



Group booklet

Growing God's Church

In our 2016 Commitment Series we will flesh out our revised mission—*Growing God's Church with the Gospel*—from the book of Acts, before finishing the year with an Advent series.

The following intro is a useful primer as we open Acts.

Intro to the Book of Acts

Luke's Gospel, his former book to Theophilus was about what Jesus **began** to do and teach in his earthly life (i.e. until he was taken up to heaven, Acts 1:1). From his name/title we gather that Theophilus (c.f. Luke 1:3) was an important Roman official who had become a Christian; he likely sponsored Luke's two writing projects of the Gospel and Acts.

This means that the Book of Acts is about what Jesus **continued** to do:

- through his well-instructed apostles,
- in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Like Luke's Gospel, Acts is all about Jesus. But in a different way, as it's about Jesus' ongoing work in the world through his Spirit-filled apostles.

The 12 Apostles & the Holy Spirit

Jesus' 12 disciples became known as the 12 Apostles. An Apostle was someone given the authority by Jesus to spread the gospel. In Acts 1:12-26, the disciple Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, was replaced by Matthias who had been a follower of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit who had been promised by Jesus (Acts 1:5, 8) came upon all of Jesus' believers (about 120 in all, Acts 1:15) gathered in Jerusalem. In a dramatic fashion the Holy Spirit enabled them to proclaim "the wonders of God" (i.e. the gospel, v12) in many different languages, so that all those around them could understand it in their native tongue (Acts 2:1-6). This resulted in both amazement (Acts 2:7-12) and cynicism (Acts 2:13).

So as we investigate the early chapters of Acts, on Sundays and in small groups, we hope that you will be enthused by what Jesus is continuing to do and teach, through the Apostles' testimony, in the power of the Spirit, as God grows his church through the Gospel!

Study timetable

We've prepared these small group studies to follow the Sunday message, but you're free to use them as you wish. You might want to juggle things around, especially given there's extra events as part of our Commitment Series.

Here's a suggested timetable for their use¹.

Sunday Sermon Date	Passage	Mid-week (small group)	What?
		Tues/Wed 11/12 Oct	Leader Sessions
Sun 16 Oct	Acts 2:14-21 (The Mission)	17-20 Oct	Study 1: The gospel grows the church
Sun 23 Oct	Acts 4:1-31 (Value 1: Bible & prayer)	24-27 Oct	Study 2: The gospel grows through word and prayer
			Sat 29 Oct: Serve Manly
Sun 30 Oct	4:32-5:11 (Value 2: Community)	31 Oct-3 Nov	Study 3: The gospel grows supernatural communities
Sun 6 Nov	Acts 6:1-7 (Value 3: Service)	7-11 Nov	Prayer Week
Sun 13 Nov	Acts 6:8-8:3	14-17 Nov	Study 4: Stephen, the slaughtered servant of the gospel
			Wed 16 November: Celebration Dinner
Sun 20 Nov	Acts 9:1-31 (Value 4: Transformation)	21-24 Nov	Study 5: Gospel growth involves amazing transformation
Sun 27 Nov	Advent series begins	28 Nov- Dec 1	Study 6: Advent

¹ Studies are loosely based on materials obtained with permission.

Study 1: The gospel grows the church (the Mission)

Start

Can you think of a powerful piece of communication (e.g. speech, artwork, photo or film, song, written document)? What makes it powerful?

Read

The Intro to the Book of Acts on p.3, then, Acts 2:14-41, and share any first thoughts or impressions.

Think & talk

1. Peter takes the opportunity to make sense of the extraordinary event that is taking place (i.e. Pentecost). Why does he start with the Old Testament reference from Joel? What point is he making by referring to this passage (you might like to look up Joel 2:28-32)?

2. Next the Apostle Peter connects the coming of the Spirit to the person and work of Jesus. What does he focus upon in Jesus' ministry?

There are 4 points of focus:

3. How does Peter conclude his appeal? What effect does that have on the gathered throng, and what are we to learn from it?

4. Peter's message was a response to their question in v12, "What does this mean?" How does he respond to their question in v37, "What shall we do?" What promises does Peter attach here? Are there any aspects of this gospel equation that you tend to forget or underappreciate?

5. In v41 3,000 people accepted the message (quite a jump up from a church of 120 at the beginning). Read the following markers to see how the gospel grew the church through the early chapters of Acts; what is the picture these numerical markers give us?

- Acts 4:4
- Acts 6:7
- Acts 9:31
- Acts 11:21

6. In light of the gospel growth recorded in Acts, what will you do? Are there promises to claim? Is there faith to be awakened or sin to repent of? Is there gospel growth to look for, or forward to? Or to be a part of, or to pray for?

Pray

Praise God for his Son Jesus, whose life, death, resurrection and ascension are at the centre of the gospel. Praise him that he continues to grow his church, through the gospel in the power of the Spirit.

Praise God for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit that flow to all who turn to Christ in faith and repentance.

Ask that his Spirit might be at work in you personally, growing you by his gospel. And then ask that he might be at work through you, bringing forth gospel growth in others.

Study 2: The gospel grows through word and prayer (Value #1)

Start

What do you think would be most important to start a revival in the Christian faith? (tick your top option)

- better training for Christian leaders
- better training for regular Christian people
- an outbreak of persecution
- an outbreak of miracles
- Christians living lives of increasing godliness
- Christians living lives of increasing boldness
- other:

Read

Acts 4:1-31, and share any first thoughts or observations.

Think & talk

1. Peter and John have just healed a crippled beggar at the temple gates, which you'd have thought would gain them high opinion from all. What are some unusual features of the opposition in v1-7? And what general principles are we to derive from this opposition?

2. What aspects of the apostles' "preaching" did the authorities find provocative? Are these aspects of the gospel still controversial to those who don't believe?

3. What aspects of the apostles' "behaviour" were disturbing to the religious authorities?

4. What aspect of the apostles' response to the request to cease preaching is most striking?

5. After Peter and John were released to the believers, a prayer meeting ensued. How did the believers' prayer support the preaching of the word? What are we to take away from their prayer?

6. If the gospel grows through word and prayer, what will you do?

Pray

Praise God that his word about Jesus, proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit by ordinary people, brings forth gospel growth. Praise him for the power of prayer, which supports the proclamation of the gospel.

Pray for our determination to keep speaking about Jesus amidst any persecution or opposition we face.

Ask that God would use us, and use our prayers to embolden us and other gospel proclaimers as they speak about Jesus.

Study 3: The gospel grows supernatural communities (Value #2)

Start

Think of a community you're a part of (it can be church but doesn't have to be). What three words describe this community?

If you could change one thing about your community, what would it be?

Read

Acts 4:31-5:11, and share your first thoughts and reactions.

Think & talk

1. Is there a connection between v31 and v32? How is being filled with the Holy Spirit linked to sharing of material possessions? Why do we balk at generosity?

2. Is Acts 4 suggesting or endorsing the practice of communism? Do we need to live communally in order to be truly Christian?

3. What are some of the benefits of generosity, from this passage and from your experience?

4. Verses 32-37 major on the exceptional generosity of the believers, but do other “supernatural” characteristics appear in this community?

5. What was the problem with Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1-11? Why was it so serious, and how can we avoid repeating it?

6. From seeing the unifying generosity of the first Christians, and the temptation for deceit in Ananias and Sapphira, what will you do in our supernatural community?

Pray

Praise God for his Spirit, who works in us to manifest boldness of speech and generosity of deed.

Pray that he would help each of us to hold loosely to our possessions and wealth, and would enable us to experience the joy of generosity, in both giving and receiving.

Pray that he might protect us from hypocrisy, and that our interactions with one another might be characterised by humility, truth, confession and love.

Prayer Week (November 7 to 11)

The Big Idea

In previous years' Commitment Series we have had a concentrated time of prayer known as the 24 Hours of Prayer.

This year we want to leverage our existing structures—prayer meetings, small group meetings, etc—and timeslots to maximise the number of people praying.

Look out for further instructions about how that is going to happen; we'll also be supplying materials to make your day or evening of prayer (whenever it is during this week) as profitable as possible.

Study 4: Stephen, the slaughtered servant of the gospel (Value #3)

Start

“The ministers minister, and the congregation congregates. That’s how church is supposed to work.”

Do you agree or disagree with this statement in principle?

Practically, is this how things often play out in your experience?

Read

Acts 6:1-15, and share any thoughts about the passage.

Think & talk

1. By the start of Acts 6 the gospel had continued to spread apace. What tension did this rapid growth give rise to? Why is this such a serious problem and what solution do the apostles arrive at?

2. Is this is a good solution and what are the implications for our church life?

3. What is the outcome of this ministry decision to delegate tasks to suitable people?

4. The first person ordained to look after the widows in v5 is Stephen, a servant full of faith and the Spirit. He now takes centre stage, not in service but in suffering. Why is he opposed and why is his response so effective?

5. Are there aspects of Stephen's character and ministry that you would like to develop so that you can be a more effective Christian?

6. Read either Stephen's entire speech in Acts 7, or maybe just Acts 7:54-8:8. What does the end of Stephen's story tell us about being gospel servants?

7. In light of our look at Stephen—both service and suffering—what will you do?

Pray

Praise God for his Spirit who gives us wisdom to speak well, gifts to serve well, and endurance to suffer well.

Praise God that both strenuous service and challenging persecution strengthen the growth of the gospel and aid its spread.

Ask God to equip and enable you to keep serving or start serving, and to expect and embrace suffering as an inescapable part of following Jesus.

Study 5: Gospel growth involves amazing transformation (Value #4)

Start

How have you changed between now and when you were younger? (circle as many as you like)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> My name has changed | <input type="checkbox"/> I've changed careers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I live somewhere different | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm no longer afraid of the dark |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm now afraid of my electricity bills | <input type="checkbox"/> I can drive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My pastimes are different | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm fitter than before |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | |

Paul is one of the most famous figures in Scripture. What's your overall impression of him from what you've read or otherwise know?

Read

Acts 9:1-31, and share your first impressions.

Think & talk

1. Paul is introduced to us as an enemy of Christians. What do we know about his pre-conversion life from the following passages? Was he a likely candidate for gospel growth, and what does this suggest about conversion?

- Philippians 3:4-6
- Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-2

2. With the Christians scattered outside of Jerusalem, Paul was travelling to other cities like Damascus in Syria to persecute them. What is the significance of the following features of his conversion:

- The lightning and voice from heaven
- Paul's experience with blindness
- The experience of Paul's companions (see also Acts 22:3-16, Acts 26:12-18)

3. How do we see Paul transformed by his encounter with the resurrected Lord in these various areas?

- His relationship with God
- His relationship with other Christians
- His ministry and service

- His transition from persecutor to persecuted

4. How has the gospel transformed you in these areas (personally, with reference to other Christians, service and perseverance)? What advice would you give to another Christian who was uncertain that they had been transformed at all?

5. In light of the fact that gospel growth brings transformation to all believers, albeit not always as dramatic as Paul's, what will you do?

Pray

Praise God that his gospel transforms lives. Praise him for how he transformed Paul from a persecutor of Christians into the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Praise God that his gospel transforms us as well, in many and various ways.

Ask that God might work at changing us continually through his gospel, personally, in community with others, in ministry and service and in perseverance in our faith.

Study 6: Advent

The History of Advent

The word “Advent” is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming,” which is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which in the New Testament refers to Jesus’ return.

Though in earlier centuries the period of Advent was a time of preparation for baptism of new believers, by the 6th century Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. But the “coming” they had in mind was not Christ’s first coming in the manger in Bethlehem, but his second coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. It was not until the Middle Ages that the Advent season was explicitly linked to Christ’s first coming at Christmas.

The Advent season lasts for four Sundays leading up to Christmas, beginning on the Sunday that falls between November 27th and December 3rd each year. Advent symbolizes the present situation of the church in these “last days” as God’s people wait for the return of Christ in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom. The church is in a similar situation to Israel at the end of the Old Testament: in exile, waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel looked back to God’s past gracious actions on their behalf in leading them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and on this basis they called for God once again to act for them. In the same way, the church during Advent looks back upon Christ’s coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when he returns for his people.

In this light, the Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” perfectly represents the church’s cry during the Advent season:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

While Israel would have sung the song in expectation of Christ’s first coming, the church now sings the song in commemoration of that first coming and in expectation of the second coming in the future.

Start

Write down as many details as possible from the Christmas story...

Read

The following passages recount the Christmas story from the text of Scripture (share the reading around, but try to get the *flow and feel* of the original story):

- Isaiah 9:6
- Matthew 1:18-25
- Micah 5:2
- Luke 2:1-7
- Luke 2:8-20
- Matthew 2:1-12
- Matthew 2:13-23

Think & talk

1. Having read the Christmas texts, do any of the details surprise you? Does the way we celebrate Christmas—either in society in general, or church in particular—adequately reflect the tone of the Christmas story?

2. How do the following texts help us live in between Jesus' coming and his return?

- Acts 1:9-11
- Hebrews 9:26-28
- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Pray

Praise God for Christmas, for coming to earth as one of us, to bring salvation to us.

Pray that this Advent and Christmas season will be a time of focus upon Jesus, as we faithfully proclaim his coming and expectantly wait for his return.