

OUR FOUNDATION

Group Leader's Guide

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

Kenneth Schenck's book, *Our Foundation*, draws us back to the dynamic early days of the church. Our risen Lord met with his disciples and promised the Holy Spirit would soon baptize them into Jesus' powerful witnesses. Their witness would begin in Jerusalem and then expand to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Schenck tracks this powerful witness from the church's founding to its arrival on the doorstep of worldwide missions (Acts 1–12).

You and your group will discover numerous lessons about personal spiritual growth and church dynamics as you study *Our Foundation*. Serving as Jesus' witnesses was not an easy assignment in the first century, nor is it any easier today. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit empowered the early church, and his power is still available.

POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Acts 1:1–2:47

TO THE FACILITATOR

Begin this session with a brief sharing time. Make sure everyone in the group knows everyone else. Give your name and some background information before asking each person to identify him- or herself. Tell the group that you want each session to be interactive, not lecture-oriented, and encourage free-flowing interaction.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jesus' disciples, like most Jews, expected Jesus to establish an earthly kingdom, free of Roman influence and full of peace and prosperity. But they failed to comprehend Jesus' mission. He had come to earth to redeem, not to reign. His second coming will present him as Israel's ruling Messiah. Although Jesus spoke with his disciples many times after his resurrection, the disciples still looked for the inauguration of an earthly kingdom. Jesus made it clear, however, that his immediate plan was to empower them by the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses (Acts 1:1–8).

While waiting in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the disciples elected Matthias to replace Judas, who had betrayed the Lord and subsequently committed suicide (vv. 12–26). Peter acted as the leader of about 120 believers when this “business meeting” transpired.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit arrived, filled the united, praying believers, and enabled them to declare God's wonderful works in foreign languages to crowds of Jews that had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13). Peter credited what had happened as a fulfillment of prophecy, and then proclaimed Jesus as Israel's Messiah (vv. 14–22). He preached Jesus as crucified, buried, risen, and God's appointed Sovereign and Savior (vv. 23–36).

When the assembled Jews heard Peter's message, they fell under conviction and asked what to do (v. 37). Peter urged them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (v. 38).

About three thousand Jews did as Peter told them (v. 41). They became the nucleus of the church at Jerusalem and an example of fellowship and outreach (vv. 42–47). They engaged in Bible study. They observed Communion. They prayed, shared genuine unity and love, offered praise to God, and observed daily conversions to Christ.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that the disciples may have held at least one wrong motive for anticipating an immediate inauguration of an earthly kingdom?
2. What wrong motives might believers today have for wishing Jesus will come again in their lifetime?
3. What do you believe is the purest motive for hoping for the second coming? Explain.
4. Why do you agree or disagree that witnessing for Jesus is not the same as being Jesus' witnesses?
5. How would you identify your Jerusalem, your Judea, and your Samaria?
6. How effectively are you and your fellow Christians being Jesus' witnesses in those places? Defend your answer.
7. How do you know the Spirit-filled believers spoke in discernable languages on the day of Pentecost? How might you share the gospel with non-English-speaking people?
8. How can you tell that the Holy Spirit was molding Peter into a powerful church leader? How does Peter's transformation encourage you?
9. What elements of the gospel did Peter include in his message? Why do you agree or disagree that the church's message today must never omit any of those elements?
10. Should every church today expect to grow?

WRAP-UP

Challenge your group to incorporate the spiritual practices found in Acts 2:46–47.

BOLDNESS AND MIRACLES

Acts 3–4

TO THE FACILITATOR

Begin this session with a brief sharing time. Ask volunteers to describe how they felt and acted when they presented the gospel to an unbelieving person. Tell the group this session focuses on the need to rely on the Spirit’s power for boldness when we share the gospel.

FOCUS ON THE WORD

Peter and John encountered a lame beggar at the temple. The beggar hoped the two apostles would give him money, but he received something far better than money. He received healing. Peter told him he did not have silver or gold, but in Jesus’ name he enabled the lame man to walk and jump (Acts 3:1–4). All who witnessed this miracle and heard the healed man praising God were “filled with wonder and amazement” (vv. 9–10).

The crowd’s amazement provided Peter an opportunity to preach. He told the assembled Jews they had ignorantly crucified Jesus, in whose name the lame man had been healed (vv. 11–17). He identified Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, whose crucifixion and resurrection had been prophesied throughout the Old Testament. He called on the crowd to repent and turn to God for forgiveness, refreshment, and restoration (vv. 18–26).

The temple leaders approached Peter and John while Peter was still addressing the crowd. Infuriated, they arrested the two apostles and threw them into jail (4:1–3). However many in the crowd believed and the number of believers in Jerusalem swelled to about five thousand (v. 4).

The next day, Peter and John were arraigned before the elders and teachers of the law. In response to the interrogation, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Jesus Christ as the one who had healed the lame man. Boldly, he accused the leaders of having crucified Jesus. He said God raised Jesus from the dead and the prophetic Scriptures had predicted both the crucifixion and the resurrection (vv. 5–11). Peter’s words must have infuriated the Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection. Finally, Peter asserted that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus Christ (v. 12).

Peter and John’s boldness convinced their interrogators that the two men had been with Jesus. Then, after a private session, the council recalled Peter and John and ordered them not to “teach at all in the name of Jesus” (v. 18). The council threatened the two men and released them (vv. 20–21).

Immediately, Peter and John reported to the believers what had happened. The assembled believers prayed, were filled with the Spirit, and enjoyed unity of heart and mind (vv. 23–32).

Because many of the believers had material needs, those who had possessions shared them with those in need. Barnabas, a particularly kind believer, sold some property and gave the money to the apostles for distribution (vv. 36–37).

In spite of the council’s threats, the apostles kept right on preaching the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with power and grace (v. 33).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Peter and John had neither silver nor gold. Why do you agree or disagree that a preacher’s financial status and his or her evangelistic effectiveness are unrelated?
2. In your opinion, why did Peter and John go to the temple?
3. It is quite common to encounter beggars today. How might a believer best present the gospel to someone who asks for a handout?
4. Peter and John took no credit for the lame man’s healing. Why do you agree or disagree that it is sometimes alright to accept a compliment for an act of service performed in the power of the Holy Spirit?
5. How would you describe the direct approach in witnessing?
6. Does faithfulness to the gospel demand that we make people aware of their sin? Why or why not?
7. On page 35 of his book, *Our Foundation*, Kenneth Schenck writes, “No amount of keeping the Jewish Law would keep a Jew from escaping God’s judgment if that Jew did not trust in Jesus as the Messiah, the king.” How might you apply this statement to a religious non-Jew today?
8. Based on Acts 4:12, would you agree that people who have never heard of Jesus are lost?
9. How should believers respond to a government law forbidding us to speak about Jesus in public?

WRAP-UP

Conclude this session by asking volunteers to pray for increased boldness in everyone’s witnessing efforts.

FUTILE RESISTANCE

Acts 5–6

TO THE FACILITATOR

Ask the group whether a good offense or a good defense is more necessary to win football games. Let a few volunteers defend their answers. Explain that the effective witness of the church depends on both a good offense—an active witness—and a good defense—an active effort to defend the integrity of the gospel.

FOCUS ON THE WORD

Ananias and his wife Sapphira pretended to do what Barnabas had done. They, too, sold a piece of property, but with his wife’s knowledge Ananias kept some of the money and gave the rest to the apostles as representing the full sale amount (Acts 5:1–2).

Peter saw through their hypocrisy. He accused Ananias of satanic-inspired hypocrisy that involved lying to God (vv. 3–4). Upon receiving this indictment, Ananias fell down and died, much to the fear of all who heard what happened. Young men removed Ananias’s body and buried it, but within three hours they would also bury Sapphira. Not knowing what had taken place, Sapphira appeared before Peter and lied about the property’s sale price. Peter accused her of consorting with Ananias to put God to the test (vv. 7–10).

This dramatic judgment on Ananias and Sapphira’s hypocrisy caused enormous fear to grip the entire church (v. 11). Kenneth Schenck wisely points out: “God used Ananias and Sapphira to impress on the early church the seriousness of following Christ” (*Our Foundation*, p. 45).

The fury of Israel’s religious leaders rose as the apostles’ miracles and effective witness increased. They jailed the apostles, but the angel of the Lord freed them to preach again. When the temple guard found the apostles, they took them to the Sanhedrin. The high priest reminded them they had been forbidden to teach about Jesus. “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching,” he said (v. 28). Peter told the high priest they must obey God rather than men. He accused the religious authorities of killing Jesus, but he declared that God had raised Jesus and was giving Israel an opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness (vv. 12–32).

A famous Pharisee, Gamaliel, persuaded the Sanhedrin not to execute the apostles, but to leave the matter in God’s hands. He argued that the movement would fizzle in time if it were not of God (vv. 33–40).

It was futile of the Sanhedrin to resist the proclamation of the gospel. The apostles shared the good news of Jesus daily in the temple and from house to house (vv. 41–42).

As the church grew, so did problems. One problem concerned the distribution of food to the needy. Grecian Jews felt that their widows were being neglected. The unity of the church was at risk, so the apostles instructed all the believers to elect Spirit-filled, wise men to oversee the welfare program. Seven faithful, Spirit-filled men were elected, each having a Greek name. So the problem was resolved to everyone's satisfaction, the Word spread, and the church grew rapidly (6:1–7).

Stephen, one of those elected to administer the church's welfare program, performed signs, wonders, and miracles, much to the anger of members of the synagogue. They used their influence to have Stephen arraigned before the Sanhedrin to face trumped-up charges. However, all who looked at Stephen saw that his face resembled that of an angel (vv. 8–15).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Referring to Ananias and Sapphira's sin of lying to the Holy Spirit, Kenneth Schenck comments on page 46 of *Our Foundation*: "It is better to be selfish and real than to be a hypocrite." Why do you agree or disagree with this comment?

2. Why do you think God chose to deal with Ananias and Sapphira's sin in such a drastic way?

3. How might a believer lie to the Holy Spirit today?

4. What evidence suggests a Christian is seeking attention for him- or herself instead of for God?

5. Do you think it is right or wrong to tell terminally-ill people that God would heal them if they just had enough faith? Defend your answer?

6. Do you think house-to-house evangelism is effective? Why or why not?

7. How would you answer someone who insists trustees do not have to be Spirit-filled because "they just handle matters related to the church's property and legal business"?

8. Why do you agree or disagree that a Spirit-filled believer's face will have a heavenly glow?

WRAP-UP

Conclude this session by having the group read or sing "Faith Is the Victory."

DRIVEN TO MISSION

Acts 7–8

TO THE FACILITATOR

Have volunteers recall an occasion when a trial opened a door for them to share the gospel. Tell them this session focuses on Stephen's trial and stoning, both of which opened doors for furthering the gospel.

FOCUS ON THE WORD

When the high priest gave Stephen the opportunity to defend himself, Stephen boldly rehearsed the story of God's faithfulness to Israel and Israel's persistent rejection of God's grace and mercy. He recalled that Abraham and the patriarchs were wanderers, but God had promised they would inherit the Promised Land (Acts 7:1–8). God also rescued Joseph from his troubles, appointed Moses to redeem the Hebrews from Egypt, and guided them into the Promised Land (vv. 9–36).

However, the Israelites rebelled against God, rejected Moses, and chose to worship a golden calf instead of the true God (vv. 37–43). Although they later possessed the tabernacle and eventually Solomon's temple, they failed to worship the God, who cannot be confined to a building but is the Creator of heaven and earth (vv. 44–50).

Stephen accused the Jews of consistently rejecting God's message and messengers—the prophets. Their closed minds and hearts had led even to the murder of the Messiah, about whom the prophets wrote (vv. 51–53).

The Sanhedrin members became enraged. They gnashed their teeth at Stephen. Nevertheless, Stephen retained his composure. Full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed up and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand. When he told what he saw, the Sanhedrin screamed, mobbed him, dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him to death. The witnesses laid the clothes and the feet of young Saul (vv. 54–58).

Still, Stephen retained his composure. He committed his spirit to the Lord and prayed for forgiveness for his executioners (vv. 59–60).

Stephen's martyrdom ushered in a time of intense persecution that drove many believers from Jerusalem. Saul was the principal force behind this persecution, but his evil work only furthered the cause of the gospel, as those who fled Jerusalem carried the gospel wherever they went (8:1–3).

Philip evangelized a city in Samaria, where the sorcerer Simon professed to believe (vv. 4–25). Later, the Lord led Philip away from the city to the desert, where he led an Ethiopian eunuch to

Christ (vv. 26–40). God was showing Jewish believers that he is no respecter of persons. Soon, the gospel would extend deep into Gentile territory.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. What do you learn about human nature from Stephen's history of Israel?
2. What do you learn about God's character from his relationship with Israel?
3. How can you apply to your own life what you learn about Israel's history and about God?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that it is possible to associate God's presence only with a church building?
5. How would you respond to the claim that one can worship God in nature and, therefore, does not need to attend church?
6. In your opinion, why was Jesus standing, not sitting, at God's right hand? What does this image of Jesus mean to you personally?
7. Why do you think the Sanhedrin murdered Stephen *outside* Jerusalem?
8. What comparisons can you draw between Stephen's death and Jesus' death?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that persecution would benefit today's church?

WRAP-UP

Have the group read or sing "Faith of Our Fathers." Conclude the session by having volunteers pray for fellow believers around the world who are facing intense persecution and even martyrdom.

REACHING THE GENTILES

Acts 9–10

TO THE FACILITATOR

Tell the group a dramatic shift took place in the church's outreach, when God saved the young Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. With Saul's conversion, the major focus of the church's outreach switched from the Jews to the Gentiles. The significance of this event for the group is enormous.

FOCUS ON THE WORD

Saul of Tarsus hated believers and hoped to destroy the church. With warrants in hand for the arrest of believers in Damascus, Saul journeyed toward that city. But the Lord apprehended Saul along the way. A brilliant light toppled Saul and blinded him, and the Lord spoke to Saul. He identified himself as Jesus, whom Saul was persecuting, and he instructed Saul to enter Damascus and await further instructions (Acts 9:1–9).

Three days later, Ananias, a disciple prepared by the Lord, laid hands on Saul and restored his sight. At first, Ananias hesitated to meet Saul, but the Lord assured him Saul was his chosen instrument to carry the gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 10–17).

After his sight was restored, Saul was baptized, and began to preach in Damascus, much to the consternation of Damascan Jews. They plotted to kill him, but the disciples helped him escape (vv. 18–25).

When Saul returned to Jerusalem, he encountered doubt that he was truly a believer. However, Barnabas took him to the apostles and vouched for the validity of his faith. Subsequently, Saul preached throughout Jerusalem until threats by Grecian Jews prompted the believers to send him to Tarsus. In the meantime, the church in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria grew and revered the Lord (vv. 26–31).

God continued to use Peter in miraculous ways. Acts 9:32–42 reports that God used him to heal Aeneas, a paralyzed man, and to raise Dorcas, a much-loved helper of the needy. Many believed in Jesus after each miracle (vv. 32–42).

While Peter ministered along the Mediterranean coast, Cornelius, a benevolent Roman military officer who feared God, received a vision, in which an angel instructed him to send for Peter in Joppa (Acts 10:1–8).

The next day, Peter saw the sky part and a large sheet with ceremonially unclean animals descend to earth. A voice told him to kill and eat, but he refused, saying he had never eaten anything

impure or unclean. The voice told him not to call anything impure that the Lord had cleaned (vv. 9–15).

This scene repeated itself three times, and then messengers arrived from Cornelius and urged Peter to accompany them to Cornelius's home. The following day, Peter went to Cornelius's home, where he found a ready audience for the gospel. God had used the vision to show him that Gentiles were valid recipients of the good news of salvation (vv. 16–48).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that Stephen's testimony and the way he faced death had brought conviction to Saul?
2. How might Saul's conversion encourage you to keep praying for and witnessing to an unbeliever who seems to be impossible to reach for Christ?
3. What do you think was the light that blinded Saul? Defend your answer.
4. How do you think you and your congregation would treat a former militant persecutor of Christians who suddenly announced he or she was a believer and wanted to join the church? Explain your answer.
5. Paul was chosen not only to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, but also to suffer for the Lord's sake. Why do you agree or disagree that every faithful witness must involve suffering?
6. Would you like to have a Christian friend like Barnabas? Why or why not?
7. What opportunity do you see to act like Barnabas on someone's behalf?
8. How do women like Dorcas benefit the church today?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that Christians should never observe racial prejudice?
10. How can you apply to your own ministry what Peter learned from his experience with Cornelius?

WRAP-UP

Challenge the group to engage in some form of cross-cultural evangelism this week. Have the group brainstorm a way to undertake this endeavor.

AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

Acts 11–12

TO THE FACILITATOR

Ask whether anyone remembers the rhyming slogan Timex used years ago to promote its watches: “Takes a licking and keeps on ticking.” Tell the group that the Timex slogan is also appropriate for the church. As we see in Acts 11–12, the church is unstoppable. It takes a licking and keeps on ticking.

FOCUS ON THE WORD

When Peter returned to the Jerusalem church, at first the Jewish believers criticized him for associating with Gentile Cornelius and the other Gentiles at Cornelius’s home. However, after Peter explained precisely what had happened, the church dropped its objections, praised God, and concluded that God had granted “even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11:1–18).

When persecuted believers traveled to Gentile cities, they carried the gospel with them. In Antioch a great number of Gentiles turned to the Lord. When the church at Jerusalem heard the news, it sent Barnabas to investigate. He saw what was occurring in Antioch and fetched Saul from Tarsus to help him disciple the Antioch believers, who were called Christians (vv. 19–26).

When a prophet from Jerusalem predicted a famine would blight the Roman world, the church at Antioch sent Barnabas and Silas to Judea with a welfare gift to help the believers there (vv. 27–30).

Acts 12 records the martyrdom of the apostle James at the hands of Herod Agrippa I, and the subsequent imprisonment of the apostle Peter by Herod (vv. 1–4). But Peter experienced a miracle. An angel awoke Peter. His chains fell off, and then the angel told him to get dressed. Soon, Peter found himself free, outside the prison and free from Herod (vv. 5–11).

Peter proceeded to Mary’s house, where many believers were praying. Before leaving Mary’s home, Peter described how the Lord had rescued him from prison, and he instructed the believers to report this good news to fellow believers (vv. 12–17).

Later, at Caesarea, Herod, dressed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and addressed the people. When he accepted the people’s acclamation that he was a god, he received the Lord’s judgment. He fell down and was eaten by worms.

The gospel continued to spread under the leadership of Barnabas and Saul (vv. 18–25). All the opposition heaped on the church had simply demonstrated that the gospel is an unstoppable force.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. What forces today are trying to stop the advance of the gospel? Why will they not succeed?
2. What types of people might Christians today be reluctant to associate with? Why do you agree or disagree that this reluctance is wrong?
3. Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch to assist in teaching the believers there. How can a ministry partner help you serve the Lord?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that it is significant that the believers at Antioch were called Christians?
5. Read John 21:18. What link, if any, do you see between this verse and Peter's ability to sleep soundly in Herod's prison?
6. Referring to Peter's release from prison, Kenneth Schenck affirms, "God still does miracles" (*Our Foundation*, p. 103). Why do you agree or disagree with Schenck's statement?
7. What do you think the believers were asking God to do when Peter was in prison? Defend your answer.
8. How does history show that wicked rulers cannot stop God's message from going forward?
9. How do you account for the fact that James experienced martyrdom but Peter did not?
10. How does it encourage you to know the gospel is an unstoppable force?

WRAP-UP

Thank the group members for faithfully participating in each group session. Ask volunteers to share a few valuable take-away truths. Have the group members read or sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers."