

My name is Theophilus, and I am a Roman living in the year 62 AD. My friend, Luke, has written two very long scrolls to me, and has convinced me to read what other few written sources there are about Jesus and his teachings. He has also informed me of the state of Christianity, so I am as well informed as any Roman can be.

It's difficult to comprehend, 2000 years on, why Christianity has been so successful. You may think that the result was inevitable. In 62 AD, a little over thirty years after the death of Jesus, here is what the situation looks like. The Roman Empire consists of about 60 million people, it has life-and-death control over all of those 60 million lives. Everyone knows the Jews in Israel are on the verge of revolt, and it is certain to me that the Romans will wipe out Jerusalem and sack the Temple of its riches within a decade.¹

In contrast to Rome's power and population, there are maybe 10,000 Christians, and they are scattered throughout the Empire. Rome doesn't even know Christianity exists, and could easily wipe out all of the Christians in a week if the emperor chose to do so. Our emperors think nothing of killing tens of thousands of people just for fun or retribution, or out of fear of rebellion. The Christians are in far more danger than they know.

On the Christian front, the many Christians living in Israel will be treated like Jews, and probably will be wiped out, too. The leader of the Christians, Paul, is in jail. The rest of the Christians are struggling with how to behave, and false teachers are already infiltrating their ranks. Frankly, I would probably struggle to find a few

¹ In fact, the First Jewish-Roman War started in 66 AD. It did result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

thousand dedicated Christians who are capable of spreading the Gospel. It is as bleak a story as I know...and it is thirty years after the death of Jesus.

In light of that, let's reimagine the night of Jesus' betrayal, and his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Let's start with Jesus' actual statement to God found in John 17:4 and imagine how the conversation between Jesus and the Father went. I must tell you, this is entirely from my imagination and you won't hear it anywhere else. The fact that it makes perfect sense must be a coincidence.

Jesus: "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do."²

Father: "And just what is that work?"

Jesus: "Among other things, I have trained eleven men really well, and have a few hundred dedicated believers, and a few hundred others who still have some unbelief. Now that is done, I'm ready to be crucified to take on the sins of the world, be resurrected and come back to you. Satan will be defeated at the time of my resurrection, but he will continue to plague the Earth until the time of his final destruction. However, I'm sure my people will grow your Kingdom because I've instructed them to do so."

Father: "So, Plan "A" is for them to go make disciples. What is Plan "B.""

Jesus: "There is no Plan "B"!"

Father: "I've got an idea. There's only about a hundred million people on the entire planet. Why don't we just send a few angels to each one of them to tell them the Gospel story? If you don't like that, why don't we just give each one of them a vision so that they understand about us? Or, maybe you stay there on Earth a while longer and take away all pain and suffering, and heal everyone. You can teach all the others like you did those eleven apostles?"

² John 17:4

Jesus: “No, stick with the plan we have had for eons. We are going to send Holy Spirit back to empower people when they become Christians. We will start some churches, and eventually write a book that tells the world about us and our plan of salvation. That will be enough to overcome Satan and the natural human desires we created those people to have. This plan will work.”

Father: “I trust you, Son, and I’ve given you all authority to choose your plan and weapons, but why don’t you think about it in the Garden for a while, see if you change your mind. I’m more than ready for you to come back and be at my right hand, but your plan seems like a slow, risky way to bring all mankind to repentance, like I want them to.”³

Jesus: “It would be risky if not for the power of Holy Spirit.”

Of course, from your vantage point of two thousand years, you know Jesus’ plan to grow the Kingdom worked. But from my viewpoint, it was a longer shot than my becoming Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Back to the book of *Acts*. I hope you now fully appreciate the excellence of the book of *Acts*. I won’t tell him to his face, but Luke is a brilliant writer. His Greek is impeccable, and the way he synthesized his information and stories into one account is stunning. He is already far from modest, but he has every right to be proud of his final scroll.

Like modern scholars, you are probably wondering why he stopped his account when he did, and if there is more to the story. You probably astutely question when Paul wrote his later letters, like First and Second Timothy, and Titus. Here is why Luke stopped his account. The Holy Spirit told him to. It is that simple. He did not just run out of room on the scroll like some modern scholars say, although I tease him that he did.

³ 2 Peter 3:9

If Luke had been a Hollywood writer, he would have saved the rest of Paul's story for *Luke's Grandiose Stories - Part 3*. This is not Hollywood, and there are no reliable sources which give you a lot of solid evidence about the rest of Paul's life. Some scholars believe Paul was martyred during the reign of Nero in the spring of 68 AD. This means Paul spent another several years evangelizing and establishing churches. There are others who believe Paul was martyred shortly after the end of Acts in about 63 AD, or 65 AD.

You can rightly assume that I liked *Acts* well enough to pay for many copies of *Luke* and *Acts* to be made so they would make it through the trials and travails of time. I hope you take the opportunity to read them since they survived all that time. If you do, you will find that the two books Luke wrote to me are critical to understanding much of the New Testament.

Acts gives precious little information compared to the entire story that took place over more than thirty years. But, as John observed, this is information enough.⁴ Perhaps you even realize how you have unconsciously added details in your own mind to flesh out the stories you have read all your life.

The people in the book of *Acts* were not super-heroes, just people like you. As you read the rest of the Bible, let their stories come alive as you put yourself in their shoes.

The Roman Empire consisted of many cultures, many languages, and many religions. Travel a few days in any direction, and it was highly likely that we would find ourselves in an entirely different culture. The book of *Acts* is about Christians learning to make disciples and grow churches in different cultures. Think of how Paul talked to Athenians compared to how he taught in Ephesus. To think that the New Testament is a concise rulebook about a single way to make disciples or to grow churches is a very narrow way to view it.

⁴ John 21:25

The vast Roman empire and the excellent highways, provided advantages. It was no accident that the vast majority of all of the early Gentile churches were started in cities on Roman highways or in Roman ports. Those types of factors helped the early church grow so quickly.

The influence of weather and geography was immense on our lives. You have cars, planes, and air conditioning to insulate you from those influences, but they had immense impact on us. Imagine walking in sandals on an uneven, rocky Roman road for fifteen miles in a blinding rain up a mountain without even the hope of a dry place to spend the night or find food, and you will just begin to understand travel in our time.

The early Christians relied desperately on Holy Spirit. His guidance and his gifts were critical in helping establish and grow churches throughout the Roman Empire. You need him just as desperately today, don't forget that. What you see in *Acts* as a complete, orderly story was not that way. Every day was a new adventure, and we thought of our lives as chaotic and dangerous. We knew Holy Spirit was in control, but most of the time He didn't give us much of a heads-up on His plans.

The purpose of Holy Spirit is to grow Christ's world-wide church by growing local congregations through empowering individuals. Perhaps Luke convinced you of this timeless message.

Many people read *Acts* and solely think of how Holy Spirit empowered individuals. Paul is the central character, so he gets the most attention. This is magnified since he wrote so much of the New Testament.

Paul and the others knew that they were only instruments in the hands of Holy Spirit. As Paul taught, Holy Spirit empowered people so they were better able to be church members and disciple makers.

Luke began *Acts* by quoting Jesus, "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." His instructions were the exact

outline of the book of *Acts*. Luke's story started with Pentecost in Jerusalem, Stephen going to Judea and Samaria, the believers being scattered out of Israel, and the missionary journeys as the start of going "to the ends of the earth."

But the Holy Spirit knew it was not enough to make disciples of individuals. He knew that individuals could not withstand the powerful influences of Satan and his demons, or even the influences of family, friends and culture. So, Luke emphasized the importance of creating self-sustaining churches. A couple of decades after my life, when John the Apostle wrote *Revelation*, it became apparent that individuals and their churches were inevitably intertwined. So, *Acts* is maybe best thought of as a history of the establishment of churches.

Our mission is to be a disciple, make disciples, and mature disciples. This is what *Acts* is all about. Luke convinced me, and my hope is that he convinced you, too.