

How the word conquers the world

Notes by Steve Addison

The book of Acts tells the story of the progress of the gospel from a small gathering of Jesus' Jewish disciples in Jerusalem, across religious, ethnic, relational and geographic boundaries, to Paul's bold and unhindered preaching of the risen and ascended Jesus to Gentiles in Rome.

Acts is a story of missionary expansion, begun with the promise of the Risen Lord that his disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them and they would be his witness to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

For Luke, the word of God is first God's promise in the OT, then the preaching of Jesus himself, and finally the preaching about Jesus. As Acts unfolds Luke provides progress reports on the spread of God's dynamic word. As disciples are made and churches formed Luke can say, "the word grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:24).

The word of God travels to the end of the earth, conquering the world in the process. Its goal is the creation of the community of the true people of God.

This unstoppable advance is not without its challenges and setbacks. Progress is met with violent opposition. Yet the word continues to spread and grow.

Luke records the spread of the word south to Ethiopia and Cyrenaica; east to Arabia, Elam, Media and Parthia; north to the coast of the Aegean Sea; and west to Rome.

Acts is structured around a series of reports that describe this unstoppable progress of the word (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-33).

Progress reports	
6:7	And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.
9:31	So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.
12:24	But the word of God increased and multiplied.
16:5	So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.
19:20	So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.
28:30-31	He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

These reports of the creative and powerful word recall Jesus parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-15). They remind us that it is God who causes the growth (1Cor 3:6).

Like a seed, the word has in itself the power of life. The seed does not grow because of the sower, and the word does not depend upon the preacher to effect salvation. The word of God is an independent force. Missionaries in Acts are effective because they are “ministers of the word” (Acts 6:4; also 4:4, 29; 10:44; 18:5).

Luke tells the story of how Jesus’ followers overcame impossible odds to preach the message to ever-widening circles. But it is God who directs and enables them to do so. God is the decisive actor.

He leads Phillip to an Ethiopian eunuch already prepared to hear the gospel. He intervenes in a vision that opens Peter’s eyes to the mission to the Gentiles and sends him to Cornelius. He intervenes to call the church’s greatest persecutor to become its greatest missionary.

Acts is a chronicle cycles of progress and expansion. As the word reaches new fields there is a repeated cycle:

- a. God chooses his witnesses.
- b. They preach and/or perform miracles.
- c. There are positive and negative responses.
- d. There is opposition and persecution
- e. Opposition opens up new opportunities for witness.

This cycle takes place every time the word penetrates a new region—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor, and Europe. These cycles highlight the rejection and persecution which pervades Acts and remind us of the great cost involved in spreading the gospel.

Acts begins with Jesus’ command is to go to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Acts finishes with the goal unreached. Rome is not the end of the earth, it is the center of the empire.

Luke’s last progress report (Acts 28: 30-31) has Paul, in custody in Rome, unhindered as he proclaims the gospel of the kingdom. This open-ended ending shows that the progress of the word is ongoing.

Acts ends, but the missionary expansion does not. Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to Paul, but he leaves us in no doubt that despite the obstacles and suffering his servants face, the word will continue to grow, and spread and multiply. God will do it.

Luke challenges his readers—us included—to follow Jesus and finish the task.

Sources: Jerom Kodell, “The Word of God grew” *The Ecclesial Tendency of logos in Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20*. *Biblica* 55 (1974): 505-19. David Pao, *Acts and The Isaianic New Exodus* (Baker: 2002). Brian Rosner, “The Progress of the Word”. In *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*. Edited by I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 215-33.