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#64 Questions on the Acts of the Apostles

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Is church life in Acts prescriptive for us today? What guidance does Acts give about baptism? How should we understand the signs and wonders in Acts? Tom responds to these and more questions from participants on the NT Wright Online video course on The Acts Of The Apostles.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NT-Rite Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello there and welcome back. I'm Justin Briley.

Premia's theology and apologetics editor, and the show is brought to you by Premiere, SBCK and NT-Rite online. NT-Rite is senior research fellow at Wickliffe Hall, Oxford University, the former Bishop of Durham, and a multi-published Bible scholar. This is the podcast where he answers the questions that you send in.

Well, today is a special edition of the show, brought to you in partnership with NT-Rite Online, where you can access Tom's video teaching courses. More on that in a moment.

Just a reminder as well, we're only a week out now from our two special NT-Rite events.

On Thursday the 13th of May, you can be part of the live stream conversation that I'm hosting between Tom and cultural commentator Douglas Murray on identity, myth and miracles. Can we find a story to live by in a post-Christian world? You can go to thebigconversation.show for more on that. Then just two days later, Tom will be my special guest at Unbelievable the Conference 2021.

That's on Saturday the 15th of May. Our theme is how to tell the greatest story ever told. You can learn how to present the case for faith to today's generation along with other wonderful contributors to this year's conference.

There's also going to be a live edition of this show, the Ask NT-Rite Anything podcast to round off the whole day. You can attend from anywhere in the world from the comfort of your own home. Unbelievable.live is the link you're looking for to register.

And all of those links are available in the info with today's show, including how to get in touch and leave a question for the show yourself.

[MUSIC] Well, as I said today's show will actually feature Tom answering questions on the book of Acts that he gave as part of a Q&A for NT-Rite online who deliver Tom's video teaching courses. Now, one of their popular courses is based on the acts of the apostles.

And if you'd like access to the full video teaching course, we've actually a special listener discount for you in the info with today's podcast. So just click on the link for that and you'll be able to access that. But let's start with the first question.

Is the book of Acts prescriptive or descriptive for how the church should operate today?

[MUSIC] As we read the book of Acts, we see all sorts of things going on, which nobody so far as I know would say must be mandatory for the church ever afterwards. For instance, when Paul wants to get from the Middle East to Rome, he goes by boat, round by the Turkish coast, by Cyprus, gets shipwrecked on Malta, and so on. Nobody would suggest that a Christian leader making the same journey today would, for anything other than nostalgic or touristic reasons, be bound to do the same thing.

You'd just get on a plane at Tel Aviv and land in Rome. And there must be many other things like that to do with the lifestyle of the first century, what was possible and not possible then, which we just cheerfully ignore. And many of us would say that the same is true for some of the extraordinary things that happen in Acts, like when Ananias and Saphira cheat by lying about the money that they've given to the church, and then Peter comes in and basically strikes them dead.

I suspect that there are very few churches which would say anything other than, "No, we're not going to do that now." However, badly people may have behaved. And

likewise, it might extend to other things like when Paul in Ephesus has handkerchiefs brought to touch his body and then to touch sick people. The way Luke tells that story implies that this is very unusual and did not normally happen.

It hadn't happened before with Paul or anyone else, and it doesn't seem to have happened afterwards. So these things are not told in order that we should slavishly imitate every last detail, nor indeed so that we should say that just because something isn't mentioned there, that means we should never do it. There's all sorts of things.

For instance, obvious one, the use of musical instruments in worship. We don't know whether they use musical instruments. It never says so.

So some Christians have said, "Therefore, we shouldn't use musical instruments, but it seems to me with the whole musical tradition of the Old Testament behind us that actually there's every reason to suppose that any musical talents that were there would have been brought gladly to God in worship," and so on and so on. There are lots of things about the organization of the church. Paul was planting churches by starting off in the synagogues.

Now, that would mean something very different if people began to do that today to what he did and so on and so on, so that we have to be very careful about just saying, "Okay, we pick up acts and put it down in the 21st century as a template. You just can't do it like that." However, acts is all about the lordship of the ascended Jesus. That hasn't changed.

Acts is all about the inauguration of the kingdom of God and about the willingness of people through prayer, fasting, holiness, scripture study, to do whatever the Spirit directs them to in their mission, in their life together, and so on. That hasn't changed. Acts is all about the foundation of the church in general and of individual churches as places where the living God comes to dwell as a new temple.

That hasn't changed and we ought to pursue it more than we usually do. Acts is all about the struggle for unity in the church, which many contemporary churches have largely given up, but we shouldn't have done. It's all about the necessity of holiness and of the example of Christian leaders, and again and again Christian leaders often don't take that seriously enough.

So there are many, many ways in which acts ought to be paradigmatic, but of course this takes wisdom and it's up to each individual church, each individual preacher, Christian leader, that in studying this book to wrestle together with the questions, what are the things where we say, "Yes, this is our story and we are going to do it the same way." And what are the things where we say, "Well, that was how the whole thing got started, but as with any organization, the way you start something and the way you carry it on may quite appropriately not be the same. It's not the same sort of process or purpose." So I

think when we think of whether Acts is merely descriptive of events in the first century or totally prescriptive for us in our day, I think it's a false either or it is both, but as with everything in scripture it takes wisdom and discernment to see how that's going to work out. The second question being asked about the book of Acts is what guidance does Acts give about baptism, what it means and how to do it? So what guidance does Acts give about baptism, about what it means, about how to do it and so on? It seems to me that Acts in line with the whole of the New Testament is very clear about the meaning of baptism.

Baptism goes back in the early Christian movement to John's baptism. There's no sense that all the early followers of Jesus who'd been with him during his ministry were rebaptized after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. No, there was one baptism from John the Baptist onwards though it then got a whole new raft of meaning with Jesus.

And as we see in Paul, there's every reason to suppose this is going on in Acts as well. Baptism has now been marked out as the Jesus Mark. Jesus himself underwent John's baptism and then his death and resurrection.

Jesus spoke of as a baptism that he had to undergo. And baptism itself of course looked back to the Exodus and behind the Exodus to creation where the Spirit of God moved upon the waters to bring new life to birth and then in the Exodus when they came through the waters from slavery to freedom. All of these great Israelite stories now shape what baptism meant when John the Baptist said it's time for God to do the new thing and when the early Christians said God just has done the new thing and is now doing it with you too.

So baptism meant all of that. This great story reaching its fulfillment in Jesus' death and resurrection. There's no reason to suppose that in Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament, it leaves all that wonderful world of meaning behind.

There are of course many questions that have been raised, not least in the Western Church over the last three or four hundred years, as to how precisely you should baptize and who you should baptize. The early Church seemed to have been quite relaxed about this. Think of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch.

They're just going along in the chariot and the Ethiopian eunuch, who's just wonderfully come to faith through the exposition of Isaiah, sees that there's some water. We're not told whether it's a river or a pond or a lake and Acts isn't concerned about what precisely it is. He and Philip go down into the water.

Philip baptizes him and he's on his way. Now, I as a bishop would want to say to somebody today, it would be better if you were baptized in a church service. It would be better if we had witnesses, it would be better if the larger church could gather together to celebrate this event.

Acts seems to be cheerful about not needing to do that. Like the Philippian jailer in Acts 16, the prison doors burst open with the earthquake. The jail is about to commit suicide.

Paul says, "Don't do that. Trust in Jesus and you and your household will be saved and they all believe and they are baptized." And Luke doesn't specify whether the household was all people over the age of 30 or whether most of them, as is much more likely, were under the age of 15 or what. It's a household.

They're a family. They're going to become a Christian family. They all get baptized.

That raises all sorts of controversial issues to which Acts actually doesn't give the answer. Should you baptize small infants, should you baptize people who can say at least something of an expression of faith, most of the church for most of its history has said, "Acts just opens the way to saying we baptize families when the family has declared its faith." Our over individualized Western readings may be a problem here. As to the mode, again, nothing is specifically said about how it's got to be running water or what happens if it's only still water or whatever.

They seem to have been quite cheerful about that. So the meaning is the crucial thing. And the meaning is that these people are now defined in God's sight and in the world's sight as people who have shared the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and are therefore to be seen as a new family.

And here's question number three. It's how do we reflect today upon the signs and wonders performed by the apostles in Acts? So we find in Acts all sorts of things that they called and that we sometimes called signs and wonders associated with the apostles. How do we reflect on that today? There is a problem here because we in the modern Western world have tended to use this blessed word "miracle." And within the 18th century and then the early 19th century in the West, people have understood the word "miracle" in terms of a God who is normally absent from the world and who sometimes reaches in and does something extraordinary and then, as it were, goes away again.

And so people ask, "Do you believe in miracles?" meaning, "Do you believe that that sort of thing happens?" I think the early Christians would have said, "What a very odd way to think about God. If God is the Creator, if God is the one we know in Jesus and by the Spirit, He is always present. He is always active.

He is in the very breath we breathe. And sometimes, He does stuff that we didn't expect. So actually in the New Testament, there isn't one word that translates as our word "miracle." And actually, there is no idea of this absent God who sometimes reaches in.

That's the first thing to get out of the way, that the way we have usually discussed this stuff is often very, very misleading. Having said that, and after half a lifetime, more than

half a lifetime, as a pastor and working with people and churches and individuals and so on, I want to say, God can do and often does do extraordinary things in terms of healing, in terms of special guidance, in terms of people having a vivid dream, which they then realize means they've got to go and do something about something right now, or whatever it is. And God can do this in all kinds of ways.

He is God. He can do whatever he likes. The Holy Spirit can nudge people this way or breathe a message into their heart and imagination some other way.

And often that happens quite softly and quietly and in the ordinary course of a day, without it seeming to be a particular sign or a wonder. But often when that happens, if people then obey the sudden strange nudge, then they find that something really extraordinary has happened, or they just happen to be in the right place at the right time to help somebody who really needs that help or whatever. So I would see a complete continuum all the way from somebody whom the doctors have given up and said, this person is about to die.

There's nothing to be done for them, who then after prayer, perhaps anointing with oil, such a person is then extraordinarily healed and the doctors say, we have no idea how that happened. I know of such cases firsthand. I suspect many people watching this will likewise.

Equally, as in Acts, there are many times when we want that to happen and it doesn't. I often think about Acts 12, what a strange chapter it is. It begins with Herod killing James the brother of John with the sword and it ends with Peter in jail and Herod's going to kill him too, but the church is praying and they've been praying for James as well.

But Peter gets out of jail and is able to go off and continue his work as a church planter and teacher and as an apostle at large. If I was James' mother or even his brother, I think I wouldn't like Acts chapter 12 very much. We've got signs and wonders at the end here, an extraordinary story about Peter getting out of jail.

Why didn't something like that happen for James? That is part of the mystery, which is a mystery of all of Scripture, all of Christian life, as it was all of ancient Israel's life. And Acts presents us with that mystery and says, yes, this is how it is. Signs and wonders do happen, but they're not readily available on tap, as it were.

They grow out of the prayerful, wise, witnessing life of the church. And it keeps us humble. We don't control these things.

It's up to God and God is very mysterious. And even when we think we have an inside track on some of the things that God's doing, one of the messages of Acts, which is as true today as it was then, is that actually God remains sovereign over all this. And often what happens to people, to situations, to nations, to political questions and situations is

not in our control.

It's God's business. And on that, I think we and Acts are basically on the same page. Our final question on Acts for today's show, what is the relationship of Galatians with the Jerusalem Council? So what is the relationship of Galatians with the Jerusalem Council? Historically, in modern scholarship, there have been two views on this.

Perhaps the majority in Germany and in some parts of America has been to say that Galatians chapter 2 verses 1 to 10 is Paul's own account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. And if you take that view, then all sorts of things follow about the dating of Galatians, perhaps about the destination of Galatians, and about the fact that Galatians 2, 1 to 10 really doesn't seem to be telling the same story at all as what we find in Acts chapter 15. It has different sets of questions, different results, and so on.

That's why I and many scholars both in Britain and in other parts of Europe and around the world, going back not least to great scholars a century ago like William Ramsey and backed up, for instance, by somebody like Stephen Mitchell, the great current authority on Anatolia that's on ancient Turkey, have said no, the letter to Galatians is written to the churches in South Galatia, that's Antioch, Lister, Derby, and Iconium, and it is almost certainly written before the Jerusalem Council, so that Acts chapter 15 hasn't yet happened when Paul is writing Galatians, but obviously the same issues as to whether Gentile Christians have to get circumcised are very much in the air and on the table, and so that Galatians 2, 1 to 10, then refers not to the Jerusalem Council, but to the previous visit that Paul and Barnabas had made to Jerusalem at the end of Acts 11, the so-called famine visit, when they hear that there is a famine coming and so they collect money in Antioch and they take it to Jerusalem, and this fits not least because of what is said in Galatians 2 verses 9 and 10, all the all that they asked was that we would remember the poor, which I was eager to do, so that's the view that I have taken in my work both on Paul and on Acts. It isn't of course complete like almost everything in ancient history, there is still a little bit of wiggle room, but it seems to me that to line up Galatians 2, 1 to 10 with Acts 15 is to make a fundamental mistake historically and about both of those documents. Well it's been a bit different today to the usual podcast.

You've been listening to Tom's responses to a number of questions sent in by participants on the anti-write online video course on the Acts of the Apostles. And we'll hear more questions and Tom's responses on next week's podcast. And again, if you'd like access to the full video teaching course on the Acts of the Apostles, we've a special listener discount for you in the info with today's podcast, so do check that out.

Don't forget as well to book your place for Unbelievable the Conference, this Saturday the 15th of May, Unbelievable.live. And if you can join us for the curtain razor on Thursday the 13th May, the livestream conversation with Douglas Murray, we'd love to see you for that as well. All the links are with today's show for now. God bless and see

you next time.