For these comments Stephen is martyred, like Jesus and the prophets. Even in this defense suffering has a major historical and thematic role. One could cast the history of Israel in a different way, but the persecution motif is chosen.⁸

Because of Stephen's death the disciples are scattered from Jerusalem by Saul. Thus persecution expands the gospel beyond its initial boundaries. Now that Christ has been preached in Jerusalem suffering moves the message to Samaria (8:4-25), which partially fulfills Jesus' command in 1:8.⁹

Marshall claims:

The scattering of the Christians led to the most significant step forward in the mission of the church. One might say that it required persecution to make them fulfill the implicit command in 1:8

Persecution both spreads the gospel to Damascus and provides Acts' greatest proponent of Christianity in chap.⁹ Saul, the tormenter of the Church (8:3), believes that some "followers of the Way" (9:2) have fled to Damascus. He goes to arrest them but joins them instead. His dramatic and unexpected conversion adds an ironic twist to the suffering theme. God causes the source of suffering to suffer blindness and humiliation and makes him a follower of the Way (9:3-9). Further, God adds, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (9:16). Saul's (Paul's) ministry is summarized as one of suffering, and later texts second this assessment (cf. 20:22-24; 21:7-14). Thus Paul's activities are cast in the light of suffering from the start. This affliction will characterize and authenticate his work. Indeed his first preaching efforts meet with life-threatening opposition (9:19-30).¹¹

8 House, 322.

9 House, 322.

10 House, 322.

11 House, 322.

Conclusions

Various theological conclusions may be drawn from the suffering theme in Acts.

1. One can assume that this message was needed in the early Church.

Problems arise, but they can be overcome and used to promote the gospel.

As Maddox concludes:

The church within which Luke writes is under pressure, through theological argument as well as through physical assault and judicial processes: all that cannot be avoided. But the Holy Spirit is working irresistibly on, and that can only give the Christian joy and confidence to take his share in the witness to Christ, to which the whole church is called.³³

2. Luke teaches that suffering accompanies serious ministry and the expansion of Christianity.

Paul agrees with this assessment as well (2 Tim 3:12). Those who kill Christ and the martyrs will always exist. Still, through personal witness and sacrifice the kingdom will triumph.³⁴

3. The greatest defense of the gospel and its representatives is that it is worth dying for.

The Christians are not a political threat because they suffer for another kingdom. Paul does not succumb to persecution because it fits into his theology and extends his ministry. These trials are not “mere annoyances” or slight setbacks. They cost the Church its best people. Yet it is this willingness to sacrifice life and comfort that speaks loudest to second-generation Christians as well as to today’s Church.³⁵

32 House, 326.

33 House, 330.

34 House, 330.

35 House, 330.