

From Easter to Pentecost and Beyond: A Church-Wide Study in the Book of Acts

Clarksville First United Methodist Church
April 8 — May 12, 2020
Brian Shelton, Teacher

Week 2

Gospel to the God-Fearers

Acts 6-12

Wednesday, April 15

Introduction

Last week, we saw the Spirit descend at Pentecost and empowers the disciples for service (1:8). With the growth of the church and this power being displayed to Jerusalem, it's time for us to start calling the disciples "apostles." The twelve followers of Jesus are now church leaders, given this new title beyond other disciples and new converts. The term means "one sent forth," in the form of authority like an ambassador heralding the good news of the gospel. These were men who walked with Jesus, witnessed his resurrection (1:21-22), and now are realized to be pillars in the leadership of the church.



Acts chapters 6-12 show the continued evangelism to the Jews, but broadens the availability of the message out to God-fearers and gentiles. The opposition by Jewish leaders heightens as they kill their first Christian. The opposition by the Jewish King Herod Antipas accompanies this as he kills his first Christian. All the while, the gospel is going forth. New converts are made in the midst of this suffering. Those who suffer still echo the disciples' response last week: "Rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (5:41).

The theme of the tension between being Jew vs. being gentile (non-Jewish) takes form in these chapters. God's people in the Old Testament had been his chosen people, set apart in holiness from the nations around them. They did not eat certain gentile foods and did not enter into the homes of gentiles. Central to this lifestyle was Leviticus 11:44: "For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy." That would change in Acts. Watch for God's plan to the nations unfold.

The Apostle Paul is introduced as the zealous, Jewish Saul this week. Peter and Paul overlap in the narrative, before this section sees Peter fade away while the focus on Paul's gentile ministry increases.

Questions

Inquiries from last week will be provided here each time. While there are no inquiries from last week, there were a vast numbers of clicks on the video and a United Methodist group of women in Oklahoma are joining us in this study. Welcome back to all of you! Send your comments or questions to wbrianshelton@gmail.com. Your voice can shape the study.

Reading Acts 6-12



Quiz

After you have read the passage, if you want to engage in a self-assessment—a quiz over the reading—it's here as an option for you. The questions might include important facts or trivial facts from the reading. The answers are at the end of this module under the title, "Answers to the Quiz."

1. Why did the apostles decide to appoint deacons to serve tables and handle practical ministries?
 2. What accusation is made against Stephen?
 3. Name two Old Testament figures in Stephen's sermon that he describes as persecuted by fellow Jews in prior generations.
 4. Who asked to buy the gifts of signs and wonders displayed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles?
 5. What references to a metaphor of "seeing" characterize Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus?
 6. What professional position does Cornelius the gentile hold?
 7. In Peter's vision of the sheet from heaven, what non-kosher food was contained on it?
 8. Who joins with Paul to take up a collection for the church in anticipation of a famine?
 9. What apostle was beheaded in Acts?
 10. Who came out to the crowds in self-aggrandizement and was struck dead?
- Bonus: Name all of the regions and cities where Peter is found in this section (five—and this is hard).

Overview of section

Peter has several encounters that shape his vision for the inclusion of gentiles—not just Jews—in the faith. The Apostle Paul is called still called Saul when he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus. He has some initial encounters in his ministry before the book of Acts shifts from Peter and the twelve to Paul. Deacons are introduced, of which Stephen's story is primary. Either the apostle or the deacon named Philip has encounters in Samaria and Gaza.

Chapter 6

The apostles are focused on spreading the gospel in the streets of Jerusalem and they are beginning to share it in nearby regions. Their focus is on teaching, evangelism, and works of mercy. However, some Christians feel neglected in the apostolic ministry of leading the church (6:1). Therefore, the apostles appoint deacons so that their own work can keep a preaching focus: "It is not desirable to leave the word of God and serve tables...we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word" (6:2, 4).

These first deacons are named for us (6:5). They will serve in the ministry of the early church along the lines of the spiritual gift of helps (1 Cor. 12:28). They will "wait tables," the root for the word "deacon." Clarkesville First United Methodist Church has the unique staffing of a deaconess in Jennifer Boydston. This is an appointment of service in the larger life of the church. If the development of this new position in Acts interests you, email Jennifer at jennifer@clarkesvillefirstumc.org and ask her about her ministry and her appointment.

After Stephen is recognized as a minister of the gospel—showing signs and wonders in healing (6:8)—a religious sect in Jerusalem secretly reports him to the Jewish authorities as committing blasphemy. A simple claim that Jesus was the Messiah could be considered blasphemy—unless it were true.



Chapter 7

Stephen is placed on trial and he reaches back to Abraham to explain how God established a covenant relationship with his people. He tells the story of Joseph being sold to slavery by his brothers, an evil which God used to save their lives during a famine. He tells the story of Moses delivering the commandments to the people, only to find them betraying his efforts by worshipping a false god. Then, Stephen turns to accuse these Jewish leaders of the same—persecuting the prophets. They killed Jesus, which God is using as the gospel message to his people that is preached by Stephen. Now they persecute him, which is more of the same pattern. Notice his direct rebuke to them: “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you” (7:51).

The Jewish Sanhedrin is not allowed to commit capital punishment under Roman law. That’s why they had to pressure Pilate to crucify Jesus in the gospels. When the mob stones Stephen, this is against the law and it is an act of vigilantes by some who are religiously zealous.

They place their coats for this murderous activity at the feet of Saul (7:58). He is introduced in foreshadowing, this person who will soon be a champion for the movement called Christianity. He gets renamed Paul and becomes an apostle himself after he encounters Jesus. From this event, along with the arrests of the apostles, the Jewish leaders are making all efforts to stop Christianity from gaining momentum.

Chapter 8

The same Saul who consented to the death of Stephen (v.1) is now making “havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison” (v.3). Whether they dwell in these homes or are worshipping in house churches when Saul bursts in, he is zealous to keep Judaism pure from what he sees as heresy to the Old Testament covenant.

We then see Philip preaching in Samaria to the crowds and in Gaza to the eunuch. A problem of identity arises on whether this is the apostle (1:13) or the deacon (6:5). On one hand, the deacon Stephen is doing great ministry just beforehand (ch.6-7); on the other hand, the narrative returns to the Apostle Peter soon after (ch.9). It doesn’t help his identity that 8:14 reads, “When the apostles *who were at Jerusalem* heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.” We don’t know if that means Philip was not in Jerusalem (supporting the apostle theory) or if he was numbered among the apostles in Jerusalem (supporting the deacon theory). Either way, the work of the Lord is done through Philip.

Philip encounters a man named Simon Magus who engaged in sorcery and amazed the crowds (8:11), and people may have associated his recent works as being from God (8:10) like the apostles were doing. He professes belief but he is amazed at the magic-like signs and wonders the apostles performed. When he asks to buy the gifts (8:18-19), Peter rebukes him to repent, saying, “Your heart is not right in the sight of God” but that he was “poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity” (8:20-23).

Philip is then moved by an angel to go towards Gaza, where he encounters the Ethiopian eunuch. He is a figure of responsibility in the court of Queen Candace (8:27). It was not uncommon for males in the court of a queen to be made eunuchs in the ancient world. He is reading a passage from Isaiah that is a prophecy about Jesus and he is confused by its meaning. Philip explains it to him, the eunuch believes and is baptized, and he takes the good news back to Ethiopia.

Chapter 9

Saul continues his persecution of the church, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (v.1). He gains Jewish leadership authority to bring Christians in Damascus to prison and trial. Notice the name for the Christian movement used by Luke: “the Way” (v.2). It is reminiscent of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, when Thomas asked, “Lord where are you going and how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:5-6).



Then Saul’s life is changed. On the road to Damascus, a light shone suddenly from heaven, Saul fell to the ground, and Jesus asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (vv.3-4). Jesus’ ownership over his children is reminiscent of his words in the gospel judgment passage of the sheep and the goats: “In as much as you’ve done it to the least of these my brethren, you’ve done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40). Saul is commanded to go into the city and wait, blinded for three days. A faithful disciple named Ananias gets a vision from the Lord to go lay hands on him to receive his sight. Naturally, Ananias is hesitant, reminding the Lord about “how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem” (v.13). Saul is then recognized by Jesus to be “a chosen vessel to bear my name before gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (v.15). When Saul started

preaching Christ in the synagogues, the people felt the same way, “Is this not he who destroyed those who call on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose?” (v.21). When he is first brought before the apostles, they were also afraid of him, too (v.26). But Barnabas presented him, the same “Son of Encouragement” we met last week (4:36). He testified to Paul’s conversion and ministry.

This important section closes with another early church summary statement (v.31). The remainder of the chapters in Acts this week focus on Peter, before they shift to Paul permanently in chapter 13. Peter heals the paralytic Aeneas in Lydda and raised Tabitha from the dead in Joppa.

Chapter 10

In the most important chapter dealing with the tension between Jewish and gentile Christians in Acts, chapter 10 tells of how the chief apostle Peter comes face to face with the availability of the gospel and the Holy Spirit to all people, not just the Jewish people. It begins with an Italian centurion Cornelius. He was a God-fearer (v.2), which means he believed in one God, the Jewish God, led his family through some forms of obedience, such as giving alms. The Lord tells him to send for Peter in Joppa.

Meanwhile, God is making Peter ready for the invitation. Peter is on the housetop in prayer when a vision from the Lord came to him. A great sheet from heaven descended, opening up to provide food that was from animals that were considered by Jews to be unholy to eat. In Leviticus 1:1-47, God had prohibited these foods as part of his covenant and their lifestyle to be holy (11:44), different from the world. A good Jew would not eat them. A voice in the vision said to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat” (v.13).

Peter refused because they were unclean. “What God has cleansed you must not call common” (v15), or uneatable. Later Paul would write, “Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food” to describe Christian liberty (1 Cor. 6:13). As Peter contemplates a lifestyle that seems more gentile than Jewish, Cornelius’ invitation arrives. When he arrives at this gentile’s house, he is not supposed to enter because of Jewish custom. However he says to Cornelius, “You know how unlawful it is for Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (v.28). Then, when he explains to Cornelius how “God shows no partiality” (v.34), including to gentiles, the Holy Spirit fell on all the house members who then spoke in tongues and were baptized—just like the faithful Jewish apostles themselves. Luke writes, “The gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the gentiles also” (v.45). These God-fearers were faithful but were not Jewish, yet they experience the fullest qualities of believers in Jesus. Between the Samaritan “pentecost” and the Cornelian “pentecost,” Peter now got how the Christian message was for all. In the words of Paul later, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In Acts 15 for next week, a final declaration by the apostles will seal the deal that the belief. No necessary following of Jewish customs can mark a believer in this new covenant if they simply believe in Jesus.

Chapter 11

Peter explains this experience of Cornelius’ house and the vision to eat unclean food with the other apostles and brethren in Judea. After showing the geographical extent of the ministry of Stephen and the apostles, a summary verse comes in v.21: “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.”

Barnabas goes to Saul and for a year they lived in Antioch, likely a discipleship time for the new apostle. Here we receive this landmark verse in 11:26: “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” This term is one of association, where “-ian” means “like or related to,” added on to “Christ.” The term we call “follower of Christ” is equivalent to “Christlike one.”

A prophet named Abagus arrived in Antioch to warn of a great famine coming, leading the disciples to collect relief for those in need. This sets up Barnabas and Paul’s early mission, to deliver these funds to the church leaders, keeping alive our key passage of 2:42-27 where the Christians shared all things in common as each had need.

Chapter 12

James, the brother of John, was an important disciple in the gospels but had not been named with specific action in Acts. Suddenly, out of nowhere, James is arrested and killed in two quick verses. To the reader, his death comes with suddenness and astonishment—as quick as the blow of a sword. Until now, the apostles were seeing successes on every front, overcoming every obstacle before them. This is very different—that for a moment, the reader is stalled in shock. In my own book on the apostles, I describe it this way: “For the first time, the apostles are proved perviewous [able to be defeated]. The story of Jesus’ twelve disciples will not be one in which they are protected from death in promotion of the advancing Kingdom. They are at all at risk in a new and profound way. They will die. The year is AD 44.” (*Quest for the Historical Apostles* [Baker, 2018], 118.)



Peter is immediately arrested and heavily guarded by soldiers (vv. 3-4). His own fate hangs in the balance. When arrested before, he was scolded by the Sanhedrin (ch.2) or delivered from prison by an angel (ch.5). Now we realize that Peter could die as James did. However, God is not finished with Peter yet, sending an angel to free him from prison. He was bound to two soldiers in a locked cell when “an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a great light shone down in prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise, quickly!’ And his chains fell off his hands” (vv.7). This miraculous relief is captured in the hymn by the Methodist Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be*, where Peter’s freedom from prison is a type or parallel to our freedom from sin:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

When Peter arrives at the house of some disciples, he relates the event and instructs them to tell James (v.17). James the brother of John had just died and Peter knew that, so this is a reference to the brother of Jesus and likely author of the book of James who would play a prominent role of the church in Jerusalem in the first century. Just as there were multiple Simons (Magus, the Tanner, Peter, the Zealot), the James individuals can be confusing (brother of Jesus, brother of John, son of Alphaeus).

In one of the most interesting of verses in Acts, Peter then disappears permanently from the stage of the early church. In chapter 15, at the Jerusalem Council, he reappears to provide guidance and a speech, but that event is not about Peter. The council provides an apostolic support for Paul, for whom the book of Acts will shift to focus. In verse 17 we say good-bye to the fisherman of Galilee: “And he departed and went to another place.”

The same King Herod Antipas who had killed James and arrested Peter one day strutted out in royal apparel upon gaining peace with Tyre and Sidon. The people shouted that he was like a god and not a man (v.22). An angel struck him immediately “for not giving glory to God, and he was eaten by worms and died” (v.23). In contrast, the word of God thrived (v. 24). James’ death is vindicated.

Commentary

- 6:1—People’s complaining about needing support led to a solution for the church and the creation of an office of deacons.
- 6:6—The deacons are commissioned by the apostles: “They set them before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.” The apostles are still the guiding authorities in this new church.
- 6:8—Stephen, the appointed deacon, “did signs and wonders among the people,” furthering evidencing that Jesus’ power at Pentecost wasn’t just for the apostles, but for all who believe. Likewise, the suffering that Jesus foretold not only applied to the apostles, but as Stephen was martyred, we realize that this faith won’t be an easy one for us all.

- 7:2-50—Like Peter’s sermons to Jews, Stephen’s defense unpacked the Jewish scriptures to show Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.
- 7:56—Stephen gets a glimpse of heaven at his martyrdom, providing confirmation that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father in intercession for us.
- 7:60—Notice Stephen asks forgiveness of his persecutors like Jesus did against his persecutors from the cross (Luke 23:34).
- 8:18—Simon Magus offered money to buy access to the apostles’ signs and wonders. This led to the term “simony” in the middle ages when people paid money for their bishop appointments. Reformers like Martin Luther protested this practice, just as Peter does here.
- 8:21—Notice that Peter says Simon’s “heart is not right in the sight of God” for this. This is surprising because Simon had believed and was baptized (8:13). It’s an instruction to the church that just because someone is a member doesn’t mean that their discipleship is complete. Simon seem to respond in sincerity (8:24), asking Peter to pray for him and his sanctification.
- 8:39-40—It is unique that God would physically move someone from place to place as he does Philip, but it is yet another wonder among the work of the Spirit during this time.
- 9:3-6—Paul gets a vision of Jesus, calling him to cease persecuting Christians. Later, Paul would use this event as credibility in being an apostle. He describes how Jesus appeared in ministry to the other apostles, then he describes himself: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor. 15:8).
- 9:25—The Jews in Damascus sought to kill Paul. It is ironic that he sought to kill Christians in Damascus when Jesus confronted him on that same route. Now, his former allies are providing a dose of his own persecution. When he slips through the window of the city wall, it is because many houses were commonly built into the wall. Their windows were the outer windows of the city.
- 10:6—The detailed writing style of Luke continues in these chapters. In the case of this verse, he mentions that Peter was at the house of a Simon, in Joppa, who was a tanner, and who lived by the sea. This propensity for details offers historical credibility to Luke’s testimony.
- 11:23-24—Notice the reputation that Barnabas maintains. Already called a “Son of Encouragement,” now he is recognized as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” His ministry is effective, surely in part due to this reputation.
- 11:27—The arrival of Agabus is a bit of a mystery. He is not mentioned before as a follower of Jesus. He comes from Jerusalem as a prophet—like an Old Testament prophet who travels around with words from the Lord. In the Old Testament, the test for a prophet’s legitimacy was if their prophecy came true (Deut. 18:21-22). The famine did come, so we believe he was from the Lord. He will reappear in 21:11 when he prophesies about Paul becoming a prisoner. He is just as mysterious then.
- 12:11-16—It is almost humorous that while the disciples were praying for Peter in prison, he arrived at their house. Rhoda heard his voice and related his presence at the gate to them, but she did not let him in. He stood waiting as they talked about whether or not it was his angel, surprised that he would be freed from prison.

Application

- How much does CFUMC or your local church look like the early church in the Acts chapters this week? This question is worth considering again.
- How do you manage to explain Simon Magus, who believed and was baptized before he wanted selfishly to buy the gifts of healing that the Spirit gave to the apostles? How do we explain this in terms of sanctification: Jesus as our Lord and Savior?

- Did the sudden death of James, the brother of John, strike you? Did you sense the contrast between this loss and the many wins that the apostles were gaining?
- Like Ananias and Sapphira last week, how do you explain theologically the sudden death of King Herod? We call it judgment for his sin of pride (12:23), but we also don't get struck down when we sin. How do we recognize God as consistent, or does he have to be when he is showing mercy to us?
- What did you think of the expansion of the Spirit's power beyond the apostles to the deacons—a seeming second generation of believers? Does that give you confidence that the same Spirit in the early church is alive and empowering the church today?
- How did you feel when the gentile Cornelius got the Holy Spirit? In the gospels, it was the despised tax collectors like Matthew, the sinful Mary Magdalene, and other sinners who were receptive to Jesus' message to become disciples. Now, it's the gentiles. Do you recognize the diversity, social mercy, and inclusion of undesirables that are making up the early church?

Further Application

- How did you feel when Stephen was stoned, knowing how unjust it was? Would you be struck to learn that the book of James tells us how “with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness” (3:9)? In other words, we “kill” people in our hearts when he speak against them. Are we so different?
- If Luke wrote this part of Acts without being there for the events—the “we” passage have not yet begun—who do you think related this to him? The insights into Paul's own experiences, including his place at Stephen's stoning evidence Paul's later testimony to him. From which eyewitness or apostle did he get information on Acts 1-8? When did he have access to these apostles to record their story?

Answers to the Quiz

1. So the apostles could focus on preaching: “It is not desirable to leave the word of God and serve tables...we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:2, 4)
2. Blasphemy (6:11)
3. Joseph (7:9-16) and Moses (7:17-50)
4. Simon Magus (8:18-19)
5. A light (9:3) and temporary blindness (9:8, 18)
6. A centurion of the Italian Regiment (10:1)
7. “All kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air” (10:12)
8. Barnabas (11:30)
9. James, the brother of John (12:2)
10. King Herod Antipas (12:21-23)

Bonus: Samaria (8:14), Lydda (9:32), Joppa (9:36), Caesarea (10:24), and Jerusalem (12:3)

