How To Study The Bible (#23)
Understanding Acts

This material taken from my personal notes of the text How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, Third Edition - Caveat: S/F are dismissive of pattern/restoration theology. Read with that in mind.)

Chapter Six - Acts:
The Question of Historical Precedent

Introduction
1. Most people do not read Acts in the same way they read Judges or Samuel.
2. When we read Old Testament narratives we tend to moralize, allegorize, personalize, etc.
3. We do not usually think of Old Testament narratives as paradigms for Christian behavior or church life.
4. While we do not usually think of Old Testament history as setting biblical precedence, that’s exactly the way we read the book of Acts. We assume that it is the history of the early church, as well as the normative model for the church at all times.
5. S/F assume that this is a hermeneutical difficulty.
6. “Many sectors of evangelical Protestantism had a “restoration” mentality.” (108)
7. “In fact it is our lack of hermeneutical precision as to what Acts is trying to teach that has led to a lot of the division one finds in the church. Such diverse practices as the baptism of infants or believers only, congregational and Episcopal church polity, the necessity of observing the Lord’s supper every Sunday, the choice of deacons by congregational vote, the selling of possessions and having all things in common, and even ritual snake handling (!) have been supported in whole or in part on the basis of Acts.” (108)
8. The main purpose of this chapter is to offer hermeneutical suggestions for the problems of biblical precedent, especially in Acts.
9. The authors do not believe that Luke’s intention, which is the intention of the Holy Spirit, lends itself to pattern theology.

The Exegesis of Acts
1. S/F assume that though Acts is a very readable book, it is a difficult book for group Bible study,...
11. S/F assume that discovering Luke’s intent can be difficult because we do not know who Theophilus, why Luke wrote him, and because Luke’s interests are varied. They maintain that his interest must be always kept in mind as we read/exegete Acts, noting both the what and the why of everything, with the what chronologically/logically prior.

The First Step
1. Read the book of Acts in one sitting, making observations and asking questions. [jla-we should do this with every book of the Bible.]
2. Make mental notes of such things as key people and places, recurring motifs, and natural divisions of the book.
3. Review and skim read, and jot down with (verse) references your prior observations.
5. Because Acts is unique S/F will be more specific in guiding our reading and study.

Acts: An Overview
1. Note first the natural divisions as Luke presents them.
2. That division might occur in this way (topically, around two main characters): Luke’s interest in Peter (1-12); Luke’s interest in Paul (13-28)
3. Or it might appear geographically according to the spread of the gospel (1:8) first to Jerusalem (1-7), then to Samaria and Judea (10-11) and finally, to the rest of the world (11-28)
4. S/F see another series of clues in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:4; 19:20 [“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7); “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” (Acts 9:31); “But the word of God grew and multiplied.” (Acts 12:24); “And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.” (Acts 16:4); “So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.” (Acts 19:20)]
5. S/F suggest that summary statements seem to pause for a moment before taking off in a new direction of some kind.
6. They assume, then, that Acts is composed of six sections of the narrative given the demonstrated continual forward movement from its Jewish setting in Jerusalem, ultimately ending in Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal (111).
7. Those six sections are:
   a. 1:1-6:7 - primitive Jerusalem church, everything is Jewish
   b. 6:8-9:31 - first geographical expansion, by Hellenists, to Samaritans
   c. 9:32-12:24 - first Gentiles (Cornelius), Antioch (Gentile center)
   d. 12:25-16:5 - first geographical expansion in Gentile world, council to keep working among Gentiles
   e. 16:6-19:20 - further westward expansion in Gentile world, Jews rejecting and Gentiles accepting the gospel
   f. 19:21-28:30 - Paul, and the gospel, moves to Rome

Luke’s Purpose
1. S/F make the key to understanding Acts Luke’s interest in the movement of the gospel. Any statement of purpose that does not include this Gentile mission will have missed the point of the book, they claim. (111-112)
2. This movement is proven by what Luke does not tell us: no biography of the apostles, once the movement to Gentiles get underway, Peter drops from the scene
3. There is no other geographical expansion except the one from Jerusalem to Rome. Other areas are simply not included.
4. Luke’s interest does not seem to be standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity. Only two elements are usually included in conversions: gift of the Spirit and water baptism, but without regard to order. The authors see no specific example being set forth as a model Christian experience.
5. They believe that much of Acts is to serve as a model, but not in the specifics as much as in the overall picture. (114) The emphasis is on the joy of the expansion, and on the particulars that prompted it.

An Exegetical Sampling
2. 6:1-7 (ministry of the seven among the widows)
   a. The authors see this section as a transition between the first and second panels of movement from Jerusalem toward Rome.
   b. There is also the tension that exists between the Hebrews and the Greeks.
   c. The background given on page 115 is simply for the purpose of setting the scene for the first expansion of the church outside his Jerusalem base (last lines on page.)
   d. 8:1-25 (Philip among the Samaritans)
      i. S/F see the primary focus as the mission to Samaria, specifically as carried out by a Hellenist (one of the seven in Acts 6) ... And all of this is part of the expansion from Jerusalem to Rome
      ii. They further note that this mission had both divine and apostolic approval (spiritual gifts given by apostles demonstrates that)
      iii. See their discussion on what/when/why Samaritans received different “measures” of the spirit

The Hermeneutics of Acts
1. The primary question of this chapter: how did the narratives of Acts, or any other narratives, function as precedents?
2. Does Acts describe the early church as well as serve as the norm of the church at all times?
3. How do you establish this, if it is true?
4. Part of the problem, is that most biblical Christians tend to treat precedent as normative authority to some degree or another, but seldom consistently so.

Some General Principles
1. We must learn to differentiate between what happened in the early church, versus what must happen in the continuing church.
2. Notice this assumption: unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described is not functioning in a normative, obligatory, way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.
3. Note the following three categories of doctrinal statements:
   a. Christian theology, what we believe
   b. Christian ethics, how we should live
   c. Christian experience and practice, what we do (jla - this must be viewed as overlapping with both a. and b.)
   d. These doctrines are known on two levels, primary and secondary
      i. Primary doctrinal statements come from explicit propositions or imperatives
      ii. Secondary doctrinal statements are derived only incidentally, by implication or by precedent (jla - S/F apparently fail to grasp the import of implication as being on par with explicit statements)
4. The authors contend that most everything Christians derived from the biblical text is in the third category, Christian experience or practice, and always at the secondary, that is implicit, level.
5. Note the discussion at the bottom of page 119-120 relative to the observance of the Lord’s supper, the practice of baptism and the day of assembly.
6. “It is a general maxim of hermeneutics that God’s word is to be found in the intent of the Scripture.”
7. They assume that Luke’s broader intent was showing how the church emerged as a chiefly Gentile, world wide phenomenon, and how the Holy Spirit provides for universal salvation based on grace alone (120)
8. They assume that the recurring motif that nothing could hinder the spread of the Gospel makes this a model for understanding Acts.
9. They do not believe that the specific details in these narratives should be seen as normative models. They view them as incidental to the main point of the narrative, and because of ambiguous details they assume they see, not central to the narrative itself. (120)

10. Note the following principles regarding the hermeneutics of historical narrative:
   a. Acts may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what the narrative was intended to teach. (jla-they assume that their understanding of intent is “the” way to view it)
   b. The inclusion of material (an event, narrative, example, etc., -jla) may be incidental to the primary event and may not have the same teaching (binding - jla) value as the narrative itself.
   c. Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to intent. Does the narrative establish (binding-jla) precedent?

11. Note the discussion on page 122 about baptism, practice, age, mode, essentiality, etc. The authors assume, seemingly, that because Christendom is divided on these matters, they must be incidental to the teaching of Acts, and thus not normative.

**Some Specific Principles**
1. Do not use analogy based on biblical precedent as authority for present-day actions.
2. Though not the author’s primary purpose, some narratives do have illustrative and pattern value. New Testament writers often use historical precedents from the Old Testament. We, however, do not have God’s authority to reproduce this sort of exegesis and analogical analyses that the New Testament authors had. It must also be noted that where precedent justifies present action, that the precedent doesn’t establish a norm for specific action. Precedent illustrates the principle, not necessarily a specific action. To use a biblical precedent to justify some action, it is best that that principle of action is taught elsewhere, in addition to the passage where the precedent is alleged to exist.
3. Biblical precedents may be regarded as repeatable patterns, even if not normative. Biblical precedence does not necessarily demand that all Christians in every place in every time must repeat that pattern, or else be disobedient to the word.
4. The strongest case for practices and patterns demands: the existence of a singular pattern, the repetition of that pattern, design approval of that pattern, cultural application beyond initial use/practice