

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

Welcome

Members of Clarksville First United Methodist Church are invited on a six-week study of the book of Acts. Together we'll move through the earliest days of the church, studying the bible together and gaining insight into the Lord and our own church. The method of our study is designed to serve this unique time as we are more socially isolated than usual. The text for the class is the book of Acts in your Bible.

Special thanks to Lead Pastor Keith Cox, the Director of Discipleship Jennifer Boydston, and the rest of the CFUMC staff for their leadership to our congregation. They had the conviction that we should continue the ministries of the church that we can. The Wednesday night class experience is an important one for studying the bible and topics of the Christian life. Our study in the book of Acts is an effort to unite us as a congregation along the unity that the book shows about the early Christians.



Why did we choose to study Acts?

As a church, we are currently moving together towards Easter. We move on to Pentecost next, then we move beyond Pentecost. Our own movement through this part of the liturgical calendar takes place for the first time in the book of Acts.

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples are clustered in the Upper Room, frightened. During this time of the Covid-19 we might feel the same way. Next, the early Christians are meeting for church in their homes. During this time, as we watch a video in our homes of Pastor Keith preaching and Paula Gibson playing the piano, we might feel the same way. Then, the church went forth in various ministries—preaching, evangelizing, serving, and showing hospitality. During this time, we can examine ourselves and our own role of contributing to the Body of Christ.

Remember, the tongues of fire  (Acts 2:3) and the baptism by fire (Matt. 3:11) represented by the work of the Holy Spirit finds expression in our own denominational symbol.



How does this study work?

Each week about 4 pages of curriculum will be provided to you. It will come electronically as a PDF from the CFUMC office or by regular mail for any who request it. If you have a friend who would like to join our study during this interim period of our society, please invite them to join us. An introductory video to the class and an overview of the book of Acts supplements this introduction.

Each weekly study will guide you through a section of the book of Acts in a study format. Each study will contain these sections:

- Introduction to the section of Acts to be studied, including themes to be watched
- Read about 5 chapters in the Bible
- A quiz over what you read, with answers provided and the invitation to peek if you makes you feel better
- Overview of the events in the section
- Commentary on some of the more interesting elements in the section
- Application from the section
- Further application in the form of questions for you to reflect more deeply about the life of the church

Each weekly study will take you about an hour of time. You can break it up, read as slowly as you want, or branch out into other parts of the bible or into resources that you may have. A bibliography of books related to Acts will be provided, a couple of which you might like to order if you want to study further than we do together.

What if I have a question?

If you have any questions of the logistical kind, such as receiving the weekly study by email or linking to the introduction video, contact Jennifer Boydston at jennifer@clarkesvillefirstumc.org. If you have questions or comments about Acts along the way, share them with me, Brian Shelton, at wbrianshelton@gmail.com. Each week, I'll share the best questions (anonymously, if you'd likes) and answers with the group.

Getting started

This document is an introduction to our study of the book of Acts. Our first week will study chapters 1-5. Whenever you're ready, you can start reading Acts. You can read it all the way through and revisit our chapters each week. Or, you can also simply read it along with us.



Studying the Book of Acts

Let's get started! This section is an introduction to our study and to the biblical book of Acts.

About the book of Acts

In the chronological order of the New Testament, this book comes after the gospels. The four gospels tell of the ministry of Jesus: his teaching, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection. They also tell the story of the training of 12 particular disciples, individuals sometimes wise but often not. They become apostles, leaders of the foundation of the church in Acts. This book tells how Jesus' ministry became the apostles' ministry as the church launched in Jerusalem, into Judea, into Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). As a church, this story is important as it provides understanding into our own mission—the same mission as Jesus and the 12 apostles. Ephesians 2:19-20 says it this way: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of



the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”

The movement of Acts as a STORY. Acts has a certain flow to it. This flow starts with a revisit of Jesus’ ascension into heaven and the apostles move away with some uncertainty about what to do next (ch. 1). The story flows into the Upper Room in Jerusalem, where the apostles are empowered by the Spirit to go forth. Acts flows into the streets on Pentecost, as they speak in foreign tongues and explain the ministry of Jesus (ch. 2). It flows to Jewish people in the form of preaching, such as to the people in the Temple (ch. 3). It flows to God-fearing gentiles (non-Jews who believed in the Jewish God) in the form of preaching, such as Cornelius and his household. It flows to non-believing Gentiles, such as Antioch of Pisidia (ch. 13). The Acts story flows from Peter to Paul, and along his missionary journeys to Cyprus, to Syria, into modern Turkey, and then into Greece (chs. 13-26). Finally, it flows by boat with Paul to Rome, to the very capital of the Empire, called *caput mundi* in antiquity—“the head of the world” (chs. 27-28). As a church, we are part of the ongoing story of Acts, as the gospel continues to flow in our lives and into the relationships we share with friends and with strangers. Their story is our story.

The gospel extends to all people as its MISSION. The reader of the book of Acts watches the 12 disciples find a replacement for one member, Judas Iscariot. The reader watches the Holy Spirit descend with power on the 12, allowing them to go forth with the confidence that Jesus had but that they seemed to struggle with in the gospels. They seem to explode on the scene 50 days after Passover—on the Jewish Feast of Weeks, commemorating the harvest as set forth in Exodus 34:22. Pentecost means “fifty” and on that day there was a harvest of souls by the preaching of the apostles. They continue in Acts to preach the gospel and they perform the miracles that Jesus did. It begins in Jerusalem on a Jewish feast and by preaching in the Jewish Temple. By the end of the book, an apostle is in the actual Gentile capital of the Roman Empire. As a church, let’s keep thinking about what it means to go forth from Clarkesville, into Habersham, into northeast Georgia, to Honduras and Jamaica, and to the uttermost parts of the earth for our generation.



These same people shape the church’s IDENTITY. The reader also gets to meet individuals who are so committed to the gospel Jesus preached and so moved by his resurrection that they boldly engage people and are willing to suffer for this cause. The 12 disciples who didn’t understand Jesus fully in the gospels, who missed some of the Teacher’s questions, who resisted his arrest, and who asked to sit on thrones in heaven, now have a proper perspective on their own identity and mission. It’s encouraging to see their change that takes place because of the Pentecost. It’s powerful to see them collectively recognize that gentile converts don’t have to become Jewish in Acts 15. As a local church moving ahead to Pentecost, let’s be reminded of how our own weaknesses, inadequacies, and fear can be exchanged for the strength, power, and confidence that comes by the Holy Spirit as it did for the first Christians.

As we move to Pentecost Sunday on May 31, 2020, our study will be better informed by the significance of that first Christian Pentecost. That's why we chose the book of Acts as our CFUMC study for this time of community dispersion.

Overview and Themes in Acts

The *key verse* for the book is Acts 1:8: "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."

A *typical passage* that summarizes the goal of this power is Acts 2:42-47:

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.

Themes to watch for in your reading include:

Story, Mission, Identity

These themes introduced above weave throughout the book of Acts.

From Jews to Gentiles

The Old Testament covenant people of Israel knew they were special among the nations. However, their own writings anticipated a time when "all nations" would come to know the Lord. This happens in Acts. Generally, Peter encounters Jews in evangelism and Paul becomes the apostle to the gentiles. When Peter sees gentiles in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius receive the Spirit, he knew the gospel was for all. Even Paul's urban ministries start in the Jewish synagogues first and move out to the streets, typical of his words in Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The structure of the book sees this same approach:

- Chapters 1-9 The gospel to the Jews
- Chapters 10-12 The gospel to the God-Fearers
- Chapters 13-28 The gospel to the Gentiles



From Regular to Wonderful

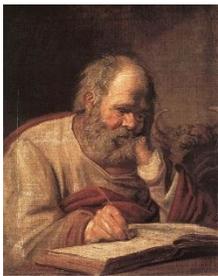
The power of the gospel described in Acts 1:8 is transformative. While there were many prophets appearing in first century Israel, there was one that transcended them all. Just as the message was superior, the Holy Spirit changed ordinary people to do extraordinary things. For example, in the gospels we see Peter rebuked by Jesus (Matt. 16:21-28), fall asleep when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), and deny him three times (Mark 14:66-72). However, after Pentecost in the book of Acts, Peter preaches boldly in the streets, in the Temple, and before the Jewish rulers.



These two themes and more await us in our study of the book of Acts. Just as the early Christians received power (Acts 1:8) and lived in unity (Acts 2:44), so we can do the same—even during this time that we find ourselves studying Acts by video and PDF. The world still needs mission-driven and empowered Christians!

Author

The early church believed, and most scholars still agree, that Luke is the author of Acts. Examining the author more closely gives us insight into our study of Acts. This section is for the student who wants to get behind the book of Acts a little more.



Who is Luke?

Luke is called “the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14), one of the companions still with Paul in Rome as he writes from prison, about AD 62. There is a recent and powerful movie that imagines Luke interviewing Paul while he is in prison in Rome, the 2018 *Paul, Apostle of Christ* is biblical and very well-done. It provides insights into the struggles that early Christian experienced as believers navigating their new faith in an unfriendly context. Most importantly, it is from the perspective of Luke himself. John McArthur says: “Next to Paul, Luke is the most powerful writing force in the New Testament.”

How do we know he wrote both *Luke* and *Acts*?

Luke has been identified as the author of both works not because the text names him as author, but because of a process of deduction and a close inspection of the nature of these two books. Let’s examine these to round our picture of the author of Acts for our study.

Linking Luke and Acts

An examination of the opening of his gospel reveals two connecting parts, showing us how Acts is a clear sequel to the gospel of Luke. These were his effort to “give an account” of the life and ministry of Jesus as he established the church:

- Luke 1:1-4: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent **Theophilus**, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”
- Acts 1:1-3: “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. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”

With both works addressed to an individual named Theophilus, here we see Luke-Acts as a combination of two books set forth to depict the ministry of Jesus and the birth of the early church. At this point, we see the unnamed author of the gospel Luke is the unnamed author of Acts.

Enter Luke as Participant

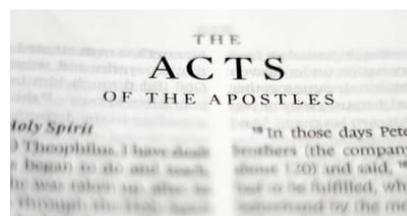
Next, we notice Luke himself enter into the story that he is telling in Acts 16.

- Before ch. 6, the narrator in Acts speaks in the third person “he,” “she,” and “they” throughout the gospel of Luke and Acts.
- Suddenly, the author speaks in the first person plural “we” to describe Paul’s journey, revealing that he has joined the second missionary journey of Paul in Acts 16:10: “And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” The author’s inclusion of himself continues with “we” markers at Acts 20:5-15 and Act 21:1-18. As a member of the expedition, he continues on to Rome with the Apostle according to the narrative in Acts.
- Luke is mentioned by name there in Col. 4:14, Philem. 24, and 2 Tim. 4:11, epistles written by Paul from Rome. This means he is still with the apostle.
- Of all the companions of Paul on this fourth missionary journey, Luke is the only one not mentioned in the third person in the Acts text. This first qualifies Luke as the author of this story.

Evidence of Luke from his Style

The theory of Luke as author is supported by the type of author scholars imagine that Luke would be.

- Luke’s interest in medical matters seem evidenced in his gospel when he provides a specific diagnosis of sick individuals who encounter Jesus (Luke 4:38, 5:12, and 8:43).
- One would imagine that a physician in antiquity would have a high intelligence and a scientific bent of mind. The details of Luke-Acts are some of the most precise of the New Testament. For example, the details around the water route of the journey of Paul as prisoner to Rome with its currents, distances, times, and islands is the best historical source for water currents on the Mediterranean Sea. This tendency for historicity fits the stated intention of the scientist who sought to “to write an orderly account for you... that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”
- Luke is considered the only Gentile to have written a book of the New Testament. Naturally, his treatment of Jewish matters find extra clarity for those gentiles who might be unfamiliar with them, while providing the strongest Greek language skills of the New Testament. The Greek is the hardest and the text provides some of the highest number and precision of historical details. Luke joins Paul’s party near Philippi in Macedonia, and this might be his Greek hometown.



For Further Reading

Below are some resources that might help you appreciate and understand our study together.

Max Lucado. *Life Lessons from Acts: Christ's Church in the World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018.

- Basic and application-centered, this book introduces the reader to Acts and provides reflective application for the Christian life. If you've read Max Lucado before, you know what to expect and you won't be disappointed.

Paul, Apostle of Christ. Written and directed by Andrew Hyatt. Affirm Films and OBD Films, 2018.

- In this movie, Luke the evangelist and author of Acts enters Paul's prison and records the apostle telling the story of his conversion and ministry. Filmed on the island of Malta but set in Rome, the costumes and setting are authentic, providing a good insight into Paul and the book of Acts.

F.F. Bruce. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.

- The best and thorough treatment of the work of Paul. It moves through Acts while connecting his missionary journeys to his letters in the New Testament. This is scholarly and detailed, but many of you will enjoy using and keeping this resource for the rest of your lives.

Ajith Fernando. *Acts*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

- This commentary has three parts for each section of Acts: background, interpretation, and application. Together, they take you from the text to your life. There are many good commentaries on Acts, all of which match the exact sections of scripture to treat verses or passages in detail. Other good commentaries include Marshall's *Acts* in the Tyndale NT Commentaries and Schnabel's *Acts* in the Exegetical Commentary on the NT Series.

Mike Aquilina. *The Apostles and their Times: Archeology, History, and Scripture Unveil What Life Was Really Like During the Apostolic Age*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 2017.

- A basic explanation of the historical context and the lives of the apostles during the book of Acts. While written from a Catholic perspective, the variety of issues it explains makes it a helpful and clear tool.

W. Brian Shelton. *Quest for the Historical Apostles: Tracing their Lives and Legacies*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018.

- Many of you may already have this book from a prior study. It tells the story of each apostle from the gospels, through Acts, and into early Christian literature. Only parts of it will relate to our study, so its focus is the continuation of their journeys. Yet, the trajectory of their ministries to Italy, India, Syria, modern Turkey, and modern Iran continue the message of the gospel by the apostles introduced in the New Testament.

About the Teacher

Brian Shelton (PhD, Saint Louis University) is a theologian and college administrator. With his wife Sally and three daughters, he has been a member at Clarkesville First United Methodist Church for eleven years. He has taught biblical studies and theology for Asbury University, Taylor University, and Toccoa Falls College. He is currently on a one-year project to research and author *The Scared Leader: Understanding and Overcoming Fear in Leadership* with north Georgia business professional Kent Rothwell while he holds out for the next great thing. He can be reached at wbrainshelton@gmail.com and (706) 768-0679.