Okay, let’s go ahead and get started. What we’re going to plan to do is continue to work today through the Book of Acts. We just got started on it, and so we’ll review just a little bit about what we said regarding kind of the overall makeup and structure of the book. And then, similar to how we’ve handled the Gospels, we’ll focus on the main themes and some of the main texts that I want you to pay attention to in the book and then I’ll be looking at an example of one of the issues that usually we have to confront when we read the Book of Acts. Then we’ll use that passage as a test case for how we will go about interpreting the book or least some of the questions we need to raise and deal with. So let’s open with prayer, and then we’ll look in more detail at the book of Acts.

Let’s pray: Father, again, I thank you for the opportunity to stop and analyze your Word in light of its original setting and context but also in doing so realizing that that very contextually situated set of documents continues to speak to us as your Word today. And I pray that we would be mindful of that and that we would recognize that we are dealing with nothing less than your words, so it requires all the energy and discipline and all our mental and spiritual faculties and abilities bringing that all to the text to try to understand it as clearly and as accurately as possible. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

The last class period, we began to look at, Acts as far as its structure and relationship to the Old Testament. I suggested to you that the key text for understanding the book of Acts is Chapter 1, verse 8, where Jesus at the very beginning of the book as he’s addressing his disciples, his followers that we read more about in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Jesus now addresses his followers after his death and his resurrection, Jesus reminds them of their commission and that is that they are to as Jesus says, “wait for him” and that in verse eight, they would “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Now, what is important about that is I suggested that that is not primarily a strategy for how
to do missions but that that comes right out of the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. So all those texts, the reference to power or the Holy Spirit coming upon them from on high, the reference to being witnesses, and the references to going to the ends of the earth, all of that comes right out of the book of Isaiah. What Jesus is basically saying is now what Isaiah anticipated. Isaiah’s promise of restoration of God’s people and the spread of God’s kingdom and his glory to the ends of their earth now is being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and his followers who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy and his vision for restoration and spreading God’s kingdom and his glory throughout the ends of the earth. So again, Acts 1:8 is not primarily about how to do missions: it’s primarily about how Jesus and his followers fulfill the program of restoration as found in the book of Isaiah.

Also, you’ll notice that the second section in your notes under the references I’ve given you to Isaiah 32 and 43 and 49 is obviously and on the other hand Acts chapter 1, verse 8 also provides a rough outline for how the rest of the book will proceed and how it will develop in fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision for restoration. So, for example, the first part “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem” basically corresponds to the first six chapters or the early part of Acts. Then the fact that the Gospel’s to spread to Judea and Samaria is reflected in the next several chapters of Acts, chapter 6 through chapter 9. Then chapters 12 to 28 would correspond “to the ends of the earth,” where the Apostle Paul ends up in Rome preaching this good news, again, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise of restoration. So for that reason, Acts 1:8 is very important because it links back to the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament but also provides, then, the rough outline for how the rest of Acts will develop – in broadening, concentric circles embracing territory that moves far beyond just Jerusalem.

In view of this, we can say the purpose of the book of Acts primarily is to demonstrate how this gospel that has its roots in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, especially Luke, because remember, Acts is part of a two-volume work along with Luke, but this gospel now Jesus brings the kingdom and fulfillment of the Old Testament. Acts
demonstrates how that gospel spreads to embrace lesser and lesser Jewish territories, again, in fulfillment of the Old Testament, especially the book of Isaiah. It tells how the gospel moves from Jerusalem, moves out from there to address and to embrace lesser and lesser Jewish territories, ending up in Rome and the ends of the earth. So we’ll come back to that last comment – that’s important for the way that we understand the gospel – in a moment, but recognize that as the primary purpose of Acts. It narrates how the gospel that Jesus proclaims and fulfills and brings to fulfillment in the Gospels, how that now spreads out to places that are less and less Jewish and begins to cross cultural barriers and boundaries.

Now, before we go on, to go back to the very first verse of Acts to demonstrate the connection, we said Acts and Luke both belong to a two-volume work: Acts and Luke. Before they were included in the New Testament, they would’ve comprised a two-volume book. Notice how verse one of chapter 1 begins, “In the first book, Theophilus.”

Theophilus is the person that is addressed in Luke chapter 1, and so “the first book” referred to in Acts 1:1 is referring to the book of Luke. So “in the first book” – that is the Gospel of Luke: “Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions by the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.” Now Acts will be a continuation of that story that was begun in the Gospel of Luke.

Now, before we move on and look at some important texts in Acts, one interesting thing, in light of the parallels to Isaiah. We said the book of Isaiah, especially the latter half of it, but the entire book lays out a program of restoration that begins with salvation in Jerusalem, that is God's people Israel must be restored to Jerusalem. God will bring his people back. Remember when Isaiah was written, God’s people are in exile or ready to go into exile because of their sin and idolatry. So Isaiah anticipates a time when God’s people will be brought back from exile to Jerusalem and restored. But that is simply preparation for the restoration of the kingdoms. Remember as well, at this time, the time when Isaiah was written, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. You remember your Old Testament survey with Professor Wilson or Hildebrandt or Professor Phillips, the divided Kingdom,
the Kingdom of Israel had been divided into Israel and Judah. So, Isaiah looks at it for a time when two kingdoms will be restored and united. There will be one people of God; salvation will come to Jerusalem; they will be witnesses so that salvation will ultimately go to the ends of the earth. We said, too, that Acts follows this same scheme: it begins with salvation in Jerusalem and the restored kingdoms. Interestingly, what happens after the gospel moves out of Jerusalem? One of the first places that the apostles begin go to is Samaria, which was the northern kingdom of Israel. So that’s one of the reasons why Acts mentions from Jerusalem, Judea, to Samaria because that was part of Isaiah’s promise of restoration that the two kingdoms that were split would be restored as the one people of God, and then they are to be his witnesses so that salvation ultimately goes to the ends of the earth. Acts 28 ends with the gospel going to Rome via the Apostle Paul, one of Jesus’ disciples.

Now, one thing I think this helps us to understand an interesting passage that’s always perplexed me a little bit – and that is right after Acts 1:8 you read this: Jesus appears to his disciples and tells them, “you’ll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth when I’ve poured my Spirit out on you,” again, in fulfillment of Isaiah, and then Acts chapter 1 ends with this interesting story, starting at verse 15. I am still in chapter 1, this is right at the beginning of the book: “In those days Peter stood up among the Christians [the believers] and said, ‘Friends, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit, through David, foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus.”’ Now, this takes you back to the Gospels. Remember that right before Jesus is crucified and put to death, one of his 12 disciples, Judas, betrayed Jesus and basically is no longer one of the 12. So, the problem is, you’re now left with 11 disciples.

And so, Acts chapter 1 ends with the people choosing one more disciple: it says that they actually cast lots, and lots ended or landed on a certain person named Matthias, and he was disciple number 12. So that, verse 26 of chapter 1 ends and “they cast lots for them, and the lot fell in Matthias, and he was added to the 11 apostles.” So, now you have 12 again. What’s the significance of that story? Why do they need to have 12, and first of
all, you could ask why isn’t 11 enough? Especially since Judas was a bad guy so Jesus could have accomplished his purpose with 11, why was another one necessary? Why did Luke need to record that? What’s going on in Luke emphasizing the fact that the 12th apostle was added? Again, Jesus chose 12 apostles. One of them, Judas, defected, so you end up with 11 at the beginning of Acts – there’s only 11 apostles. Now the author of Acts, makes a point to emphasize that a 12th apostle was added. What do you think the reason for that is? That’s the ideal small group size or what’s going on? Again, what was the significance of the number 12? Why did Jesus choose 12 apostles in the first place?

The 12 apostles represented the 12 tribes of Israel. What Jesus, by gathering 12 apostles, was doing, was saying this is the new people of God. The new people of God no longer revolves around the nation of Israel and the 12 tribes, but the new people of God, including Israel, is now based on Jesus and his apostles. That’s why he chooses 12: it shows this is the new people of God that will bring the fulfillment of God’s true intention for Israel.

So, why in Acts do you have a 12th apostle? We’ll see later on that Paul does seem to think that he’s kind of an addition to the 12, but I take it that Matthias here was one of the original 12 Apostles. This is not a mistake that, “Oh, whoops! We got the wrong guy! Let’s try again,” then they got Paul. Paul himself in his letters seems to think that he’s an addition to the 12. So, I take it that this is legitimate and that this was supposed to happen. But notice part of Isaiah’s promise of restoration is the restoration of God’s people. So, by choosing the 12th apostle, it’s as if the author of Acts wants to make it clear that now Israel is being restored; the people of God are being restored by choosing the 12th apostle. Remember, the apostles represent the 12 tribes of Israel, so it’s necessary for the author of Acts to include the story because, again, he’s demonstrating the prophecy that Isaiah made is coming to fulfillment by the nations are being restored; the nation of Israel is being restored through the choice of the 12 Apostles. So, there had to be 12 because the 12 Apostles correspond to the 12 tribes of Israel. So, again, what’s going on is Acts is saying the promise, Isaiah’s promise, of restoration that starts with the nation, the tribes of Israel
being restored is now being fulfilled but not through national Israel but now through this new people of God, founded on not the 12 restored tribes but the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ.

So, you see, a new people of God is being formed that crosses national boundaries. A new people of God is being formed that does not depend on Jewish identity or obedience to the law but depends solely on faith in the person of Jesus Christ. And again, the author of Acts demonstrates that by having the church choose the 12th apostle. So now the 12 tribes, the restored kingdoms from Isaiah, are now. That’s taking place by a 12th apostle being chosen as, the foundation of this new people of God that now will accomplish the purpose that God intended for his people Israel. But, a people of God that includes Israel but is not limited to Israel includes Gentiles because now the defining factor is no longer national identity or keeping the law. The defining factor is faith in Jesus Christ, and if that’s the case, then Gentiles, as well as Jews, can be part of this new people of God that is founded on the 12 Apostles, not the 12 tribes of Israel.

Alright, just a number of key texts: I want to focus only on three of them, although we’ll look at a couple other elements as well that are unique to Acts. But the first one is Acts chapter 2, which records the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon God’s people who are gathered in Jerusalem. But the key here is that this event is clearly linked again to the Old Testament: in other words, however much it may have been unexpected and it was not a unique, or unprecedented event. It was anticipated in the Old Testament because when Peter has to stand up and defend what’s going on, it says some of the onlookers thought that they were drunk because the people had been filled with the Holy Spirit, and now they were speaking in tongues. Onlookers thought that they were drunk, so Peter has to get up and explain what’s happening, and he explains it by linking it back to the Old Testament.

One of the prophets, Joel, in demonstrating that what is happening is nothing less than what the Old Testament prophesied and anticipated. That is, again, the Old Testament anticipated, as the book of Isaiah did and Ezekiel and Jeremiah and most of the other prophets, that one day God would restore his people and pour out his Spirit and
establish a new covenant with them. Now, Peter is making it clear, and the author of Acts, that this is taking place with the Holy Spirit being poured out on Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem. So that the idea of the Holy Spirit coming upon God’s people – this is not a unique church thing, this is not something that just belongs to the church or that it was new to the author of Acts, but it’s clearly a fulfillment of what was anticipated in the Old Testament. So the Holy Spirit being poured out on God’s people in Acts 2 is simply part of the fulfillment of the New Covenant. Remember, the prophets anticipated the day when God would make a new covenant with his people. The Old Covenant failed because Israel disobeyed, and didn’t keep it, so God would establish a new covenant. Part of the new covenant would be that God would pour out his Spirit upon his people; that now takes place in Acts chapter 2. So, Acts 2 is a very important text because it’s the fulfillment not only of what Jesus promised, remember, back in chapter 1 verse 8 it said they will receive power from on high when they receive the Spirit, and so it’s not only a fulfillment of Jesus’ words, but it’s also a fulfillment of the Old Testament. So because of that Acts 2 is very important. This is the beginning of the restoration and the salvation that was promised in the Old Testament prophets.

Another important text: Acts chapter 10. And we’re jumping ahead several chapters, but Acts chapter 10 – I’ll start reading the story. I won’t read the whole thing, but this is a story of a centurion who was a Roman military person and therefore a Gentile, not a Jew. His name was Cornelius, and so it says, “In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort,” as it was called. “He was a devout man who feared God”. There was a category of people in the first century, along with Jews and Gentiles, known as “God fearers,” and so here’s one of those God fearers. “He was a devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius.’ He stared at him in terror and said, ‘What is it, Lord?’ The angel answered, ‘Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a
certain Simon, who is called Peter. He is lodging with Simon Peter, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.’ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.” So that’s where Peter’s supposed to be.

“About noon the next day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof of his house to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared,” his food was being prepared, “he fell into a trance.” Now, what I take this to mean, the trance is probably a visionary type experience, much like the author of Revelation had. The author of Revelation is in the Spirit and actually ascends to heaven and sees this vision. We’ll talk more about Revelation, obviously, but that’s the kind of trance that’s going on here. “He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In the sheet were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill these and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean you must not make profane or unclean.’ This happened three times, and then the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.”

Now what is going on here? The vision Peter has is of the sheet that contains all these animals that were pronounced unclean according to the Old Testament law. And now, in a vision, Peter sees this, and hears a voice from heaven, probably God, a divine voice, saying that now these animals that under the Old Testament law were pronounced unclean are now clean – that is, you’re free to eat them. What is the purpose of this? You have two different things: on the one hand, you have Cornelius, who is a Gentile centurion, and he sends men to Joppa where Peter is, and then you have this story about Peter having this vision, a vision of these animals that under the Old Testament law, the Mosaic covenant, were declared unclean, and now they are declared clean. Is this really about just satisfying Peter’s hunger? How do these two stories connect? In the story of this Gentile centurion and then the story of Peter, one of Jesus’ apostles, who has this vision of food
that now God declares clean.

You’re right in mentioning the Gentiles because what’s going on here is not just a pronouncement on animals but also on Gentiles as well. So Peter is being shown that the law, the Old Testament law that distinguished Jew and Gentile, can no longer play that role: now the gospel can go out to Gentiles as well as Jews. So by having this vision then, saying that all food is now clean, it’s as if God is also saying now the Gentiles are clean too, and they can now be accepted as equal members of the people of God. That is demonstrated by showing Peter that the Old Testament law no longer divides between Jew and Gentile. It has in a sense been rescinded, and it’s been brought to fulfillment in Christ.

Again, you think about it, the food laws in the Old Testament that forbade Jews from eating certain kinds of food or certain kinds of meat, one of the functions of those laws was it functioned as an identity marker to distinguish the Jews from other nations. And furthermore, think about it – in the early church, where the distinction between Jew and Gentile would often become most apparent – again, think about it – the church is going to start spreading from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In other words, the church is going to start becoming increasingly Gentile. Now, as the church does that, one of the places, one of the times where the distinction between Jew and Gentile would be most acute is when they sat down and ate a meal because Jews would have been forbidden from eating certain kinds of food and meat according to Old Testament law, where Gentiles had no such scruples. So, again, what this vision is doing is demonstrating to Peter that now, with the coming of Christ and all these events that have taken place, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and with the coming of Christ, now Gentiles are pronounced clean, and now Gentiles can become God’s people on an equal footing with Jews. Therefore, the food laws no longer apply; they no longer draw these distinctions between Jew and Gentile, and Peter can feel free to eat. He can sit down and eat with them. He can welcome them; he can preach to them and welcome them as the true people of God. So, chapter 10 plays a very crucial role in the development of the book of Acts.

Again, the purpose of Acts is to demonstrate how the gospel begins. It got its start in
the rather narrow Jewish confines and begins to spread out and embraces lesser and lesser Jewish heritage, that is, more Gentile’s, until it gets to the ends of the earth. As that happens, again, you’re going to confront problems. Remember the question that most Jews were asking: who are the true people of God? What does it mean to be God’s people? It means that I live life as a Jew, that is, I embrace the laws of Moses. For males, that meant being circumcised; for everyone, that meant observing the food laws, observing the Sabbath, et cetera. The question is, as the church becomes more and more Gentile, that is, people that do not observe the law, what is required of them? Must they keep the law in order to be God’s people?

This vision is a reminder to people, to Peter: no, the law no longer plays a role in defining who the people of God are. The well-known Jewish identity markers, such as circumcision, eating certain meats, keeping the Sabbath – no longer do those play a role in defining who the people of God are. That’s the purpose of this vision that Peter has. In declaring all foods clean, the law no longer plays a role in determining who God’s people are. But now Gentiles are clean as well and can be accepted as God’s true people.

The next important text in Acts is the well-known Jerusalem Council. In fact, it may be the most crucial text in the book of Acts, and I do want you to know this date: A.D. 70. You need to know A.D. 70 because that’s when the Temple was destroyed. I’m not sure how I got that in there. Anyway, the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 50): be able to connect that with Acts chapter 15. Now, what’s important about the Jerusalem Council, again, is this question about what is required to become the true people of God. Who are the true people of God? Is the Law of Moses, is observance of the Law of Moses, and living life as a Jew necessary for becoming God’s people? And again, especially for males, that would’ve meant circumcision as the sign of the covenant that God gave all the way back to Abraham and Moses, the sign of belonging to God’s covenant people. So that’s the same issue that was being addressed in chapter 10, but now it comes to a head so that the early church calls kind of the first council where they are going to discuss this and, in a sense, render a decision: that is, who are the true people of God? What is required to belong to
God’s people? The problem is when you start reading Acts chapter 15, here’s how it begins: “Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching other Christians, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” So, that was the issue: circumcision. The issue is not just circumcision for males, that was simply a part of the sign that you adopted the entire Mosaic Law and that you were going to obey the Law of Moses. So the question: is obedience to the Law of Moses necessary to belong to God’s people and to be saved?

“And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and elders. “and they were sent there on their way by the church and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria they reported the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the believers when they came to Jerusalem. They were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belong to the sect of the Pharisee stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised in order to keep the Law of Moses.’” So again, they hear these reports of all the Gentiles, such as Cornelius, coming to Christ and responding to the gospel from Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the gospel that the apostles were preaching, and the Pharisees were saying, “That’s not enough. They must also live according to the Old Testament law. They must also submit to the Law of Moses, for males that means undergoing circumcision, for everybody observing the Sabbath and food laws; and the other laws that clearly marked one out as a Jew as belonging to God’s people.

And for that reason, the Council of Jerusalem meets together and basically renders a decision on this, although, again, the church did not wake up on the next day and everything was fine. It still took a while for this to be worked out. Later on in the book of Galatians, Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we’re even going to see that Peter didn’t carry through all the time, that Peter even acted, inconsistently with the decision of the Jerusalem Council. But the answer to the question: do people, especially Gentiles –have to submit to
the Law of Moses in order to become God’s people, in order to be saved? The agreed-upon answer was: no, they do not, faith in Jesus Christ was enough to render one a true member of God’s people and for that person to be saved. So that was the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council. The church didn’t wake up the next morning and everything was fine and everybody adopted that and everything went smoothly from then on. There was still opposition and misunderstanding and some debate, but it seems that the decision of the Jerusalem Council won the day. Therefore, the book of Acts, the author, spends a lot of time describing it, and, as I said, it’s probably the most crucial event in the book of Acts.

So, the result should be that this event that took place in Acts 2 with the pouring out of the Spirit, that began to happen in subsequent places, Gentile territory, and so the conclusion, of this should be those were genuine experiences. That is, Gentiles, then, should be received and welcomed and accepted as the true people of God, even though they do not submit to the Law of Moses, such as being circumcised, observing food laws, et cetera.

That's a really good question; I don’t want to pass, I don’t want to ignore that question, but I want to spend more time talking about that when we get Galatians because it’s the same issue. Are there certain portions of the law – did Jesus intend for the entire law to be set aside? Were there certain portions of it that people still obeyed? Some Christians have distinguished between moral and ceremonial law. Law that was ceremonial, dealing with sacrifices and circumcision, food laws, et cetera, was set aside. Moral law, like don’t kill, don’t murder, et cetera – that is still binding. I want to return to that issue when we get to the book of Galatians because it does, I think, speak very clearly to the role of the law in the life of God’s people.

Remember, to go back to Matthew, if you remember when we talked about the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 begins with the statement of Jesus. He says, “‘I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.’” What Jesus meant, is not that he came to obey it perfectly, although I agree, he did that, but Jesus is basically
saying that “I am what the law pointed to – my life and ministry and teaching is what the law really pointed to.” So, that does raise a question that, again, I think Galatians will help answer as well, that probably upset a lot of Jews as well. If Gentiles don’t have to submit to the Law of Moses, then what constitutes their moral guidance? Or, what is the standard of obedience if they don’t have the Law of Moses to guide them? The book of Galatians will answer that as well. So, I do want to bring that question up. What part of the law, of the Old Testament law, if any, are we supposed to obey? Is there any of it that’s still in force or binding? Or are parts of it still binding and other parts aren’t? If so, how do we decide that? That’s a very good question. I’m going to argue when we get there that, according to Paul, I think the entire Mosaic Law is no longer binding on Christians. I think he’s fairly clear, but he also is clear that that doesn’t mean that we can do whatever we want and that we’re not subject to any commands. It doesn’t mean that we have no moral guidance whatsoever, and Paul will address that issue as well.

Alright, those are the three main texts. I want to look at a couple of other unique things about Acts, but are there any questions on any of these texts? The other thing I want to mention is what happens in Acts chapter 2 actually happens: that is, the Holy Spirit being poured out, people speaking in tongues, et cetera. This gets repeated numerous times throughout Acts, again, as if the author wants to say what happened in Jerusalem to Jesus’ apostles and other followers now gets replicated. But as the gospel moves outside of Jewish territory into lesser and lesser Jewish territories, into more Gentile territories, so what happened to the Jews in Acts 2 gets repeated with the Gentiles several more times throughout the book of Acts, so that often you have the idea that the only conclusion is the Gentiles must be the people of God because the same thing happened to them as what happened in Acts 2 to Jesus’ apostles and the followers. So the Gentiles must be God’s people, too, because the same thing is happening to them.

Alright, two features of the book of Acts that I want to focus on is what are often called the missionary travels or journeys of Paul that occupy a large segment of the book of Acts, and I expect you to copy this whole map – no, I don’t, I’m just kidding. I just want
to show you, I just want to demonstrate how the book of Acts, even Paul's missionary journeys, fit this kind of concentric structure of Acts. So, here you have Jerusalem, kind of the starting point, and this red dotted line, which you can’t see very well, is Paul’s first missionary journey. You can see it’s not really extensive but it clearly goes into Gentile territory. So, here’s the land of Palestine and Jerusalem, and so Paul’s first missionary journey takes him well into Gentile territory.

This purple line, then, represents the second missionary journey of Paul. So there’s three of them in Acts. The second missionary journey, as you can see, takes him over into Greece and even further removed from Jerusalem, and then the third missionary journey is this green line also takes him to some of the same territories. But clearly this fits the pattern of Acts, for the gospel is now spreading far beyond Jerusalem to embrace peoples that are not Jewish at all.

Finally, this orange line ends with Paul in Rome, which is where the Book of Acts ends. There’s been a lot of questions in relationship to this. Some have wondered why Acts ends with Paul in Rome. Probably because that’s all that Acts needs to do: it just needs to show that Paul got to Rome to demonstrate the fulfillment of Isaiah – that the gospel would reach the ends of the earth. It has taken place with Paul reaching Rome. Now, that that happens, Acts ends its narrative right there. So, this just shows you the extent of Paul’s travels, and much of the book of Acts I think chapter 9 starts Paul’s conversion, much of the rest of the book of Acts focuses on Paul and his journeys.

Let me say two things about them: number one is that, in a sense, these are probably not – the label journeys is not entirely accurate because the picture is not so much of Paul taking a trip, and he ends up back home, although that’s part of it. When you read Acts carefully, you’ll note that he actually took up residence in a number of these cities for up to a year and a half or two years. So, he would actually buy a home and take up residence, even set up business, and stay for some time in some of these cities. At other times and other cities, he was there much shorter. One of the cities that we’ll talk about later in connection with one of Paul’s letters, he was driven out by a lynch mob because they were
so upset with him, but basically, Paul’s philosophy was to go to one of these cities, and he would stay as long as was necessary to establish a new community, a church, and then he would move on to another one. So, these are probably not best labeled “journeys”, but there’s probably not a better word, so that’s the one we’ll use.

The second thing to note about these travels are most of these cities that Paul visits on these journeys are cities that Paul will write letters to that we find in the rest of the New Testament. As we said, the book of Acts provides a wonderful bridge between the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. So, we have Paul visiting cities like Ephesus, and we have him visiting cities like Corinth and a number of other cities. We have Paul visiting cities that end up being referred to in the letters of Paul later on in the New Testament. So, again, Acts provides an introduction to the rest of the New Testament in some respects, and, as we said, it also introduces, other key features like Peter – we have letters of Peter – some other key figures we find in the rest of the New Testament as well.

One other key theme is the role of the Holy Spirit in Acts. Much like Luke, we said one of the key themes in Luke was the Holy Spirit, and that gets picked up in Acts as well, except now with Acts, there’s two things to recognize. First of all, the Holy Spirit in Acts plays a role in orchestrating a number of the events, throughout the book of Acts, arranging and bringing people to certain places. So, the Holy Spirit plays a very active role in what goes on in the book to the extent that some suggest that the better term for the book is not Acts of the Apostles but Acts of the Holy Spirit. There may be some truth to that. But second, as we’ve already said, the mention of the Holy Spirit throughout Acts is always to be understood as the presence of the New Covenant Holy Spirit that was promised in the Old Testament. So remember, the presence of the Holy Spirit in Acts is not something brand-new or something that is Christian but instead it’s something – the presence of the Holy Spirit – is what was promised and prophesied in the Old Testament in relationship to the coming New Covenant that God would one day restore or enact with his people. Now, with the presence of the Holy Spirit in Acts, the New Covenant has already been fulfilled.

Alright, one more thing to say about Acts, and that is Acts raises a number of
questions regarding how we read it: that is, its importance. So, what’s so important about the book of Acts? And how are we supposed to read it? And, particularly, how do we apply it? What I have in mind is how do we – as we move through the book of Acts, what do we do with these passages that portray miraculous signs and wonders taking place? For example, in Acts chapter 2, it seems like everyone present speaks in tongues, and the question is: when you read Acts and read things like this, how are we to read this and apply this? Are we to take these as normative for our experience today or in some other way?

As an example of that, I want to read Acts chapter 8. As the gospel’s beginning to spread out beyond Jerusalem, in chapter 8, here’s what we read: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria” – so here’s the gospel going into Samaria – “When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.” Keep that in mind. It’s interesting – why did they choose Peter and John? “The two of them went down and prayed for them,” for the Samaritans who had accepted the gospel, “prayed that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for as yet, the Spirit had not come upon any of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.” And I’ll stop there. There is more to the story and some other interesting things going on Chapter 8, but I want to stop there.

So, again, as the gospel spreads throughout Acts, you find, for example, starting with Acts chapter 2, the Holy Spirit’s poured out and the people speak in tongues as a demonstration that they have received the Holy Spirit as a demonstration in fulfillment of the Old Testament that the New Covenant salvation has now come to them. And the Spirit has now been poured out, and they speak in tongues, and sometimes all these interesting things, these signs and wonders occur. The question then becomes, what are we supposed to make of that? I mean, when we read the book of Acts, are we to read it in a way that we see it as describing a rather normative experience, so that we should read the book of Acts expecting that that’s how it’s going to happen to us and that’s how it should happen?
First of all, let me say something about this phrase “signs and wonders.” First of all, as I already said, the “signs and wonders” testify, such as tongues and healings and miraculous events, they seem to function to testify to the presence of the Holy Spirit in this New Covenant salvation. So, as the Holy Spirit is poured out upon people when they respond to the gospel and as that spreads to various territories less and less Jewish, these signs and wonders accompany that perhaps as a demonstration that the same thing that happened in Acts 2 to the Jews is now happening to Gentiles as well. So, these signs and wonders accompany the spread of the gospel as it moves out to territories where it has not been, it’s demonstrated the presence of the gospel, and the Holy Spirit is demonstrated by these signs and wonders. The other thing, too, is – I’m also convinced of the signs and wonders, probably, goes back to the Old Testament. It recalls the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and the signs and wonders, the miraculous things such as crossing the Red Sea, and the miraculous provision of manna, et cetera, all those things accompany God’s people as they went through the wilderness, so I also think of signs and wonders as Old Testament background to it as well.

But the question is, are these signs and wonders when we read through the book of Acts – how are we to treat these events? Again, Acts is full of examples like we find in Acts chapter 8. The problem is, when you read through Acts, there doesn’t seem to be consistency all the time: sometimes people receive the Holy Spirit immediately when they respond to the gospel, sometimes that’s accompanied by speaking in tongues and other miraculous signs, sometimes it’s not. In Acts chapter 8, the people respond to the gospel, but they don’t receive the Holy Spirit right away. So, the problem is that there doesn’t seem to be a lot of consistency throughout Acts. In other words, it doesn’t happen the same way all the time. So, how do we answer this question: is Acts normative or descriptive? That is: is Acts establishing a pattern that must be true or that always happens? That would be normative. Is Acts describing the norm that whenever the gospel spreads or someone responds in faith to Jesus Christ that this is what must happen? Or is it descriptive? Is Acts more interested not in saying “this is how it has to happen,”
but just saying “this is the way it happened”? It’s simply describing how the gospel spread to lesser and lesser Jewish territories and it’s simply here’s what happened. It’s not trying to give us a model or pattern for the way it has to be.

In my opinion, I wonder if part of the answer’s not both. I admit, sometimes I like to straddle the fence. I don’t have to make a decision, but sometimes I think that’s legitimate, and here’s an instance. In other words, I think the book of Acts does call on God’s people to expect God to work in miraculous ways as his gospel spreads to different people. Yet, at the same time, Acts doesn’t necessarily tell us what that has to look like, and I think that’s natural from reading Acts. The fact that it doesn’t happen the same way every time, I think Acts is primarily describing how the gospel spreads to lesser and lesser Jewish territories. The normative part is I think that yes, God does and can work in miraculous ways that accompany the spread of his gospel, but the descriptive part is Acts is not telling us what that has to look like or how that has to happen every time. That’s why sometimes when people respond to the gospel they speak in tongues and other times they don’t. In Acts 8, the people respond to the gospel, yet they don’t receive the Spirit right away, whereas in other places, people receive the Spirit right away. Sometimes they lay hands on them, sometimes they don’t. So again, Acts is descriptive in that sense: it’s not trying to tell us exactly how God’s Spirit has to work and move as the New Covenant salvation spreads to be embraced by different people.

Now, in light of that, let’s look at Acts again. What can we explain as we read Acts and can we explain why it happened the way it did? In other words, again, the order, in comparison to Acts 2, the order is rather unique: the people have responded to the gospel, they’ve even been baptized, yet they have not received the Spirit, and Peter and John have to go to the people and lay their hands on them so that they’ll receive the Spirit. Why you think that if this is not giving a norm and saying this is how it has to happen because, read some of the other text – sometimes the Spirit comes on people when their hands aren’t laid on them, sometimes they speak in tongues, sometimes it doesn’t say they speak in tongues – but can we explain what’s going on in this text? Two things: why do you think the Spirit
did not come upon these Christians in Acts 8 until two apostles got there, and why do you think it was Peter and John? Do they have to lay their hands on them? In other words, why do you think it happened the way it did here in Acts 8?

Okay, that’s very interesting. So here are two apostles touching something that was formerly unclean, namely, the Samaritans. Don’t miss that: they go down to Samaria to Samaritans who have presumably responded to the gospel. Now they physically touch them and lay hands on them. Now they’re physically touching persons that would have been considered unclean by most Jews because, again, we talked about the relationship between Jew and Samaritans was not a good one. They would have been – according to the Gospel of Luke, social outcasts. So, why do you think it’s important that the coming of the Spirit was delayed until Peter and John got there and could lay hands on them?

Think about it – these are Samaritans. Why didn’t they receive the Spirit immediately until Peter and John, two of the most important – remember the role Peter has played in the Gospels and now in Acts – he’s the spokesperson that got up in Acts 2 and explained what was going on. Remember these are Samaritans, why don’t they receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John, two of the most well-known apostles from Jerusalem, get there and lay their hands on them? So what? Again, how is that significant from the standpoint that these are Samaritans? The fact that they’re Samaritans – why was this necessary? What would have happened if the Samaritans would have received the Holy Spirit as soon as they believed, and then the word spreads out: the Samaritans have received the Holy Spirit, too? What would’ve been the response of most of the people, most of the Jewish Christians? “No way, that’s not legit! These are disgusting Samaritans.”

So, by delaying the coming of the Spirit until Peter and John could get there and lay hands on them, now there is indisputable proof. No one can argue with Peter and John, who laid hands on them and witnessed this, that the Samaritans, too, have received the Holy Spirit. So again, you see different things happening as the gospel begins to cross racial and cultural barriers and spread to lesser Jewish territories. In this case, it was
necessary for the Holy Spirit to be withheld until Peter and John could get there so that there can be no dispute that these “disgusting Samaritans” also were truly God’s people and had received the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Jewish Christians did in Acts chapter 2.