

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 6

Gospel to the Uttermost

Wednesday, May 5

Introduction

While our reading of the book of Acts came to an end last week, there is more to consider “from Easter to Pentecost and beyond.” This week, we look to an epistle by one of these apostles that we watched together in Acts. This week, your teacher returns to video to summarize our study and to send you forth in continued ministry. This week, we will consider how the individual apostles continued their ministry beyond the book of Acts in fulfillment of the Great Commission. Finally, this week, we reflect on qualities that should characterize the larger church from our study and examine the ministry of our local church congregations. If you are a visitor, then every time you see “CFUMC” for Clarksville First United Methodist Church, you can substitute your own church congregation to imagine the same ideals and values which should be there if we are going to model our church after the early church in Acts.

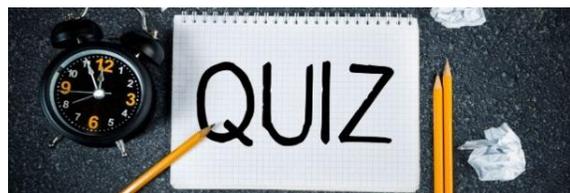
Reading

Any New Testament Epistle

Choose any NT epistle by Paul (Romans-Philemon), James, Peter, or John. With our knowledge of these authors at work in the book of Acts, it can be more meaningful to read their letters to the church. Some further explanation of this exercise is in the video.

Quiz

This week’s quiz is not based on NT reading but mostly on church tradition. You’re not supposed to know the answers to these, but it can be a primer for the lesson ahead. Give it a stab! The answers are at the end of this module under the title, “Answers to the Quiz.”



1. Who was the first apostle to die?
2. Which apostle supposedly encountered Jesus when the apostle was fleeing a Roman prison?
3. Which apostle supposedly died a natural death rather than a martyrdom?
4. Which apostle may have gone to Spain?
5. Which apostle was supposedly crucified upside down?
6. What reason is given for this crucifixion request?
7. Which apostle likely went to India?
8. Which apostle was held prisoner by cannibals?
9. Which two apostles were executed by Emperor Nero?
10. What types of passages in Acts are cited as possible examples of child baptisms?

Bonus: Name all 12 apostles (again), substituting Matthias for Judas Iscariot. (Now it's only 11.)



Overview of section

With the completion of our reading the book of Acts, this week we consider the implications and application of the whole book and of our study together. The apostles went to the Jews first, to the God-fearers, and to the gentiles. The apostles in Acts went to Judea, Samaria, Anatolia or Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece, and Italy. Beyond the New Testament, the apostles continued this same pattern of ministry in new geographical areas. Now, it is time for us—their inheritors of this gospel ministry—to consider what it means to do the same. If you want to engage in reading for this study, consider reading any book of the bible beyond Acts but before Revelation. Romans is quite long while Philemon is really short. You may not realize it, but New Testament epistles are ordered first by author—Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude—and second by length of the epistle. For example, among Paul's epistles, Romans is first and longest; Philemon is last and shortest. In the middle is Ephesians—this is about the same length as a weekly reading for our Acts study. Make your final reading assignment any one NT letter of your choice.

First, we'll look "beyond Pentecost" at what church tradition says about the apostles beyond the New Testament, including some non-orthodox sources and a lot of uncertainty. You might find the summary of their stories interesting. You certainly will recognize a continued effort to take the gospel to the nations which, for most apostles, included their martyrdom.

Second, we'll look "beyond Pentecost" at what the contemporary church can be doing to be more like the church in Acts. After many application questions, your teacher proposes some lessons to be learned from study of this book to make the church today stronger and better.

Commentary

Let's look first to the continued story of the apostles, then to the continued story for our generation.

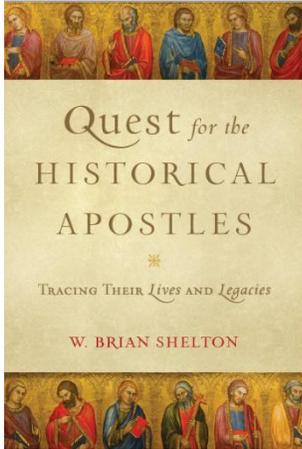
The Apostles beyond the New Testament

Here is where the story of each apostle ends in the book of Acts:

- Peter goes "to another place" in 12:17. He reappears at the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15, but without any note of his recent or subsequent experiences.
- John participates travels to Samaria to see the ministry to the gentiles there in 8:14.
- James, brother of John and son of Zebedee, is killed by the sword in 12:2.
- Paul travels to Rome and closes out the book of Acts in chapter 28.
- Matthias is chosen to replace Judas Iscariot in 1:26.
- All the others are only named in the apostles list in 1:13.

Early church sources on the apostles come from four main groups of people. (1) As early as the first half of the third century, we have historical lists of the apostles. Figures like Hippolytus, Eusebius, Jerome, Sozomen, and Socrates tell us about their lives in these histories. (2) Throughout the early church, sermons were preached and commentaries were written that occasionally provide a story of an apostle

from the writer's time. (3) A group called "gnostics" wrote other gospels and acts within their communities, sometimes looking like the orthodox tradition and sometimes looking different—even like a fringe group. Gnostics had a different worldview, believing the light of heaven is present in each, the gospel liberates that light, and Jesus provides salvation through a personal vision. They are different from the biblical books, but they can contain legends handed down and geographical theaters of apostolic ministry. You might have heard of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Judas*, or the *Acts of Peter and Paul*.



Piecing together elements from these sources, some of which are more reliable than others, we can establish some theories about the apostles' journeys beyond Acts. For more on the sources and on the apostles' lives, you might enjoy W. Brian Shelton, *Quest for the Historical Apostles: Tracing Their Lives and Legacies* (Baker, 2018). I took the best information we have, reported much of it, and proposed journey paths of individual apostles. Each one is summarized below.

The stories are more interesting than they are reliable. However, a historical core lies behind many of the stories that evidence the gospel going to the uttermost parts of the first century world.

Peter

Peter and Paul are together in Antioch in Galatians 2. There are stories of Peter in Asia Minor, southern Greece, and in Rome. The *Acts of Peter* describes how Simon Magus, who Peter encountered in Samaria in our study of Acts (8:9), was in Rome wooing the crowds with his magic and his teaching. Peter feels compelled to stop this false teacher, travelling to Rome of his own accord. They duel using spiritual gifts and Magus is humiliated. The fisherman is thus found in Rome when Emperor Nero chose to blame Christians for the city-wide fire, leading to the crucifixion of Peter upside down on the Vatican hill, buried there to this day.

Andrew

In the *Acts of Matthias*, Andrew the brother of Simon Peter is called by God to a place called Myrmydonia on the Black Sea where Matthias is held prisoner among cannibals. Stories have him in modern Ukraine (ancient Scythia), Iran (ancient Parthia), Asia Minor, and throughout Macedonia and Achaia (southern Greece). He is supposedly crucified on a saltire-shaped cross, which looks like an X, and a basilica in Patras, Greece, sits atop that legendary spot.



James

James is killed in Acts 12:2 by Herod Agrippa in Jerusalem. He may have gone at least to Antioch with Peter in Galatians 2:9. His bones may have been transferred to Spain, accounting for his legacy there more than any likelihood of a ministry there.

John

The stories of this apostle center around Ephesus in Asia Minor. There are also legends of him in Macedonia and Achaia (southern Greece). One legend finds him in Rome, required to drink poison by the order of the Emperor Domitian. When John survives the ordeal, the emperor is frightened and exiles him to the island of Patmos. There, he writes the book of Revelation and eventually dies naturally—although weathered—in Ephesus. As the last of the apostles to die, around AD 96, some think this long life is a fulfillment of the words of Jesus to Peter about John: “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” (John 21:22).

Philip

The range of geography with stories of Philip is wide. These include Bactria (just west of India), Parthia (modern Persia), Macedonia, Achaia, North Africa, but mostly in Asia Minor. Philip has some of the most fantastical stories, too. Supposedly he encounters a leopard that regrets almost killing a lamb. Since they talk in the story, the leopard repents and the two animals follow Philip around through the latter years of his ministry. The *Acts of Philip* describe his death: “He ordered Philip to be hanged, and his ankles to be pierced, and to bring also iron hooks, and his heels also to be driven through, and to be hanged head downwards, opposite the temple on a certain tree.”

Bartholomew

Among the furthest travelled of the apostles in their itinerant ministry, stories of Bartholomew or Nathaniel range from Asia Minor, Egypt, modern Iran, modern Armenia and Azerbaijan, and across to northern India. A legend of him being allowed to survive crucifixion, episodes of spiritual warfare, and many miracles fill the stories about him. In a rare case, the *Martyrdom of the Holy and Glorious Apostle Bartholomew* provides a physical description of him: “He has black hair, a shaggy head, a fair skin, large eyes, beautiful nostrils....a yellow beard, and few grey hairs, of middle height...his clothes had been worn twenty-six years.” While the legend that he was skinned alive in Armenia dominates, no apostles has as many varied death stories as Bartholomew.

Thomas

The legends of a ministry in India for Thomas find reinforcement in the numerous sites there that claim his heritage of preaching. Indian Christians call themselves “Thomas Christians,” churches claim his visits, and the biographies have unique details of Indian rulers in the first century AD. Among his death stories, the most accepted is that he was speared by soldiers on a rocky hilltop.



Matthew

A tax collector would be in the habit of taking notes in the first century whenever a citizen approached him to pay their taxes. This skill lends itself to the taking of notes in the ministry of Jesus and constructing them into the first gospel that bears his name. With ministry stories in Palestine, Syria,

modern Georgia, Egypt, and modern Iran, he was harassed by pagan magicians before he likely died by spear or sword in modern Iran.

James the Lesser

Often confused in ancient tales with James the Just from Acts 15, this James seems to have ministered in Egypt, modern Iran, and the west end of modern Kazakhstan. The stories are only pieces with details in worship documents of the medieval period, making him the least documented apostle. Perhaps he was bludgeoned with a club or carved with a saw in his death in modern Iran

Jude

Legends of Thaddeus extend to Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, and modern Iran, with miracles and preaching characterizing his itinerant ministry. Interestingly, he shares stories with Peter, Matthias, and Simon the Zealot in ministry moments and a rare, less likely non-martyr death story has him “falling asleep on the twenty-first of the month of August” in Syria. A powerful martyrdom story tells how, after performing a pagan temple exorcism in Persia, the priests and soldiers slay him with a sword or spear. Just beforehand, he turns to Simon to say, “I see the Lord calling us” home.

Simon the Zealot

Only stories in North Africa and Persia come to us about Simon. The Persian story of the exorcism is shared with Jude, leading to death by sword or spear. Western works also partner Simon and Jude in ministry. A fourth century source reports that he sailed to Britain from North Africa, and while it is less likely, in the second century Origen says that the gospel had gone to Britain by his day.



Matthias

The country of Ukraine may hold an ancient city with a story of Matthias being captured by cannibals. They would pluck out the eyes of their victims and hold them prisoner until their next feast. The *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* tell how God sends Andrew to rescue him. Matthias survives in that story, leading to ministry in Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, modern Iran, and Egypt.

Regardless of where they went and how certain we can be of their stories, they are characterized by a belief in a resurrected Lord, the transformative power of the gospel, and a willingness to sacrifice their lives for this cause.

The Christians Today

One of the best reasons to consider the book of Acts is the instruction and model that it gives the church today. From the scripture, particularly from Acts that we have studied, we have sufficient instruction to guide the church in our generation. Below are some characteristics of the early church that come as guidelines and faith instruction for our church.

Unity

The early church showed a united front against excessive requirements of Jewish legalism for gentile believers, pagan religions and magic, and governmental persecution. Beyond these battles, deep within the church itself, we see a unity that underlies their community living. We used Acts 2:42-47 as one of the best illustrations for this unity:



“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

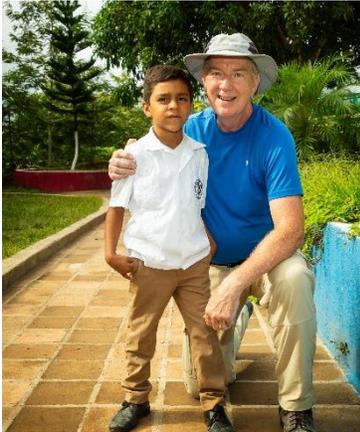
CFUMC gathers each Sunday to worship together in three worship services. We sing songs, cite the creed and scriptures, and listen in unity. When we can't assemble, we worship by video in our own homes. We gather in Sunday schools and small groups where we might agree or disagree on the Word, but we work together to an understanding of God's revelation to his people. We cook barbeque shoulder to shoulder as Methodist men each year. We build wheelchair ramps for the elderly in Clarksville and we build latrines for families in Honduras. When we do these activities, we do them together for the common cause of the gospel. We sometimes disagree, as seen in our larger denominational battle this year. Our neighbor has a different interpretation in Sunday school and we debate the merits of our views. We analyze from different perspectives on different committees whether money should be spent on facilities or ministries. Disagreeing is natural and when it is done in love, we mutually profit and grow in our understanding of Jesus, the church, and ourselves.



Ministry

The early church regularly engaged in ministry to the church and to the non-churched. In Acts 3:1-10, Peter and John heal a blind man at the gate of the temple. We don't know if the man was Jewish or gentile, if he was a believer or a non-believer, or if he honest or dishonest. They probably didn't know either, but he was a man in need and God provided to him through the ministry of the church. It was also clear from Peter that Jesus receive the glory, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and

walk” (3:6). Afterwards, Peter told the crowd, “His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong” (3:16).



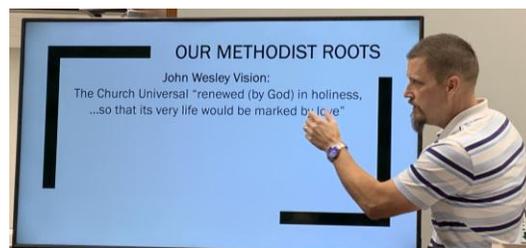
The ministries of the church were not only for the apostles. By Acts 6, the activities were so many that Peter called for workers to help the Greek widows: “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables” (6:2). Deacons arose with the gift of helps. Figures like Stephen arise, non-apostles with a powerful witness to their belief in Jesus. Timothy, Priscilla, and Aquila have active ministry as converts under Paul. The Acts 2:42-47 passage offers a sense that the apostles were at the center of the gospel activities in Jerusalem, but when “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42), it is clear that the church was doing ministries beyond the pastors.

This would lead Paul to write, “There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all” (1 Cor. 12:4-6). He elaborates in v.20: “But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.” We are the body of Christ, and we share labor, rewards, and suffering together. The practices at CFUMC like we see in Acts are described below.

Belief

Practice and belief go hand in hand. Practice without right belief will be misguided. Belief without right practice will be inactive. A battle for the understanding of the Old Testament was underway as the gospel was preached in synagogues and the temple. Jews rightly believed in a monotheistic, covenantal God who was “one” (Deut. 6:4) over against the many gods of the other nations. He should be loved with “all heart, mind and soul” by his people who teach their children to do the same (Deut. 6:5-6). The Jews were given special guidelines for living, from not eating certain animals (Lev. 20:25) to not mistreating strangers (Lev. 19:33), all around the theology, “Be you holy, for I [the Lord] am holy” (Lev. 11:44). An understanding of circumcision was central, and Paul in particular helps the church see that belief in Jesus did not require the practice of circumcision.

The Bereans “searched the scriptures” (Acts 17:11), Peter in his first sermon cited the prophets and the psalms (Acts 2:14-36), and disciples “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). The very last verse of Acts tells how Paul, “Preaching the kingdom of God and taught the things which concern the Lord Jesus” (Acts 28:31). The high point of our Protestant service is the sermon, or the preaching of the Word, and our worship services have a time of the reading of the bible. Our Sunday schools, Wednesday night classes, children’s ministry, pre-school, and so many other church programs have teaching for right belief as a part of their focus. Even this study of Acts over 6 weeks is a part of helping understanding of the scripture and reinforcing our belief in Jesus.



The Jewish leaders persecuted the apostles because they were misguided in their zeal to protect the Old Testament teaching in the face of what becomes the New Testament teaching. A theology of resurrection, love, messiah, promises, prophets, covenants, worship, discipleship, and so many other Christian tenants require an understanding that in turn guides our practice. The beliefs at CFUMC like we see in Acts are described below.

Gospel to the Uttermost

Jesus tells the apostles before his ascension that they will be empowered to practice, believe, and unify to take the gospel to the ends of their known world: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Peter typifies this expansion as he goes to Samaria (Act 8:14), where the religiously despised Samaritans received the gospel and displayed signs that they received the Holy Spirit. Paul typifies this expansion to Italy to the capital of the Empire, as Luke writes, “Now we came to Rome” (Acts 28:16).

CFUMC has ministries to the community, seen in the CommUnity Thrift Store (notice the “unity” word emphasized), Fleece Blanket Ministry, Meals on Wheels and the local soup kitchen, nursing home and prison visitations, prayer shawl ministry, and Food 2 Kids. CFUMC has ministries of work teams, both in the county and as far as Honduras. From Clarkesville in northeast Georgia to the Agalta Valley in central America, we organize food, clothing, encouragement, teaching, and prayer to fulfill the command of Jesus to “go Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the world” (Acts 1:8).



Conclusion

The church gets much criticism from external critics and from internal dissenters. It was no different in times depicted for us in the book of Acts. However, we have the same potential for good unity, practice, and belief as the Christians in the early church. We have it modeled for us in the book that we have studied together. When it feels like the church isn't doing as much right as it is receiving criticism for doing things poorly, we need only look around at all the things done by the church that are good. Not enough attention comes in the news to the sacrifices of individuals in local congregations. Here, the gospel is going forth by faithful Christians in the heritage of the apostles, the teachings of the bible, and the hope of the resurrection.

Answers to the Quiz

1. James, son of Zebedee, by the sword of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2)
2. Peter, depicted in the story of *Quo Vadis* by the movie of the same name
3. John, in Ephesus, of old age or perhaps from suffering during the Patmos exile

4. Paul, after his first Roman imprisonment
 5. Peter, on the Vatican Hill in Rome
 6. He claimed he was not worthy to be crucified like the Lord
 7. Thomas, where Indian Christian today still pride themselves as Thomas Christians
 8. Matthias, where his eyes were gouged out to prevent escape before the Lord supposedly healed him
 9. Peter and Paul, separately in Rome
 10. Household passages (Acts 10:47-48, 16:32-33, 16:15)
- Bonus: Simon Peter, John, James son of Zebedee, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Matthew/Levi, Bartholomew/Nathaniel, Simon the Zealot, James son of Alphaeus, Jude/Thaddeus, and Matthias.

Recognitions

Here in the last week of our study together, several people deserve recognition for their contribution to this 6-week study on the book of Acts. Their efforts illustrate the values that Acts tries to give us about helping one another in the body of Christ.

- Jennifer Boydston first conceived of this study to be done by video and in writing. Each week she coordinated the distribution of the study and provided a welcoming introduction. As of this week, 247 people had clicked on the introduction video from week 1.
- Mike Young video recorded and edited the two videos. He used his talents to provide this teaching to each of us.
- Keith Cox and the staff at CFUCM envisioned some form of teaching during the time of this virus. Their vision was to see the church not stop, but to marshal resources and people to continue the ministries that we are instructed to promote.
- Lewis Hinely was kind enough to proofread these lessons in advance (after the first three weeks), offering relief to my effort to get teaching thoughts down on paper.
- Sally Shelton worked through some chapters and dialoged with me about the book of Acts.
- Jimi and Susan Weidner, Warren and Mary Lanier, and Dianne Gunn engaged with quality questions, comments, and expressions of appreciation. Beth Crabill and her friends in Atlanta gathered together for the study. Roberta Boydston and her friends in the last town of the Oklahoma panhandle before New Mexico shared in the study.