

Santa Barbara Community Church
Winter - Spring 2014

The Church on the Move

ACTS





The Book of Acts

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The Book of Acts

Study Calendar

HG Week	Sermon	Study	
January 20	January 26	#1	Acts 1:1-26 Now what?
January 27	February 2	#2	Acts 2:1-41 The Holy Spirit Comes
February 3	February 9	#3	Acts 2:42-47 Essential Ingredients
February 10	February 16	#4	Acts 3:1-26 Repentance and Refreshment
February 17	February 23	#5	Acts 4:1-22 Conviction and Courage
February 24	March 2	#6	Acts 4:23-31 Prayer that Shakes
March 3	March 9	#7	Acts 4:32-5:11 Gospel Money
March 10	March 16	#8	Acts 5:12-42 God and Country
March 17	March 23	#9	Acts 6:1-7 Church Life Gets Messy
March 24	March 30	#10	Acts 6:8-8:3 A Sermon and a Stoning Church Retreat
March 31	April 6		
April 7	April 13	#11	Acts 8:4-25 The 'Great Power' vs the Holy Spirit Easter
April 14	April 20		
April 21	April 27	#12	Acts 8:26-40 Chariot Evangelism
April 28	May 4	#13	Acts 9:1-31 The Vision that Changes Saul
May 5	May 11	#14	Acts 9:32-11:18 The Vision that Changes Peter
May 12	May 18	#15	Acts 11:19-30 A New Church is Planted
May 19	May 25	#16	Acts 12:1-25 Prison, Prayer and Peter

This is the third version of a study first worked through by SBCC in the fall of 1991. It was slightly re-worked in the summer of 2000, and now has been updated again in the winter of 2014. The original study was written by Reed Jolley, re-worked in 2000 by Reed, and now updated by Steve Jolley in 2014. Graphic design on this most recent edition is by Carolee Peterson.



Acts 1-12 – Jerusalem to Antioch

Study Sources & Abbreviations

Barclay	Barclay, William, <i>The Acts of the Apostles</i> , Westminster, 1953
Blaiklock	Blaiklock, E. M., <i>The Acts of the Apostles, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries</i> , volume 5, Eerdmans, 1959
Bruce	Bruce, F. F., <i>The Book of Acts, New International Commentary on the New Testament</i> . Eerdmans, 1954
Bruce, Apostle	Bruce, F. F., Paul, <i>The Apostle of the Heart Set Free</i> , Eerdmans, 1977
DNTT	<i>Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. Gerhard Kittel, Eerdmans, 1976
ESV	English Standard Version Bible
Fernando	Fernando, Ajith, <i>The NIV Application Commentary, Acts</i> , Zondervan, 1998
Haenchen	Haenchen, Ernst, <i>The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary</i> , Westminster, 1971
Kistemaker	Kistemaker, Simon, <i>New Testament Commentary, Acts</i> , Baker Book House, 1990
KJV	King James Bible
Longenecker	Longenecker, Richard N., <i>Acts of the Apostles, The Expositors Bible Commentary</i> , volume 9, Zondervan, 1981
Marshall	Marshall, I. Howard, <i>Acts, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries</i> , volume 5, InterVarsity Press, 1980
Morgan	Morgan, G. Campbell, <i>The Acts of the Apostles</i> , Revell, 1924.
Munck	Munck, Johannes, <i>The Acts of the Apostles</i> , Anchor Bible, volume 31, Doubleday, 1967
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. Colin Brown, Zondervan, 1975
NIV	New International Version
Stott	Stott, John, <i>The Spirit, The Church, & The World</i> , InterVarsity Press, 1990



Introduction: Acts 1–12

The Book of Acts

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

So begins Luke's second letter – a letter we have come to know as the book of Acts – to Theophilus. The sixteenth century Reformer John Calvin said that the book of Acts is a vast treasure for believers to investigate and enjoy. Indeed, it is a privilege to look into this repository that contains the story of the origin of the church. Here the heart of a believer will burn with joy as he or she discovers the origins and development of the early church.

One of the early followers of Jesus was a physician named Luke. Dr. Luke was from Antioch in Syria. Tradition tells us that he developed a friendship with Barnabas when the apostles sent aid to the church in Antioch. Luke traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys.¹ He stayed with Philip the evangelist in Caesarea (Acts 21:8). The book of Acts alone mentions over one hundred names. Luke, it appears, gathered information that allowed him to provide his acquaintance, Theophilus, with an accurate chronicle of the spread of the early church.

We should always keep in mind that Acts is volume 2 of Luke's story. In volume 1, the Gospel of Luke, he provides Theophilus with an account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The second installment, the book of Acts, confirms the truth of Jesus' claims. Indeed the gospel of the kingdom was spread throughout the world. In Acts we learn, among other things, that Jesus' mission was inclusive. His followers include Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles! What began in Bethlehem, a small town in a Roman province, ends up permeating the entire Roman world.²

Why did Luke write this detailed letter? Several purposes were probably in his mind. New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker suggests that there were at least four³:

1. Acts proclaims the continued confrontation of men and women by the Word of God. In Luke men and women were confronted by the Word in the person of Jesus (Luke 5:1; 8:11, 21; 11:28). In Acts the same confrontation continues through the ministry of the church (4:29, 31; 6:2, 4, 7; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36; 11:1, 19; 12:24; 13:7, etc.).

¹ See Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4:11.

² See Matthew 24:14, Colossians 1:23.

³ Longenecker, pp. 216-221.

2. Acts demonstrates that Christianity is not a political threat to the Roman world. As a true development of Jewish religion, Christianity should be treated as a *religio licita* (legal religion) along with Judaism. Luke goes out of his way, especially in the later chapters of Acts which detail the arrest and trial of Paul, to show that Christians are not in violation of the laws of Rome.
3. Acts shows the real harmony between Paul and Peter. There is evidence that some in the early church understood Paul and Peter to be at odds with one another. Peter, it was claimed, represented true Christianity, a faith that held Judaism dear and upheld the law. Paul, on the other hand, represented a 'lawless' version of the faith. Acts presents the ministries of Peter (chs. 1-12) and Paul (chs. 13-28) in parallel fashion. Both heal a lame man (3:2-8; 14:8-10); both do miracles at some distance (5:15; 19:12); both exorcise evil spirits (5:16; 16:18); both defeat sorcerers (8:18-24; 13:6-11); both raise the dead (9:36-43; 20:9-12); both defend themselves against Jewish authorities... both are involved in bestowing the Holy Spirit on new converts (8:14-17; 19:1-7); and both are miraculously released from prison (5:19; 12:7-11; 16:25-27). More importantly, both proclaim the same message and even use, to some extent, the same set of proof texts (e.g., Psalms 16:10; cf. 2:27; 13:35). (Longenecker, pp. 287-288) Paul acknowledges Peter's authority in the church of Jerusalem. Peter and the Jerusalem apostles encourage Paul in his apostolic ministry (Acts 15).
4. Luke's letter was to provide teaching to a wide audience. In the first century, letters addressed to a single person often had a larger audience in mind. Luke probably wrote his letter to Theophilus with the expectation that churches could use it for instructional purposes.

Sir William Ramsay wrote, *It is impossible to find anything to say about Acts that has not been said before by somebody.*⁴ This relatively brief study guide will not attempt to prove Ramsay wrong. It will, however, attempt to guide us as a church through the story Luke has left behind in the book usually called Acts.

In one sense Luke himself provides us with an outline of Acts. When Luke includes *The Great Commission* in 1:8, he gives his readers a preview of all that is to come.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; describes the birth of the church at Pentecost.

Acts 2

and you will be my witness in Jerusalem

Acts 3:1—8:1

⁴ *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, 1895.



and in all Judea and Samaria,
Acts 8:2—12:25

and to the ends of the earth.
Acts 13:28

As we study this God-saturated chronicle of the Holy Spirit's work in the early church consider Luke's view of history. I. Howard Marshall explains:

1. The events in Acts are understood to be the result of God's will and purpose. Jesus did not die by accident. He was crucified according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (2:23). The same can be said for events in the life of the church (4:27-29).
2. Therefore, the life of the church takes place in fulfillment of Scripture. The prophecies made in the Old Testament governed the course of church history – the outpouring of the Spirit and the proclamation of salvation (2:17-21), the mission to the Gentiles (13:47) and their incorporation in the church (15:16-18), and the refusal of the Jews as a whole to respond to the gospel (28:25-27).
3. The life of the church was led directly by God (13:2; 15:28; 16:6, etc.).
4. The power of God was demonstrated in signs and wonders performed in the name of Jesus (3:16; 14:3). The Christian mission, therefore, is carried out by God (15:4). (Marshall, p. 24)

Together Luke and Acts constitute about a third of the New Testament. Acts contains 1007 verses that fill in the New Testament story in a unique manner. In this study guide we will cover roughly half of the material in Acts, chapters 1-12. Most of the story takes place in and around Jerusalem. The Christian mission to the Jewish world is the focus of these chapters. In these verses we see a picture of the expanding early church, her struggles and her joys. This picture should inform our own church life in Santa Barbara.



Study One: Acts 1:1–26

Now What?

Try to put yourself in the place of the first disciples. Shockingly, Jesus has been crucified. Then, even more shockingly, there is a resurrection. The disciples are undoubtedly confused. This is not what they had anticipated or signed up for. Sheepishly, we imagine, they ask the risen Christ, *Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* (v. 6) These confused disciples are essentially saying, *Now what?* Perhaps you too have wondered what the Christian life is all about. You have faith in the risen Christ, you've begun your journey with Jesus, but may yourself be asking, *Now what?*

Read Acts 1:1-26. Before going on, list those things that stand out to you as you read.

Acts Chapter 1 has four major sections:

1. Introduction to the book of Acts (With a description of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples, vv. 1-3.)¹
2. The ascension of Jesus (vv. 4-11)
3. Perseverance in prayer while waiting for the Holy Spirit (vv. 12-14)
4. Choosing Matthias to replace Judas (vv. 15-26)

¹ Jesus appeared at least ten times between his resurrection and ascension.

1. The women at the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10)
2. Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-11)
3. Two men of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32)
4. Peter in Jerusalem (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
5. Ten disciples (John 20:19-23)
6. Eleven disciples (John 20:24-29)
7. Seven disciples fishing in Galilee (John 21:1-23)
8. Eleven disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20)
9. Five hundred people (1 Corinthians 15:6)
10. James the brother of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7)

According to Luke, Jesus was doing two things during his 40 days on earth after his resurrection. He was *proving* that he was alive and teaching about the *kingdom of God*.

The kingdom of God is a prominent theme in Luke's Gospel and in Acts. In his Gospel the phrase is mentioned over 30 times and it is mentioned in Acts repeatedly (1:6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Notice how the book begins and ends with this theme. Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God as the book opens, and Paul, as a prisoner in Rome, is teaching about the same subject as the book closes.

What is the message of God's kingdom? This idiom summarizes the heart of Jesus' teaching. The kingdom is God's rule in the hearts and lives of his people, who as citizens of this kingdom receive remission of sins and eternal life. Moreover, for the apostles the phrase *the kingdom of God* meant preaching the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection and making disciples of all nations. (Kistemaker, p. 49)

Notice, however, that the disciples were thinking of the kingdom of God in a nationalistic-political sense. They ask Jesus, *Is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* (v. 6) Their question shows that they were looking for a territorial, earthly kingdom. *Is it finally time for you to get the Roman empire off our backs???* John Stott comments that the question must have filled Jesus with dismay.² John Calvin commented, *there are as many errors in this question as words*. (Stott, p. 41).

Consider Jesus' answer to the disciples' question in verses 7-8. What is he saying? What is his real answer to their question? What would have surprised them about being his *witnesses to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*?

Two men dressed in white then ask, *Why are you gazing into the sky?* What does Jesus' answer, along with the ascension and question of these two men dressed in white (most likely angels), tell us about our tendency to speculate and probe the time of Jesus' second coming? What should our attitude be regarding the second coming of Jesus? Can you think of any other Bible passages to support your answer?

² Stott defines the kingdom in this way: *The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence*. (Stott, p. 42)



In verse 8 Jesus leaves the disciples with a promise (*you will receive power*) and a mandate (*you will be my witnesses...*).

Who, or what, is this Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit a force or a person? Consider what the following verses teach about the Holy Spirit.

John 14:15-17

John 15:26

John 16:12-16

The disciples receive a missionary mandate. From the beginning, the church (God's chosen community) was understood as a pilgrim people. The disciples were to begin where they were and gradually move out to evangelize the whole world.

Do you understand your faith as a missionary faith? What motivates you in this area? Are you spreading the gospel in your Jerusalem (Santa Barbara)? Why or why not?

Along with our passage in Acts 1, how do the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19 help you to answer the question, *Now what?*

In Santa Barbara we are living in a post-Christian culture. Many of the people we rub shoulders with are either hostile to or uninterested in Christian faith. Most Christians admit to having a difficult time when it comes to spreading their faith. What causes you to be timid in telling your friends, co-workers, and neighbors the good news about Jesus and salvation?

What sort of obstacles would the early church have faced in sharing their faith in a pagan Roman world? How would their cultural context have been different from our own? What would be similar?

Respond to the following statement by Michael Green.

The Spirit of God came upon Christian individuals in order to create in them a quality of life that would otherwise be beyond their powers. The Spirit of God came upon the Christian community in order to unite them in a fellowship which could not be paralleled in any other group... But there can be no doubt from a candid examination of the New Testament accounts that the prime purpose of the coming of the Spirit of God upon the disciples was to equip them for mission. The Comforter comes not to allow men to be comfortable, but to make them missionaries.³

As we study the book of Acts, we shall see the apostles and the early church caused quite a ruckus by spreading their faith. But their methods were unique to their time and place. How should our approach to evangelistic efforts be different from the first Christians? In what ways should they be similar?

Only Luke includes the ascension story in his account of the life of Christ. He includes it in both his Gospel and here in Acts. John Stott probes the meaning of Luke's account:

...I think we may say that the apostles committed two opposite errors, which both had to be corrected. First they were hoping for political power (the restoration of the kingdom to Israel). Secondly, they were gazing up into the sky (preoccupied with the heavenly

³ Micheal Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Eerdmans, 1983, p. 58.



Jesus). Both were false fantasies. The first was the error of the politician, who dreams of establishing Utopia on earth. The second is the error of the pietist, who dreams only of heavenly bliss. The first vision is too earthly, and the second too heavenly. Is it fanciful to see a parallel here between Luke's Gospel and the Acts? Just as at the beginning of the Gospel Jesus in the Judean desert turned away from false ends and means, so at the beginning of the Acts the apostles before Pentecost had to turn away from both a false activism and a false pietism. And in their place, as the remedy for them, there was (and is) witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit, with all that this implies of earthly responsibility and heavenly enabling. (Stott, p. 51)

Think practically. Are you prone to either temptation (the politician or the pietist)? Explain. How do you fight this?

The disciples *along with the women*⁴ and Mary return to Jerusalem and spend, presumably, ten days in prayer. During this time they choose Matthias to be the replacement of Judas so that the twelve disciples will be complete. The stage is set for Pentecost.

Casting lots was somewhat common in Old Testament times. The high priest would use Urim and Thummim (probably stones that gave either a 'yes' or a 'no' to a decision) to guide the nation of Israel (Exodus 28:30). This is the last time in Scripture that the casting of lots was used to make a decision. Perhaps this is part of Luke's purpose in including this story. Is he showing the reader that after Pentecost decisions are made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

The fact that Luke includes the number of believers is significant. In Jewish law 120 Jewish men were required to form a new community. Here Luke's purpose in showing the innocence of the early church under Roman law is furthered (Introduction, p. 1).

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 1:1-26. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.

⁴ In both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke takes special interest in showing his readers that the good news of God's kingdom extends to the powerless. Therefore, he repeatedly points out that women (socially, politically and religiously powerless in the first century) were a vital part of Jesus' mission and ministry.



Study Two: Acts 2:1-41

The Holy Spirit Comes!

The history of the people of God in the Old Testament is a chronicle of success and failure – mostly failure. God repeatedly entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, and Israel repeatedly failed to walk in the way of Yahweh. The problem wasn't with the God of the covenant, nor was the problem located in the covenant itself. Israel repeatedly failed because the nation lacked the *power* to keep its part of their agreement with God. Toward the end of the Old Testament period the prophets longed for the age of the Holy Spirit, for a new covenant that would impute the power of God into the lives of God's people.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

With the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost the new covenant has arrived. The age of the Holy Spirit has begun!

Read Acts 2:1-41. What stands out to you? What impresses you about Peter's sermon? What confuses you about the sermon?

Why are people amazed at the fact that those speaking other languages were *Galileans* (v. 7)?

What did the people who heard them speaking in other tongues hear (vv. 6, 8, 11)?

What are the two reactions the crowd has as they witness the speaking in tongues (vv. 12-13)?

In the biblical drama there are certain dramatic turning points. Acts 2 is one of those. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' ministry begins when he is baptized by John the Baptist (Luke 3:21). Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. Here in Acts, Luke shows that the birth and mission of the church is contingent upon a similar outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all who follow Jesus.

This pivotal event in the New Testament, indeed in the entire Bible, is rich with significance.¹

It can be understood as the final act of ministry by Jesus before his second coming. It gave the twelve apostles the power they needed to fulfill their mission as followers of Jesus. Accordingly, Peter is transformed by the Holy Spirit from a disciple who denies Jesus to a servant girl (Luke 22:56-57) to a disciple who risks imprisonment and death in order to proclaim the gospel.

Peter himself interprets the Pentecost event as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The new era of the Holy Spirit foretold by the prophets has arrived fifty days after the death of Jesus!

Pentecost has been called the first revival, *using the word to denote one of those altogether unusual visitations of God, in which a whole community becomes vividly aware of his immediate, overpowering presence.* (Stott, p. 61) This revival contained the deep conviction of sin, conversions to Christ (3000!), and a sense of awe at the powerful works of God (v. 43).

¹ Stott, pp. 60-61.



Pentecost was celebrated as one of the three main annual feasts of the Jews.² Pentecost is the first century name for the Feast of Weeks in the Old Testament. Originally this feast was the festival of first fruits of the grain harvest. The pilgrims would come to Jerusalem and offer God the first crops of the season out of thanksgiving and faithfulness. The festival was associated with the renewal of the covenant God made with Noah (Genesis 9) and Moses. By the time of the first century the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, was considered the anniversary of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was a time to renew the Mosaic covenant.

Luke's point is dramatic. On this day of Pentecost something new is taking place!

Respond to this statement by Ajith Fernando. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Pentecost made religion [Christian faith] into much more of a personal experience with Christ through the Holy Spirit than before. (Fernando, p. 90)

Luke tells us that this frightened, impotent, and small band of disciples were together in one place (vv. 1-4).

What did they hear?

What did they see?

What happened?

The sound of the wind would have brought to mind the prophecy of Ezekiel 37:9-17, where the wind of God's breath (Spirit) would blow over the dry, dead bones of Israel and give new life to a dead people. This was to be the Messianic age.

Fire was a symbol of God's presence in Judaism. Recall the burning bush of Exodus 3, the pillar of fire that guided Israel in the wilderness in Exodus 13, and the fire on top of Mount Sinai in Exodus 24.

² The other great pilgrim feasts were Passover, which took place 50 days earlier (celebrating deliverance from Egypt) and Tabernacles which took place about four months after Pentecost (celebrating the time of wilderness wanderings during the Exodus period of Israel's history).

The gift of tongues, in the Jewish mind, would signify the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In Judaism... the belief arose that with the passing of the last of the writing prophets in the early postexilic period the spirit of prophecy had ceased in Israel. Since then, therefore, God spoke to his people only through his Torah (Law) as interpreted by the teachers... But Judaism also expected that with the coming of the Messianic Age there would be a special outpouring of God's Spirit, in fulfillment of Ezekiel 37, and that prophecy would again flourish.³ (Longenecker, p. 271)

This is exactly the portrait that Luke paints! The Age of Messiah has arrived with prophetic power! Those who watched were amazed and asked, *What does this mean?* (v. 12).

Luke indicates that Jews from all over the Greco-Roman world were present. Greek was the universal language of the time and most likely spoken extensively in Palestine. The disciples likewise probably knew this language. But then something amazing happened. Each heard the message proclaimed in his or her mother tongue. The age of the Spirit transcends geography, language, race and religion. In time a large crowd must have gathered because 3,000 people converted to Christianity that day.

Read Peter's sermon again in verses 14-41. What is his strategy in this sermon? Try writing a simple outline of the sermon. What are the main points?

Two of Peter's Old Testament quotations are confusing to our ears. He quotes Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 to show that Jesus is the foretold Messiah. Kistemaker explains:

The early Christians applied Psalm 16:10 to Christ: "because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One undergo decay." They interpreted David's word to mean that the grave could not destroy Jesus' body. In Hebrew the word *destroy* has the same root as the term *grave*. "The grave or pit is the place where the body is destroyed." Christ's body did not see decay but was glorified at his resurrection. Therefore, God's promise was fulfilled not in David but in Christ. (Kistemaker, p. 97)

Jesus himself quoted Psalm 110 in the first three Gospels and applied the Psalm to himself (Mark 12:35-37). Peter takes this quotation from Psalm 110 and sees it as a messianic prophecy fulfilled in the crucified and risen Jesus!

³ This explains the excitement over the ministry of John the Baptist as recorded in the Gospels.



We need to be careful with verse 36. Jesus did not *become* the Messiah and Lord at the time of his ascension. *It is rather that now God exalted him to be in reality and power what he already was by right.* (Stott, p. 77)

According to Peter's sermon how does a person become *saved*?

Think about salvation and repentance. Is it possible to be saved without repentance? How would you respond to someone who wanted to become a Christian but had little or no interest in repenting of a particular sin?

What is Peter's warning to those listening to his sermon?

How does this sermon challenge your understanding of the gospel message?

Peter directed his hearers to *repent and be baptized*. These acts go hand in hand. Share with your group when you were baptized.

What two promises does Peter make for those who *repent* and are *baptized*?

- 1.
- 2.

Describe your personal experience of these two promises.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 2:1-41. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Three: Acts 2:42-47

Essential Ingredients

In these six succinct verses we have an intimate description of the community in the very young church in Jerusalem. Last week we learned that the church experienced a dramatic explosion of growth. Picture a church of about 120 believers, then at the end of one really good sermon around 3,000 people want in! What did they do? What values did this rapidly expanding church hold? What were the essential ingredients in the church's community?

Read Acts 2:42-47 in several translations. What impresses you? How is this infant church described? Where do you wish you had more information?

What four things was this early church devoted to? (v. 42)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What were the practical results of this devotion? (vv. 43-47)

Church life, at least at the beginning, was a *devoted* affair.¹ The people of the early church were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the celebration of the Lord's Supper and to prayer.

¹ Blaiklock writes, *This was no loose group, but a clear-cut society, universal in membership, but with definite, firm standards. Repentance, confession, and baptism were necessary. Secondly, the authority of the apostles is recognized from the first.* (Blaiklock, p. 61)

Do you see a similar devotion in *your* life to these aspects of your church? Do you see it in the lives of those around you? Was there anything unique about the time and place of this particular church that would require more intense devotion to these things? In other words, are we *off the hook* because we have almost 2,000 years of church history to fall back on?

The Apostle's Teaching

This nascent church was devoted to the *apostles teaching*. Certainly these 3,000 new converts needed instruction in basic Christian teaching. Unfortunately we are not sure as to the exact content of this teaching. Make a list of what you think would be included in the *apostles teaching*?

Consider the following statement by John Stott:

We note that those new converts were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to despise their mind or disdain theology. Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are mutually incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. (Stott, p. 82)

Are you *devoted* to the *apostles teaching*? What do you do to study God's word on a regular basis? Do you take this study seriously as a part of your discipleship?

Fellowship

The church was also devoted to *fellowship*. At a minimum this would imply meetings for corporate worship and teaching. The word used for *fellowship* is the Greek work *koinonia*.



Fernando comments:

...the nineteen occurrences of *koinonia* in the New Testament suggest that the church used this word for the unique sharing that Christians have with God and with other Christians. (Fernando, p. 120)

What has been your experience of fellowship in the local church? How have you been encouraged? How have you been disappointed?

The Breaking of Bread

In addition to the *apostles teaching* and *fellowship*, the early church also practiced *the breaking of bread*. The phrase *the breaking of bread* is wonderfully ambiguous. At face value the phrase implies that the believers were sharing meals together, but when placed in context of the New Testament we should understand the words to refer to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Both events were probably taking place at the same time.

SBCC takes the Lord's Supper together on a weekly basis. What has been your experience of *the breaking of bread* together during our Sunday gatherings? How have you been reminded of the sacrifice of Christ? How can you remain spiritually fresh with this practice in spite of its weekly occurrence?

Prayer

Lastly, our passage points out that the church was devoted to prayer. What is your view of prayer? Do you see prayer as one of the central tasks of the church? How is your view manifested in your practice and habits?

The fourth-century Bible teacher John Chrysostom referred to prayer as *conversation with God*. How is your conversation going?

The *every soul* in verse 43 probably refers to everyone in Jerusalem, and not just believers. The events of Pentecost were visible and impressive to the public. Miracles and wonders were being performed for public scrutiny. These were *signs* that validated the message of the apostles.

In verses 44-45 we learn that the early church took care of the needy in the congregation. Luke paints a portrait of a church involved in sacrificial giving. The people were going far beyond the Jewish tithes that were required of them.

How does this challenge your own view of your possessions? Are you giving sacrificially? How can your group pray for you in this regard?

Respond to the following statement on giving by C. S. Lewis:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.



Verse 46 is telling. Luke shows again that the early Christians were meeting in the temple courts in full accord with Jewish custom. They are not outlaws of Rome or of Jewish authorities. Church worship has evolved over the centuries and in many ways become divorced from its Jewish roots. The behavior of the early church may surprise us. Marshall writes of this verse,

They met together in a spirit of unanimity in *the temple*. [This] implied that they took part in the daily worship of the temple (3:1). The daily worship consisted of the offering of a burnt offering and incense in the morning and the afternoon; it was carried on by the priests, but there was always a congregation of people who stood where they could see the priests going about their duties and entering the sanctuary; they took part in prayer, and they received a blessing from the priest... Theological questions about the replacement of the temple sacrifices by the spiritual sacrifice by Jesus had probably not yet occurred to them. (Marshall, p. 85)

In addition to *attending the temple together*, they met in homes. Presumably these were smaller gatherings of believers who met in homes for the equivalent of what churches today call, *growth groups, cell groups, discipleship groups, life groups, or what we call homegroups*.

Notice in verse 46 the believers met with *glad and sincere hearts*. It was a joy to be a follower of Jesus. Luke repeatedly stresses the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit (8:8, 39; 13:48, 52; 15:3; 16:34).

Think about the joy you have in being a friend of Jesus. How would you describe your spiritual joy to those in your homegroup?

Are we a church characterized by the joy of the Holy Spirit?

How have these six verses challenged your view of the church in general and of SBCC in particular? Are there areas where you would like to change your level of commitment and involvement?

Are we a church that patterns herself after the essential ingredients described in this passage? In what areas could we improve?

Respond to the following statement by John Stott (made while commenting on 2:47):

He did not add them to the church without saving them (no nominal Christianity at the beginning), nor did he save them without adding them to the church (no solitary Christianity either). Salvation and church membership belonged together; they still do. (Stott, p. 87)

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 2:42-47. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Four: Acts 3:1-26

Repentance and Refreshment

The life of the early church must have been very exciting. Acts 2:43 points out that, *many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles*. In our passage one of the many miracles that Luke mentions comes to the forefront. The healing of the lame beggar received a great deal of publicity triggering a series of events that eventually led to serious opposition to the gospel. Our passage divides simply.

The healing of the lame beggar (vv. 1-10)

Peter's speech, or sermon (vv. 11-26)

Read Acts 3:1-26. What stands out to you in this chapter? What questions do you have?

The story begins as Peter and John were making one of the daily visits Christians made to the temple (2:46). This visit was at 3:00 p.m. one of the three times of Jewish prayer (the other two were 9:00 a.m. and noon).

Verses 1-10 describe a miracle. What detail does Luke include to show this is a true miracle?

Friends or family of this man had to carry him to the temple gate called *Beautiful* where he would attempt to beg for some sort of a daily income in order to survive.

Carefully re-read the description of the miracle in verses 1-10. Do you see any of Luke's medical background in this description? How many times does Dr. Luke draw our attention to the fact that the beggar was able to walk? Why?

The very public nature of the miracle causes quite a scene. How does the beggar respond? What is the response of the crowd?

In verses 11-26, take a more careful look at what Peter says. What is Peter's strategy in presenting Christ? How is this sermon different from the one he preached in Acts 2?

Today, in our culture, many people are willing to believe in an insipid generic god. Peter, too, lived at a time in which there were many god options. How is Peter very particular in naming the God of this miracle (v. 13)? What can we learn about how to talk about God and share our faith from Peter's example?

Acts 3:17 is significant. Jewish law made a distinction between sins committed in ignorance and sins committed deliberately. The law makes no explicit provision for the latter. Peter implies, therefore, that because the Jews acted in ignorance they are ready for God's forgiveness.

The unspoken thought is that, if the Jews now fail to admit their sin committed in ignorance and repent of it, it will become a witting sin which is much more culpable. (Marshall, p. 92)

Peter promises three results if his listeners repent:

1. *...that your sins may be blotted out.* The verb used means to wash off, erase or obliterate. The NIV translates this as *wiped out*. The same verb is used in Revelation 21:4 for God wiping away our tears when the end comes. Barclay gives a colorful description of this word.



Ancient writing was upon papyrus, and the ink used had no acid in it. It therefore did not bite into the papyrus as modern ink does; it simply lay upon the top of it. To erase the writing a man might take a wet sponge and simply wipe it away. (Barclay, p. 32)

2. ...*that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*. If translated literally this phrase would read, *that there may come seasons of refreshing from the face of the Lord*. This is the only time the word *refreshing* occurs in the New Testament. It means rest, relief, respite or refreshment.¹

It seems to be the positive counterpart to forgiveness, for God does not wipe away our sins without adding his refreshment for our spirits. (Stott, p. 93)

3. ...*and that he may send the Christ...* One of the mysteries of the New Testament is the fact that our salvation has something to do with the return of Christ. Peter says the same thing in his second letter.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance... what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . (2 Peter 3:9, 11).

What is your experience of conversion? Obviously we are all waiting for the fulfillment of Peter's third promise, but what about the first two promises that Peter makes?

If you are in Christ, then God has forgiven your sins. Do you feel forgiven or do you carry guilt around with you? Describe your experience of forgiveness?

¹ The NIDNTT sees *the times of refreshing* as shorthand for the age of salvation, which is promised to the nation of Israel if it repents. Although great numbers of Jews are converted (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 21:20), the Israel that Luke describes in Acts is one in which large numbers of Gentiles are incorporated, and from which many of the old Israel remain aloof. (NIDNTT, 3, p. 686)

What about refreshment? Are you refreshed in the Lord? If so, what are some other words that would describe your experience of refreshing?

Peter ends his sermon with further references to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. This has been a constant theme in both of Peter's sermons.²

Old Testament Idea	Old Testament text	Acts text
descended from David	Psalms 132:11	2:30
suffered, died and is God's servant	Isaiah 53	2:23; 3:18
the stone the builders rejected became the capstone	Psalms 118:22	4:11
God raised him from the dead	Isaiah 52:13	2:25-36
death could not hold him	Psalms 16:8-11	2:24, 27, 31
God exalted him to his right hand to wait for the end	Psalms 110:1	2:34-35
through him the Holy Spirit is poured out	Joel 2:28-31	2:16-21
now the gospel is preached to everyone	Isaiah 57:19	2:39
people must listen to him or pay the penalty of disobedience	Deuteronomy 18:18-19	3:22-23
those who listen and respond will inherit the blessing promised to Abraham	Genesis 12:3; 22:18	3:25-26

² The following is based on material from Stott, pp. 94-95.



Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 3:1-26. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Five: Acts 4:1-22

Conviction and Courage

After the healing of the lame beggar (3:1-10), the church continues its phenomenal growth. Luke, for the last time in Acts, gives us a number in his growth report. He tells us that this young church now numbered about 5,000 men, an astounding number when you consider that women and children were not included in the accounting (v. 4). In spite of the growth of the church, chapter 4 marks the beginning of resistance and persecution. Peter and John are arrested and spend the night in jail. From this point on in the book of Acts evangelism becomes a risky endeavor.

Read Acts 4:1-22. What stands out to you? Make a list of the things that impress you. What confuses you?

There are two waves of persecution endured by the Jerusalem church both of which are initiated by the Sadducees.¹

Politically, they ingratiated themselves with the Romans, and followed a policy of collaboration, so that they feared the subversive implications of the apostles' teaching. Theologically, they believed that the Messianic age had begun in the Maccabean period (163BC); so they were not looking for a Messiah. (Stott, p. 95)

Notice who is present for Peter's official defense of his healing ministry the day before.

the rulers = the Sanhedrin, which consisted of 71 members headed by the high priest;

the elders = rulers of various groups of Jews;

¹ The Sadducees were not a legal body of Jews. They were what we would call 'naturalists'. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Hence, the preaching of Peter would be offensive. They seem to side with the priests in Acts who oppose the Christian movement. One commentator writes, *It is interesting that, although the Pharisees were the group most opposed to Jesus during his ministry, in Acts they are almost friendly to the church, while the Sadducees (who do not figure in the Gospels until the last days of Jesus) have become the leaders of the opposition.*

teachers of the law = scribes (usually lawyers who were Pharisees) who taught and copied the law;

Annas = the high priest who was removed from office in 14AD by the Romans;

Caiaphas = the high priest from 18-36AD.

When this gathering of *important* people is assembled, they put the question to Peter: *By what power or by what name did you do this?*

Peter delivers another sermon in his defense. The apostle, under the power of the Holy Spirit, is brilliant. In Jewish law a prophet, even if he performed a miracle, was to be stoned if he led people away from God (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Peter claims to be pointing people not away but toward the true God of Abraham. He does this by quoting Psalm 118:22. Longenecker explains:

In the first-century AD Jewish *Testament of Solomon* 22:7—23:4, the expression “the stone at the head of the corner” (or capstone) unambiguously refers to the final... capstone placed on the summit of the Jerusalem temple to complete the whole edifice. (Longenecker, p. 304, parenthesis added)

Peter points to Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism.

Notice what stands out in the minds of his listeners. They are *astonished* with Peter’s boldness. This is the third time in Acts that Peter boldly lays his gospel at the feet of unbelieving Jews. *Whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead...* (v. 10). This may be Luke’s way of showing the transformation of Peter after his three denials of Jesus.

What happened to Peter? How was this apostle transformed to become so courageous and bold?

Why does the church need to pray for boldness later in the chapter (4:29)?



Notice some of the descriptive terms Luke uses to describe apostolic preaching. Read the following versus taking notes on the language used:

9:27-29

13:46

14:3

18:26

26:25-26

Can we be just as bold as Peter, Paul and the other apostles or were they unique? What hinders you from courageously and boldly talking about the gospel to friends, co-workers and neighbors? What keeps you from a bold proclamation of your faith?

Peter seems to have a ready-made formula for presenting the gospel. His evangelistic sermons follow a similar pattern of development (refer to Study Two).

What is your gospel? How would you share your faith if given 15 minutes of someone's time? Share this with your homegroup. If you don't know, think about this and do some hunting for Bible verses that would help explain what you believe about Jesus.

Acts 4:12 is one of the well known verses of Luke's book.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Read Matthew 1:21. The name *Jesus* means he will *save his people from their sins*. Peter, John, Paul and the other apostles were absolutely convinced that salvation was only found in Jesus. They were not influenced by pluralism (the notion that there may be many paths to God).

Read the following quotation by Colin Brown and *look up the references* he cites. Could it be that the lack of boldness in evangelism we find in the modern church is tied to our adoption of a subtle pluralism? If we were deeply convinced that the non-Christian was really lost would we be more bold in our witness?

Acts 4:12 makes an absolute and universal claim for the Christian message of salvation. The apostolic kerygma (message) which was addressed first to the Jews (Acts 13:26) and then to the Gentiles (Acts 16:17 etc.) excludes every other way of salvation (Acts 13:38; 15:10 f.), for salvation can be gained only by faith in Christ (Acts 16:31). The salvation given to the one who believes consists in the forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43; cf. 26:18) and a new relationship with God. (NIDNTT, 3, p. 213, emphasis added)

The rulers were astonished at the boldness of Peter and John and *took note that these men had been with Jesus* (v. 13). What is the observable result of your *being with Jesus*?

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 4:1-22. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Six: Acts 4:23-31

Prayer that Shakes!

When Peter and John are released from jail they go to where it is safe with *their friends*. It must have been a confusing time. Suddenly the excitement of this new movement was tempered by the reality of hostile persecution. Their conviction and proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was the long promised Messiah of the Scriptures could cost them their lives! According to Luke, when Peter and John were released, their friends' response was to pray.

Read Acts 4:23-31. What stands out to you in this chapter? What questions do you have?

Consider the prayer of the church.

What are the main components of this prayer? How would you outline this prayer?

What was the result of the prayer?

What surprises you about this prayer?

How are your prayers like or unlike this one?

Notice how the prayer begins, *Sovereign Lord*.

Most of the prayer is a reflection on the sovereignty of God. Even the way God is addressed, *Sovereign Lord*, is significant. This translates a single word, *despotes*, used here rather than the more usual word *kryrios*. *Despotes* was used for the relation of a master to his slave. Classical writers used it for someone who had absolute powers, and it is from this use that we get the English word *despot*. (Fernando, p. 168)

Before any petition the people acknowledge the sovereignty and power of God. They begin with praise in the midst of adversity. Notice also that Luke gives no record of thanksgiving for Peter and John's deliverance. Did Luke omit this for brevity? Did the church fail to give thanks? What is your guess?

Consider the elements of the church's proclamation in their prayer:

1. God is creator (v. 24).
2. God has revealed himself (vv. 25-26).
3. God is in control of history (vv. 27-28).¹

The prayer we find shows the Jewish nature of the early church. The prayer begins like Hezekiah's prayer in Isaiah 37:16-20, and then relies on Psalm 2 to express confidence in God and to plead for God's involvement in the present situation.

Psalm 2 began to be understood as a messianic psalm by the middle of the second-century BC. It is something of a favorite among New Testament writers (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5, 5:5; Revelation 2:26-27, 19:15).

When Jews read Old Testament prophecy during this time period they emphasized the general fulfillment of prophecy without pressing all the details. This is called a *peshet* or interpretation. Peter utilized this method of Old Testament interpretation in his Acts 2 sermon with the formula, *this is that....* He said, *These men are not drunk... this is that which was uttered through the prophet Joel...* Here in Acts 4 we see the same understanding of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy:

¹ Regarding verse 28 Guthrie writes, *This is the only place in the New Testament where the verb 'predestined' occurs outside the Pauline epistles.* Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p. 618.



Psalm 2:1-2

the nations conspire (rage)
the peoples plot in vain
the kings and the rulers
of the earth
against
the Lord
and his Anointed One

Acts 4:27

the Gentiles conspire
with the people of Israel
Herod and Pontius Pilate
in this city
against
your holy servant Jesus
whom you anointed

Notice how the church understood persecution. Their own suffering is related directly to the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of God's people in Old Testament times.

The requests made at the end of the prayer are somewhat surprising. In verses 29-30, what three things does the church pray for?

The odd thing about this prayer is the neglect of the church to pray for deliverance. The prayer says nothing about protection from persecution! What do you make of this? Why the omission?

Are our prayers centered too much on our own comforts and not enough on God's will? Explain.

This prayer meeting ends with what we might call a *mini-pentecost* experience. Kistemaker writes,

The similarities are striking: the Holy Spirit comes as an answer to prayer (1:14; 4:24-30); the Spirit fills all who are present (2:4; 4:31); and they all proclaim the wonder and the word of God (2:11; 4:31). The believers receive a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who fills them with courage so that they proclaim the Good News. (Kistemaker, p. 171)

What are we to make of the description of this prayer meeting as *shaken*? Fernando comments,

In the Old Testament the shaking of a place (v. 31) was a sign for a theophany, that is, a manifestation of God in visible form (Exodus 19:18; Isaiah 6:4)... It was God's way of indicating he was present there and would answer the prayer. (Fernando, p. 170)

What are some of the lessons we can learn about corporate prayer from this section of Acts?

Is SBCC a praying church? How can we improve our prayer-life?

In recent years the world-wide persecution of the church has received well deserved attention. Paul Marshall wrote a chronicle of the persecution of the church. In the preface he writes,

This book is about a spiritual plague. It tells of massacre, rape, torture, slavery, beatings, mutilations, and imprisonment. It also tells of pervasive patterns of extortion, harassment, family division, and crippling discrimination in employment and education. This plague affects over two hundred million people, with an additional four hundred million suffering from discrimination and legal impediments.²

Clearly the mild persecution described in Acts 4 was but a small portend of what was to come. Before long Stephen would be stoned and the church scattered. How can we do a better job of praying for the persecuted church? What can your homegroup do in this regard?

² James and Marti Hefley estimate that 119 million men and women died because of their allegiance to Christ in the 20th century. (*By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century*, 1996, Baker Books, p. 11)



What do these verses teach you about your personal prayer-life? What changes do you want to make as a result of looking into these verses?

Come to your group prepared to pray like the early church prayed. Think about how you can praise God as creator, revealer and sovereign Lord of history. Come ready to practice.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 4:23-31. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Seven: 4:32–5:11

Gospel Money

In this part of the book of Acts, Luke is showing his readers the realities of church life. The church is an institution under attack. First, the attacks came from outside, in the form of force from the authorities (4:23-31). Here the attack comes from inside, in the form of falsehood and hypocrisy.

Read Acts 4:32—5:11. What stands out in your mind? What was church-life like for these new believers? In what ways does the church in Jerusalem look like the church in America? Like our church?

The church described in these verses, at first glance, sounds like a warm and wonderful community of believers. We read that the believers were, *of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of these things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common* (4:32). Undoubtedly, there existed a warm and sharing church in Jerusalem. But as we see in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and will see in the weeks ahead, the everyday realities of life in the church community are far from idyllic.

Eugene Peterson who was a pastor for three decades concedes that the church, in practice, is always disappointing.

Every time I move to a new community, I find a church close by and join it – committing myself to worship and work with that company of God’s people. I’ve never been anything other than disappointed: every one turns out to be biblical, through and through: murmurers, complainers, the faithless, the inconstant, those plagued with doubt and riddled with sin, boring moralizers, glamorous secularizers. Every once and a while a shaft of blazing beauty seems to break out of no-where and illuminate these companies, and then I see what my sin-dulled eyes had missed: word of God-shaped, Holy Spirit-created lives of sacrificial humility, incredible courage, heroic virtue, holy praise, joyful suffering, constant prayer, persevering obedience.¹

¹ *Leap Over a Wall*, p. 101.

While not perfect, the gospel was making a real difference in the lives of the believers in Jerusalem. Notice the close connection between the *resurrection of the Lord Jesus* and the fact that in this gospel community there was *not a needy person among them* (vv. 33-34). Our passage sees that the early disciples were taking Jesus seriously. Notice how this section of Acts parallels Acts 2:42-47.

... just as after the first coming of the Spirit he describes the characteristics of the Spirit-filled community (2:42-47), so after they are again filled with the Spirit he provides a second description (4:32-37). Moreover in both cases his emphasis is the same. *All the believers*, he begins, in 4:32 as in 2:44, formed a closely knit group. They 'were together' (2:44), as they devoted themselves to 'the fellowship' (2:42), and they *were one in heart and mind* (4:32). (Stott, p. 106)

Our passage helps us to see something of how the gospel teaches us to handle our money. Luke tells us that church members did not *regard* their possessions as their own. They were seen as gifts from God that could at any time be used for the good of the community. Moreover, we learn from Peter's interaction with Ananias and Sapphira that in their local economy once possessions were sold the proceeds were given or retained at the discretion of the owner.

What are some Christian principles of money, possessions and giving you see in these verses? List both negative and positive lessons you see in here.

In past studies we have seen how Luke paints a portrait of the early church that is parallel to and in concert with the people of God in the Old Testament. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy was a series of sermons by Moses instructing the people how to live after they took possession of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 15:4 reads:

...But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess...

Luke sees the church living out this principle. *There were no needy persons among them* (4:34). After pointing to the general success of community life in this area, Luke gives both a positive and a negative example of how the church actually functioned.



First, Barnabas, who will later become a traveling companion of Paul, sells property and gives it to the church. Barnabas plays an important role in Acts. He is *a kind of hinge between the mission to the Jewish world and that to the Gentiles* (9:27; 11:22-30; 13:1—14:28; 15:2-4, 12, 22, 36-41; see also 1 Corinthians 9:6). (Longenecker, p. 312) This is the first time we meet him in Acts. He is a giver, and his freedom from possessions opens opportunity to serve God. On the other hand, Ananias and Sapphira's greed and desire for status in the community severely diminish (to put it lightly) their opportunities to serve God.

Ponder the story of Acts 5. What lessons can we draw from it for our church life together?

What about this story challenges you? What offends you? Are you more like Barnabas or Ananias and Sapphira? Explain how.

In Christian circles some of the bestselling books are on what is called *financial planning*. Ron Blue has written a bestseller called *Master Your Money*. Larry Burkett has written a cluster of books on the topic: *The Complete Financial Guide for Young Couples*; *Answers to Your Families Financial Questions*; *What Husbands Wish Their Wives Knew About Money* (wow!); *Debt-Free Living*, and the author, conference speaker, and radio show host, Dave Ramsey and Financial Peace University have become very popular and influential.

How do you (or should you) balance what our culture calls financial responsibility with this picture of giving Luke presents?

Are financial planning and generous giving mutually exclusive?

It takes a lot of money in our culture to retire. How can a Christian balance the need to be prepared for old age with compassionate and sacrificial giving?

Would you ever consider selling a possession (car, property, guitar, surf board, etc.) to meet the need of someone in our church? Why or why not?

The American church is the richest church in the world. Consistently, however, when surveys are taken we find that we give about 3% of our income for the Lord's work. Why are we so *tightfisted*?

Respond to the following statements by Gregory Lewis in *Is God For Sale*.

Christ is calling us, not to poverty, but to a spirit of poverty and denial. There is something spiritually deceitful when we place our trust in what belongs to us instead of in the One to whom we belong.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 4:32—5:11. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Eight: Acts 5:12-42

God and Country

In Acts 5:12-42 we have two pictures of church life. In the first, we see a growing church where God is miraculously at work. In the second, we find a church increasingly at odds with the religious authorities.

The believers met in public (no comfortable seats, heating, air conditioning, or classrooms for the kids). Their worship and proclamation was open to public scrutiny for they met in *Solomon's Colonnade*, the eastern part of the temple court where Peter preached his second sermon (Acts 3:11). The church appears to have met regularly and with growing numbers, and the healing ministry of this flourishing body of believers attracted visitors from neighboring towns. Such popularity caused the Sadducees to be *filled with jealousy*. Luke tells us, *They arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison*.

Our passage gives the reader a chronicle of the second wave of persecution the church endured. Remember the church is still enjoying the fact that the Roman government sees the church as a Jewish sect and therefore as a *legal religion*. During these early days of the church's life, persecution comes from within Judaism itself.

Read Acts 5:12-42. Try to picture what life was like for the believers in Jerusalem. What stands out? What do you wonder about?

What would you have thought if you had been one of the early Christians watching the arrest of Peter, John and the others? Would this event have caused excitement? Would you want to rethink this new teaching? Would the event have embarrassed you? Would you think, *Can I really trust these guys who are going back to jail??*

John Bunyan (1628-1688) penned one of the greatest books ever written in the English language, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Millions of copies of this book have been printed and are available in dozens of languages. In spite of the literary *success* of this masterpiece, Bunyan was anything but a Christian celebrity. In fact, this Puritan was arrested three times for *preaching without a state license*, and for his failure to attend the official Church of England, and spent twelve years in jail for his convictions! Was Bunyan right to disobey the civil authorities for the sake of his conscience? Does not the Bible teach that believers are to be in submission to their government?

In America believers enjoy tremendous religious freedom. *Going to church* is seen as the right thing to do. Our politicians want to be photographed coming out of their church during a busy election campaign. What would happen if all this changed? How would the church be affected if, from time to time, the police showed up and arrested whoever was preaching? What would happen to SBCC?

Notice it is the *Sadducees* who are jealous in this chapter. The Sadducees were the *respectable* Jews of the first century. They tended to be wealthy, powerful and they collaborated with the political authorities of Rome. From the Sadducees came the priests that performed the various official functions in the temple.

The anger of the Sadducees had a double foundation. As the high priests they were blamed for the murder of Christ, and found a volatile Jerusalem beginning to grow hostile (v. 28); they were also bitterly opposed to the teaching of resurrection, and here the hated doctrine was associated with the prophet whom they had found it expedient to remove (John 11:50). (Blaiklock, p. 72)

After their midnight release from prison the apostles are again found preaching in the temple seemingly unconcerned with the potential consequences (v. 19). They appear before the Sanhedrin, which is the ruling body of the Sadducees.



Think about Peter's answer to the Sanhedrin. He claims it is his responsibility to disobey *men*, (i.e., the laws of the governing authorities and country) in order to obey God. Then he preaches another mini-sermon to his accusers.

Peter's phrase, *We must obey God rather than men!*, is the basic principle of what is called civil disobedience.

For Christian theology and ethics the problem of civil disobedience is raised by two facts. First, Christians are called to an unqualified obedience to their Lord and God (Deuteronomy 13:4; Jeremiah 7:23; John 14:15). Second, Christians are called to submit to the governing authorities and to recognize that, even where the civil authority is not Christian, God uses (or can use) it as his servant for good (cf. Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). Civil disobedience becomes an issue when these two claims come into conflict, i.e., when God commands us to do something which the civil authority prohibits or the civil authority commands us to do something which God prohibits.¹

We have several examples of civil disobedience in Scripture:

Daniel's prayer (among other acts of disobedience) in Babylon (Daniel 6)

Peter's preaching here in Acts 5

Paul's refusal to leave prison (Acts 16:35-39)

Are there areas where civil disobedience is justified and legitimate in our time? Do you think the American church has become too polite and domesticated? Explain.

How do we balance Acts 5:29 with Romans 13:1-7? To what extent are you willing to place yourself in a position where you would be arrested for your Christian convictions?

¹ David Gill, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell, p. 245.

What are some examples you can think of where American Christians have been disobedient to their country because of their faith convictions? How do these instances compare to those found in the Bible?

Note the reaction to Peter's sermon – the religious council *wanted to kill them*. The apostles are saved, this time, by a Pharisee named Gamaliel.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were at religious odds with one another. The name *Pharisee* means *separate*. Pharisees were devoutly religious Jews who had given up on the priestly class of Jews (the Sadducees) because they had made too many compromises with Greek culture and with Roman authorities. Gamaliel was one of the great Pharisees.² He was called *Rabban*, which means, literally, *our teacher*. It was a title of honor reserved for the best of the rabbis. Interestingly, one of his students was Saul of Tarsus (later to become the apostle Paul).

Read verses 33-39. What is Gamaliel's defense of the apostles?

What do you make of verse 41? They rejoice because they *were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name*. Early Christianity was not a comfortable religion.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 5:12-42. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.

² During this time there were between 5,000 and 6,000 Pharisees in Israel.



Study Nine: Acts 6:1-7

Church Life Gets Messy

In past weeks we have seen that the church in Jerusalem was a place where *all the believers were of one in heart and soul* among whom *there was no needy person*. (Acts 4:32-34) It all sounds pretty good. But in Acts 6:1-7 the seemingly idyllic first century church begins to encounter some problems. Community life is about to get messy.

Read Acts 6:1-7. What stands out to you? What questions do you have of the story?

Community life in a local church is not always easy. Feelings get hurt, toes get stepped on, and people get overlooked.

Every group of Christians that tries to practice true community will sooner or later encounter problems in the very areas of their strength in community life. But this section provides answers too, for the early church faced the problem squarely as soon as it surfaced. (Fernando, p. 225)

In chapter 6, Luke faithfully records the first division in the church. The New Testament church is far from ideal. Greek speaking Jewish converts had a *complaint* that they were being neglected in the church's social welfare program.¹ By this point in Acts the church probably had about 10,000 men (plus women and children!). Jerusalem was a relatively impoverished city. Undoubtedly there were some very poor believers in the church.

The problem was cultural. The Greek-speaking believers felt that the Hebrew (Aramaic) speaking recipients of church aid were being favored. The church was multicultural and distance was created by the natural language and cultural differences. The complaint compelled action. Needs were to be met.

¹ Luke may again be drawing a parallel between the early church and the Old Testament people of God. The word translated *complaint* is the same word use in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when the Israelites complained, or murmured against Moses. (Exodus 16:7; Numbers 14:27).

How can different cultural and language backgrounds create tension at SBCC?

This issue also caused the apostles to protect themselves from getting caught up in administration when their first calling was to pray, preach, and teach (vv. 2-4).

There is no hint whatever that the apostles regarded social work as inferior to pastoral work, or beneath their dignity. It was entirely a question of calling. They had no liberty to be distracted from their own priority task. (Stott, p. 121)

What were the three qualifications for the men chosen to carry out this ministry?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Think about how churches change, consequently needing a change in administrative structure. The small intimate church has now grown, rather quickly, to a very sizeable congregation. Change happens, wanted or not. The rapidly expanding church creates a structure, appointing seven administrators, to meet the needs of the people.

What does this teach us about how churches change? How have you seen SBCC change? Do you think we are changing appropriately to meet the needs of our members?

This passage introduces us to Stephen who was one of the seven men set aside for administration in the church. Ironically, this administrator goes on to preach the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts.



John Stott writes of these verses:

We do a great disservice to the church whenever we refer to the pastorate as 'the ministry', for example when we speak of ordination in terms of 'entering the ministry'. This use of the definite article implies that the ordained pastorate is the only ministry there is. But *diakonia* (ministry) is a generic word for service; it lacks specificity until a descriptive adjective is added, whether 'pastoral', 'social', 'political', 'medical' or another. All Christians without exception, being followers of him who came 'not to be served but to serve', are themselves called to ministry, indeed to give their lives in ministry... We need to recover this wide vision of the wide diversity of ministries to which God calls his people. (Stott, p. 122, emphasis added)

Think of your own life and participation in your church. Do you see yourself as a *minister*? Why or why not? What do you, or could you, do to serve?

Luke comments in verse 7 that the church *continued to increase*. Do you think there might have been some people who were not excited about the growth? What would you have said to someone who longed for the old days of just 120 in the church?

What does this passage tell us about the importance of a local church caring for its own?

At the end of our passage Luke adds a brief but interesting comment. He tells us, *a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith*. (v. 7) What would be significant about this detail? How might it exacerbate the tensions in Jerusalem?

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 6:1-7. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Ten: Acts 6:8–8:3

A Sermon and a Stoning

At the outset the early disciples understood themselves as Jews who had discovered the Messiah. They remained thoroughly Jewish. They, apparently, had no idea of the magnitude of their discovery. The early church was threatened and harassed by Rome. They lived in what we call the Greco-Roman world. In time Rome would be a *Christian* empire, and eventually their world would be called the *Christian West*.

Stephen, as far as we know from Luke's record, was the first disciple to probe the deeper implications of what Jesus did on the cross. He undoubtedly could not foresee where his discovery would lead. Chapters 6 and 7 of Acts are devoted to Stephen's discovery. Acts 6 is really an introduction to Stephen's self-defense recorded in Acts 7. In this, the longest sermon in Acts, Stephen points out some of the radical implications of the gospel message. Ultimately, it will cost him his life as he becomes the first martyr of the church.

Read Acts 6:8–8:3. As you enjoy the story, take notes about what stands out to you. What is confusing?

Our passage is something of a spiritual biography of Steven. He appears quickly in the book of Acts and then suddenly dies an untimely death. How is Steven described? What kind of a man was he? What can we surmise about his character from these verses?

Stephen, we are told, has a conflict with members of the *synagogue of the Freedmen* (6:9).

The term *freedmen* relates to a group of Jewish prisoners of war whom the Romans under the command of Pompey captured in 63BC. In subsequent years these prisoners were released and built a colony along the Tiber River in Rome. Later, their descendants were expelled from Rome and many of them presumably found refuge in Jerusalem where they built a synagogue. (Kistemaker, p. 228)

Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin and charged with speaking against the three things cherished by Jews: Moses (the law), God (6:11), and the temple (*this place* in 6:14).

Chapter 7 is a wonderful record of Stephen's defense. Read this sermon. It is a succinct overview of the Old Testament.

Make a list of the key figures in Stephen's speech, and why they were important.

Is any of this difficult to understand? What is confusing?

What is Stephen's strategy? How does he answer his accusers?

Commentator Ajith Fernando makes this observation about Stephen's argument that will help you in your reading and understanding of the speech.

Stephen argues his points from Israel's history as recorded in the Jewish Scriptures. He stresses three major themes.

1. The activity of God is not confined to the geographical land of Israel.
2. Worship acceptable to God is not confined to the Jerusalem temple.
3. The Jews has constantly rejected God's representatives.

(Fernando, p. 246)

Two things are abundantly clear from Steven's sermon. First, he knew the Jewish scriptures, and secondly, he knew whom he was speaking to, speaking in a way that was relevant and convicting to them.



Ask yourself a question that arises from Stephen's example. Do you know the Bible well enough to give a simple presentation of the gospel? Do you understand your own culture well enough to know how to speak to your friends and neighbors in a way that makes sense to them? What steps can you take to better prepare yourself to share the gospel? How do you match up to the command in 1 Peter 3:15, *Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you?*

Not all sermons go well. Stephen's defense of his faith turns out to be an evangelistic sermon with meager results. His method is quite different from a casual sharing that we might use telling others about how much we love God. What can we learn from Stephen about sharing Jesus with others?

What do we learn about discipleship from Stephen?

How does Stephen's boldness challenge your *politeness* with regard to sharing the gospel with others?

In 7:58–8:3 we find that Saul (later the apostle Paul) seems to be in charge of this mob and *ravaging* the church. How would presiding over Steven’s death and persecuting the church plague him in the future?

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 6:8–8:3. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Eleven: Acts 8:4–25

The “Great Power” versus the Holy Spirit

Stephen’s execution proved to be the catalyst for *great persecution*. The beginning of chapter 8 shows the cost of discipleship for the early church. Luke notes that Saul, who will later turn to Christ and spend his life turning the world to Christ, approved of Stephen’s execution. Saul is busy trying to *destroy* the church. The Greek word denotes *brutal and sadistic cruelty. It is used of a wild boar ravaging a vineyard into which he had broken, and of a wild animal savaging a body.* (Barclay, p. 64) The persecution was so intense that much of the church literally fled Jerusalem and looked for more peaceful surroundings.

Because of this persecution the church is changing. What is happening to the church? How is the church changing? Think back to Acts 1:8.

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.

Read Acts 8:4-25. Here the church is fulfilling Jesus’ mandate to the disciples in a way that they would never have anticipated. What stands out to you? What questions do you have of this passage?

We see in these verses how God uses adversity to accomplish his purposes. The church was enjoying rich fellowship, great teaching, spectacular growth and marvelous homegroups. But when persecution breaks out and scatters the believers, rather than the faith disappearing the good news of the gospel is spread.

Think about the trajectory of your own life. Think of the blessings you have experienced and the bumps in the road of life that you have encountered. How has God used adversity in your life to accomplish his purposes? Share this with your homegroup.

How would your faith be affected if you had to leave Santa Barbara because of persecution?

In this passage, what events followed the scattering of the church?

Verses 5-25 show Philip evangelizing the Samaritans. Modern day Christians may shrug at this instance of evangelism thinking it normal and appropriate. But for a first century Jew this was a difficult bridge to cross.

It is hard for us to conceive the boldness of the step Philip took in preaching the gospel to Samaritans. For the hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted about a thousand years. It began with the break-up of the monarchy in the tenth century BC when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722BC, thousands of its inhabitants were deported, and the country was re-populated by foreigners... Not till the fourth century BC, however did the Samaritan schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their repudiation of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews as hybrids in both race and religion, as both heretics and schismatics. (Stott, p. 147)

Are there any *Samaritans* in your life that you would find it difficult to share the gospel with? Who might you find yourself reluctant to talk with about Jesus? Why?



Philip's encounter with Simon the sorcerer shows the triumph of the gospel over the powers which impressed the Samaritans in a certain city. Simon was able, under the power of Satan, to perform miracles and was given the name *Great Power*.¹ Notice the conflict between Jesus and Simon: the people of Samaria followed Simon (v. 12), *But when they believed Philip... they were baptized....* Simon himself believes and is baptized. What takes place later in the chapter indicates that Simon's belief and baptism is not saving faith but a conniving attempt by Simon to gain more impressive power.

Simon the magician is an unusual figure. What do you make of his mercenary approach to the Christian community? Have you known any Simon-like people in your church experience? What characterized them as such?

Before we learn of Simon's fall, Luke tells of an important visit from the apostles who still reside in Jerusalem. Read verses 14-17. What happens when Peter and John arrive for a visit with the Samaritans? Why did they come?

Many groups (including some Catholics, Pentecostals and Charismatics) use these verses to argue that becoming a Christian is a two-stage event. Roman Catholics see the first stage as baptism followed by the confirmation by a bishop. Some Pentecostal and Charismatic groups claim these verses teach a two-stage development of Christian faith. They assert that belief in Christ and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are separate events.²

The key question when approaching this text becomes clear: *Is the two-stage Samaritan experience to be regarded as the norm for Christian initiation?*

1 *Simon... plays an extraordinary role in early Christian literature. In post-apostolic times he is depicted as the father of the Gnostic heresies. Justin Martyr tells how by his magic power he secured a following of devotees not only in Samaria but in Rome, to which he went in the reign of Claudius. In the apocryphal Acts of Peter we are told how he corrupted the Christians in Rome by his false teaching and made the authorities ill-disposed towards them... (Bruce, p. 178)*

2 These thinkers would also point to Acts 10:44 and Acts 19:1-7 to support their view.

To this question we need to give a negative answer... because what happened in Samaria diverged from the plain and general teaching of the apostles. Initiation into Christ, according to the New Testament, is a single stage experience, in which we repent, believe, are baptized and receive both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, after which by the indwelling power of the Spirit we grow into Christian maturity. During this period of growth there may indeed be many deeper, fuller, richer experiences of God; it is the insistence on a two-stage stereotype which we should reject. (Stott, p. 154)

The delay of the gift of the Holy Spirit should be understood as God's demonstration *to the apostles* from Jerusalem – that Samaritans had truly been included in the blessings of the Messiah. From a historical-cultural perspective we see God patching up a conflict that was about 1,000 years old. Samaritans and Jews are worshipping the same Christ!

We see this same situation in Acts 10. While Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit fills his Gentile listeners (people worse than Samaritans in the Jewish mind). He is impressed and asks those present, *Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?* (Acts 10:46-47). That Peter would ask such a question is testimony to the revolutionary nature of faith in Christ. The Samaritans and now the Gentiles (called *dogs* by the Jews) are included in the gospel.

What has your experience of the Holy Spirit been like? Do you associate the Holy Spirit with *warm fuzzies* or do you understand the Holy Spirit to be a subtle presence and influence in your life? Is the Holy Spirit a force or a person? Can you back up your answer with Scripture?

Have you had times in your Christian life when the Holy Spirit seemed especially near to you? Can you identify a time when the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit had a clear and specific impact in your life? What is your relationship with the Holy Spirit right now? Be ready to share these answers with your homegroup.



What can you do to enhance the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit in your life?

Verse 25 is wonderful. Peter and John came to Samaria to find out what was going on. They returned to Jerusalem changed persons. On their way home they were *preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages*. The gospel is bigger than they thought.

Have you had a similar experience since becoming a Christian? How has your view of the Christian faith been enlarged since you came to Christ? Have you seen Jesus change individual lives or groups of people you never thought would change? Describe.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 8:4-25. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Twelve: Acts 8:26–40

Chariot Evangelism

We are in a part of Acts where the church, largely because of persecution, is changing rapidly. Against all expectations non-Jews are finding faith in Jesus the Messiah. The church is becoming much bigger than the original disciples would ever have imagined. In our last study we found Philip spreading the gospel message among the Samaritans. Now, the gospel comes to a complete foreigner who was employed in the palace of a pagan queen. Our passage is a bit unusual. Most of our evangelistic efforts will not be like Philip's. Yet, here there are many important principles for us to learn.

Read Acts 8:26-40. What stands out to you? What is confusing? What makes you laugh?

In our passage, Philip, the mass evangelist in Samaria, becomes the personal evangelist of a particular Ethiopian. This Ethiopian eunuch was probably a convert to Judaism.

He must have been one of two things. In those days the world was full of people who were weary of the many gods and the loose morals of the nations. They came to Judaism and there they found the one God and the austere moral standards which gave life meaning. If they accepted Judaism and were circumcised and took the Law upon themselves they were called *proselytes*; and if they did not go that length but continue to attend the Jewish synagogues and to read the Jewish scriptures they were called *God-fearers*. (Barclay, p. 70)

The Ethiopian, a high official in the queen's court, must have been wealthy. Only the rich would have a chariot, and a scroll of Isaiah was rare and costly. Who was this man?

Ethiopia (Cush in the Old Testament) corresponds to what is known as Nubia. It encompasses parts of what is now southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In ancient literature the Ethiopians were considered as living in the ends of the earth. In other words, with the gospel going to the Samaritans and then to the Ethiopian, it was going to the last two geographical spheres of the Great Commission as given in Acts 1:8. (Fernando, p. 283)

Philip quickly responds to the somewhat unusual command of the angel that results in his conversation with the Ethiopian. Considering the important position of this official it must have taken some courage for Philip to obey the Spirit's direction to speak to this man. Have you ever felt the strong prodding of the Spirit to share your faith with someone? How did you respond?

While this is an unusual passage and Philip's experience is probably not one likely to be repeated in our lives, there are still many important applications of personal evangelism for us to learn. Ponder the story carefully. What are some transferable principles that we can learn from this story about sharing our faith with people we know and encounter?

As you read the book of Acts it becomes very obvious that the gospel spread not only by the preaching of the apostles, but also by common believers sharing their faith wherever they went.

This is implied in Acts 8, where Luke says all except the apostles were scattered (8:1), and that *those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went* (8:4). The public preachers stayed at home while laypeople went out and witnessed for Christ. (Fernando, p. 286)

The church grew through average people talking about their Christian faith. What is your experience of sharing your faith? Do you see evangelism as a privilege and responsibility for you? Or, do you see this as an area of the Christian life that others will take care of?



What are some of the reasons that Christians living in Santa Barbara might be hesitant to talk about their faith and evangelize people? How is our cultural situation in Santa Barbara different from that of the first century Christians? How is it similar?

Among the many lessons we can learn from this passage about evangelism, one is that we are to witness about Christ across cultural disparities. While we don't know much about Philip's background, we do know it must have been very different culturally from the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian was a high standing educated African, probably of very dark complexion, who traveled in a chariot. What are some of the challenges you face in sharing your faith to people from a different cultural background than your own?

Think about the micro-cultures in Santa Barbara. Think more broadly than just ethnicity. Can you name some of these micro-cultures that you come across?

Should how we speak about our faith change depending on whom we are speaking to? Why or why not?

Our culture is very secular and often we encounter people who are simply not interested in God or the gospel. Finding truth outside of themselves, the need for a belief in a sovereign God, or the concept of sin and salvation are seen as either antiquated or irrelevant. How do you try to talk about the gospel to post-modern people who may think like this?

Are you able to verbalize a simple outline of the gospel message using a few portions of scripture? List some helpful Bible verses and bring them to your homegroup meeting. Together think through your passages and link them together cohesively into the gospel message.

How can you now take this scripturally based message and become more equipped to share your faith with non-believers?

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 8:26-40. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Thirteen: Acts 9:1–31

The Vision that Changes Saul

The most dramatic conversion in the Acts period of the church was that of Saul of Tarsus.¹ Luke is so impressed with Saul's conversion that he includes three versions of the event in the book of Acts. The first of these is told in Luke's words, and the second two are told by Paul as he defends himself.

Read each of these accounts. Why do you think Luke spends this much time on Saul's conversion? What differences can you find in the three accounts?

Acts 9:1-31

Acts 22:3-21

Acts 26:1-32

¹ Saul of Tarsus is the Hebrew name of the man Christians usually refer to as Paul. Paul was his Greek name and was used more frequently after his conversion because he was ministering to Gentiles. We will use both names in this study.

Saul was thoroughly Jewish. He tells the Philippian church that he was *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless....* (Philippians 3:6) He was educated at the feet of Gamaliel the famous rabbi who we met in chapter 5. Gamaliel was a great lover of the law of God. In the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish writings, we read, *When Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, the glory of the Torah (the law) ceased, and purity and 'separateness' died.* Saul was trained as a young boy to love the Old Testament Scriptures.²

Paul began his relationship with Christ's church as its persecutor. In 8:1 we observed Saul giving approval to the death of Stephen, the church's first martyr. In 9:1 we find him *still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.* Paul's murderous activity against the church would shape his self-image and worldview for the duration of his life. He writes to the Corinthians, *For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* (1 Corinthians 15:9) He refreshes the memory of the readers of his letter to Galatia... *For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it* (Galatians 1:13). When the Judean churches heard of Paul's conversion they were shocked. *The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy!*

The transformation in Paul's life is dramatic to say the least. Paul goes from a Christian persecutor and killer to planting churches all over the Roman world, suffering in prison for his faith, and writing thirteen of the letters in the New Testament! Think about your own conversion. While undoubtedly it is different from Paul's, it was no less miraculous. What was it like to go from darkness to light in your life? Were you resistant to Christ? What led to your yielding to Christ? Be ready to share your conversion story with your homegroup.

² It is fascinating that Paul, after his conversion, says so many negative things about the law (consider Romans 7 or Galatians 3). Here we find a Pharisee who, while formerly convinced of his legalistic righteousness, came to understand his own inadequacy before God. Hence the law, as a means of righteousness was repudiated in Paul's thinking. F. F. Bruce shows that Paul's change may have been anticipated in his rabbinic training. *It is possible that he had been taught that Messiah, when he came, would change the customs or even abrogate the law. There was an ancient Jewish chronological scheme, probably going back beyond the time of Paul, which divided world history into three ages of two thousand years each – the age of chaos, the age of law (beginning with the revelation to Moses on Sinai) and the messianic age... Those who accepted this scheme might well have believed that the validity of the law was but temporary, lasting only to the dawn of the messianic age.* (Bruce, *Apostle*, p. 70)



One of the least dramatic, but most impressive, conversions of the twentieth century would be that of C.S. Lewis. Lewis gave up the faith of his parents as a teenager and was a staunch atheist. His desire was to not meet God! But God had other plans. God moved in on Lewis and changed him forever. Consider Lewis' own description of this event.

I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back—drip—drip—drip and presently trickle—trickle. I rather disliked the feeling... You must picture me alone in that room in Magdlen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.³

Re-read Acts 9:3-9. Who takes the initiative in Saul's conversion?

Is Saul forced to become a follower of Jesus? Does he have a choice in this matter?

What do you think Paul thought about during his three days of blindness?

Ananias isn't too sure he wants anything to do with Saul (v. 13). He didn't want to do any *discipleship* with this pugnacious Pharisee! Have you had a similar experience? Have you ever thought, *No way. Jesus can't change that person!?* If so, why?

³ *Surprised By Joy*, p. 228.

Consider the power and the cost of knowing Christ. Paul went to Damascus a proud Pharisee and left a penitent, but forgiven sinner. His encounter with Jesus cost him his career as a rabbi – everything was changed. After his stay in Damascus, *Paul the persecutor* becomes *Paul the persecuted*. He flees at night in a basket that is lowered through an opening in the wall of the city. His flight will end, as far as Luke’s story is told, as a prisoner in Rome waiting to be tried for his loyalty to Jesus. Along the way Paul will be beaten, stoned and left for dead, imprisoned, and shipwrecked.

Respond to this statement by William Barclay.

The Christian is a man who has ceased to do what he wants to do and who has begun to do what Jesus Christ wants him to do. (Barclay, p. 73)

What has your commitment to Jesus cost you? How have you changed since becoming a Christian? To put it differently, how would you be different if you were not a believer?

What happened to Paul after his conversion (vv. 18-31)? What did he do?

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 9:1-31. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Fourteen: Acts 9:32–11:18

The Vision that Changes Peter

With the conversion of Saul, the church *had peace* and continued to grow in numbers (9:31). Luke's narrative leaves Paul in Jerusalem and concentrates on Peter from 9:32–12:25. In these chapters Peter performs miracles (9:32-42), proclaims the gospel to Cornelius who becomes the first Gentile believer (10:1–11:18), and spends some more time in prison (12:1-25). After chapter 12, Paul becomes the central figure in Luke's story. But first, Luke wants to show that the inclusion of Gentiles into the church was the direct result of God's initiation through Peter (the apostle to the Jews). Those in the first-century church who wished to drive a wedge between Paul and Peter would get no help from the book of Acts.¹

Read 9:32–11:18 and pay special attention to 10:1–11:18. What stands out as you read these verses? Does the *attitude* of the early church surprise you? What questions do you have of these verses? What is unclear?

Peter, along with many Jewish believers in the early church, shared our problem of mixing his culture with his faith. This apostle's culture was thoroughly Jewish. Peter thought like a Jew, worshipped like a Jew, and ate like a Jew... because Peter was a Jew. So what about those Gentiles? What if the Gentiles placed their faith in Jesus as Messiah? Would they need to become Jewish? Would they have to obey the ceremonial Law of Moses? Would they participate in temple worship?

In order to appreciate the shocking nature of this story to the early church we must understand the nature of Jewish-Gentile relations. Religious Jews wanted nothing to do with Gentiles. Stott clarifies:

¹ The importance of this event is emphasized by the space Luke devotes to the story. He spends 66 verses on the conversion of Cornelius.

It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles (including *God-fearers*) on the other. Not that the Old Testament itself countenanced such a divide. On the contrary, alongside its oracles against the hostile nations, it affirmed that God had a purpose for them. By choosing and blessing one family, he intended to bless all the families of the earth... The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favouritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as 'dogs', and developed traditions which kept them apart. (Stott, p. 185)²

Jews would never enter a Gentile home nor would they allow a Gentile to enter theirs. They would not accept hospitality from a Gentile because Gentiles failed to tithe (*If Gentiles rob God, how can I accept this gift from them?*). When Peter enters the home of Cornelius in Caesarea he reminds the Roman centurion that to do so *is against our law*. This, again, is not the law of the Old Testament but the law of Jewish tradition.

Re-read 10:9-48. What is Peter learning in this vision? How is God changing his understanding of being a disciple through this vision and his experience of ministering to Cornelius? How do you think Peter was feeling at this point?

² *The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of Hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that He had made. The best of the serpents crush, they said, the best of the Gentiles kill. It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world.... The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death. (Ephesians, Barclay, p. 125)*



The walk from Joppa to Caesarea takes about 9 hours. What do you think Peter thought about during this walk? What do you think the unlikely delegation of ten talked about?³ Notice in 10:34-35 how Peter's understanding of the gospel is being expanded.

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

How has your understanding of the gospel grown since the time you first believed? What types of preconceptions did you bring to your faith that have changed as you have read the Bible?

Peter's sermon is interrupted by the Holy Spirit! Gentiles are receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter's contingent is astonished, and he then asks the question, *Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?* (vv. 44-47)

The radical nature of this event in Caesarea is felt when we read on through Acts 11:18. When Peter's ministry becomes known in Jerusalem he is criticized and must go to Jerusalem to defend his practices. Jewish Christians were facing a new phase in their understanding of what took place at Pentecost. First, Jesus was the Messiah of Jews only. Then, in Acts 8 Samaritans are included in the blessing (along with an Ethiopian). Now the final barrier has been crossed. Gentiles are worshipping Jesus as Messiah. *Now Peter, surely you have gone too far!* The Jews in Jerusalem *took issue with Peter* and asked him to defend his practice: *You entered a house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.*

³ The group consisted of three men from Joppa, Peter and six others who went to witness the encounter with Cornelius (11:12). The number of witnesses may be significant. Barclay points out that in Egyptian law seven witnesses were necessary to establish a case completely. So Peter is in effect saying, *I am not arguing with you. I am telling you the facts and of these facts there are seven witnesses. The case is proved.* (Barclay, p. 92)

When Peter tells the story of what happened his critics were silenced (v. 18).

Nothing could be said to counter Peter's argument. God had acted and clearly shown His will. That He had bestowed His blessing on Gentiles, giving them the change of heart and mind which results in eternal life, was a matter for wonder and praise. Their criticism ceased; their worship began. (Bruce, p. 236)

One of the great lessons of this section of Acts is that of the unity of the church. Paul makes this same point. Read Ephesians 2:11-21. What does it add to Luke's story?

How has this section of Acts challenged your understanding of your faith? Respond to the following statement by John Stott:

The fundamental emphasis of the Cornelius story is that, since God does not make distinctions in his new society, we have no liberty to make them either. Yet, tragic as it is, the church has never learned irrevocably the truth of its own unity or of the equality of its members in Christ. Even Peter himself, despite the fourfold divine witness he had received, later had a bad lapse in Antioch, withdrew from fellowship with believing Gentiles, and had to be publicly opposed by Paul (Galatians 2:11ff.)... All such discrimination is inexcusable even in non-Christian society; in the Christian community it is both an obscenity (because offensive to human dignity) and a blasphemy (because offensive to God who accepts without discrimination all who repent and believe). Like Peter, we have to learn that 'God does not show favouritism' (10:34). (Stott, p. 197)

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 9:32—11:18. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Fifteen: Acts 11:19–30

A New Church is Planted

The church is expanding geographically, numerically and also culturally. Some of the scattered believers take the message to non-Jews. *But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.*¹

Read Acts 11:19-30. These verses describe the beginning of the first local church outside of Jerusalem. What stands out to you? What questions does the story bring up in your mind?

When the Jerusalem church hears about what God is doing in Antioch,² they send Barnabas to investigate. *He saw evidence of the grace of God.* Barnabas goes to Tarsus to find Saul and the two of them spend a year nurturing the young believers in Antioch.

Read Acts 4:36 and 11:22-24 along with Fernando's comment. How is Barnabas described? What stands out about his actions and character?

Luke undoubtedly intends to present the qualities of Barnabas as an encourager in this passage. He had earlier said how this man had been given his name, meaning *son of encouragement*, by the apostles (4:36). Now Luke not only records how Barnabas encouraged the young church in Antioch (v. 23), he also gives the character traits that enabled this man to be such an effective encourager (v. 24). (Fernando, p. 352)

1 Translations vary widely. The NIV reads Greeks. The Good News Bible reads Gentiles, the KJV reads Grecians and the Simple English Bible reads, simply, non-Jews. The problem comes from a variant in the Greek texts we have. The context, however, seems to clear up the problem. The Gospel is being preached to a new group of people, i.e., non-Jews.

2 Antioch was an extremely cosmopolitan city. Its population (estimated at about 500,000) was primarily Greek but included Jews, Persians, Indians and Chinese. Josephus called it the third city of the empire behind Rome and Alexandria. Today Antioch is in modern day Turkey and is called Antakya with a smaller population of about 40,000.

Why is the ministry of encouragement so important in the Christian life and a local church?
What does it mean for you to be encouraged spiritually?

Who is someone you have seen in your life to be a great encourager spiritually? What are they like? What makes them so good at it?

How could SBCC do a better job of being a church of encouragement? How could you do a better job of being like Barnabas or the example you noted above?

Barnabas apparently desires help in strengthening this young church. For this reason, he goes to find Paul and brings him back to Antioch to help with the teaching of the church. Why do you think Barnabas went to get the help of Paul? What does this teach us about the nature of team ministry?

Paul's fascinating life continues to change.

The trip to Tarsus was about a hundred miles—a major undertaking. About ten years must have elapsed since Saul had left Jerusalem and gone to Tarsus (9:30). He himself says that he was in Syria and Cilicia (whose principle city was Tarsus) during this time (Galatians 1:21). There is every reason to believe, especially considering his comments in Galatians 1, that he was evangelizing during this time. (Fernando, p. 350)



We know what Paul and Barnabas did in Antioch. *For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.* (11:26) To this point in our study of Acts we have seen many times the importance of instructing and teaching Christians.

Here with the birth of the new church in Antioch, the first thing Paul and Barnabas do to strengthen the believers is to make sure they were *taught*. Why is this the case? What is so important about instruction both for individual Christians and for the church?

Describe how you have been taught. What has been the benefit of this teaching in your following of Jesus?

In verse 26 Luke adds a footnote that is perhaps more significant for modern readers of Acts than it was for those who originally read the book. *And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.* The name *Christian* will only appear two more times in the New Testament (Acts 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16), but it became the most popular name to describe the followers of Christ throughout the church's history.

Although Jewish Christians could stay under the protective umbrella of the *freedom of religion* that the Roman government had granted the Jews, with the influx of Gentiles into the church the Christians had to distinguish themselves from the Jews and assume a new name. (Kistemaker, p. 423)

Luke uses other names to denote those who placed their faith in Christ. What aspect of the life of a believer do these names highlight?

disciples (6:1)

saints (9:13)

brethren (1:16; 9:30)

those *being saved* (2:47)

people of *the Way* (9:2)

What names do you use to describe your relationship with Jesus? How do these reflect your view of yourself and of the gospel of Christ?

It is easy to read Acts and focus on the big names, *Peter, Paul, John, Philip, Steven and Barnabas*. But look again at verses 19-20. It was the unnamed common believer, scattered because of persecution, who spoke and preached about the *Lord Jesus*. The gospel spread like wild fire, because the early Christians would not, in fact could not, stop talking about Jesus. What does this tell you about the work of the Kingdom in our own time? Do you think that God primarily accomplishes his purposes through prominent Christians or through everyday believers? Give examples.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 11:19-30. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.



Study Sixteen: Acts 12:1-25

Prison, Prayer and Peter

In chapter 12 the time of peace enjoyed by the church since the conversion of Paul comes to an abrupt halt. Persecution of this young church breaks out again. This time the source of the persecution changes and we find King Herod leading the torment. Tragically, James becomes the first apostle to be martyred and Peter is thrown into prison.

Read Acts 12:1-25. What stands out to you? What questions do you have of the story?

Herod Agrippa I (born 10BC) was the grandson of Herod the Great (the Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was an infant, Matthew 2:1-16). Herod Agrippa I, by virtue of his grandmother, claimed to be Jewish. Accordingly he worshipped in the temple and during the Feast of Tabernacles he was permitted to read a passage from the Law in public worship. His reception by the Jews increased his power in Jerusalem and assured his position in the Roman empire. His pogrom against the church seems to be a calculated measure to insure his political position. After killing James, *he saw that this pleased the Jews*, and had Peter arrested (v. 2).

This wave of persecution must have seemed devastating to the church. Their two key leaders were taken by the authorities and one of them, at least, would not be coming back. Try to place yourself in the shoes of these frightened believers. What might they have been feeling?

It is interesting that Luke mentions the fact that this time of persecution took place during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (also called Passover during New Testament times). During this feast Jews made their bread without yeast (unleavened bread). They also purged yeast from their homes during this festival. This was a symbol of purging sin from the community.

Understanding this allows us to see the irony in Peter's imprisonment. The Jews may have felt that they were purging the *yeast* of Peter's preaching once and for all. In reality they are standing against the plan of God. Peter, on the other hand, experiences true deliverance from his bondage, which is very much like what the Jews experienced in the original Passover (Exodus 12).

Peter was held in what we would call a *maximum security* prison. He is guarded by 16 soldiers and two of them are physically chained to him.

What do we learn about prayer from this story? Think about verses 5 and 15 together. How do you explain their reaction in verse 15? Did the church have faith that God would answer their prayers?

One irony in the story is that Peter has similarly been released from prison before. In that instance, it was also through an angel and at night (5:19-20). What is God teaching the church about prayer? What humor might we see in this difficult situation?

This famous New Testament story is often used to illustrate the power of fervent prayer. The church prays and Peter is released! We would be remiss however if we focused exclusively on Peter's miraculous rescue and ignored the brutal reality of the death of James. Luke has recorded these two events together.

But the fact that Luke has placed these two events side by side suggests that the two ways in which God's sovereignty is expressed—physical rescue and no physical rescue—should both be considered when thinking about God's help in time of trouble. What is common in these situations is that both Peter and James were faithful to Christ. (Fernando, p. 364)



Are you comfortable with God's sovereignty when you pray? How do you understand the mystery of answered and unanswered prayer?

In our study of the book of Acts we have seen that angels have played a prominent role. Unfortunately, we often read right by references to angels. In this passage alone the *angel* comes up seven times (7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 23). We have seen angels directing people (8:26; 10:3-6), providing help in times of trouble (5:19-20; 12:7-10; 27:23) and bringing judgment (12:23).

Was it easy for you to read past the numerous references to angels in your study of Acts? It is interesting to note that the statement in verse 15, *It is his angel!* Commentators point out that this reflects the popular Jewish belief in guiding and protecting angels.

How do you understand the role and ministry of angels? Consider Hebrews 1:14.

Luke's description of Herod's death may seem startling, even fanciful. Interestingly, however, Josephus, a historian of the first century, described Herod's death in a similar manner stating that Herod died after a *severe pain...arose in his belly*.

Luke and Josephus seem to be giving two descriptions of the same event. Intestinal worms were (and are) a common problem in the Middle East. Rendle Short, formerly a professor of surgery at Bristol University, notes that *worms can form a tight ball and cause acute intestinal obstruction that can lead to death*.¹ Other interpreters think Luke had appendicitis in mind.

¹ *The Bible and Modern Medicine*, 1955.

Gather your thoughts from your study of Acts 12:1-25. What are one or two take home lessons from this study that you will apply to your life this week? Be practical. Be prepared to tell your homegroup how they can pray for you in this regard.

Think back through the past 16 weeks of our study in the book of Acts.

What have you learned about the church?

What have you learned about God? Has your gratitude to God and your passion for God been enhanced during your study of Acts? In what ways?

Has your Christian life been challenged? In what ways?



How have you grown (or regressed) in your relationship to Christ during the past few months?

In one sentence, write what you hope to remember from your study of Acts 1-12 many months from now.

