



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## Missiology

### Lesson 4 – Early Mission Work in Jerusalem

The book of Acts is the Holy Spirit's own record of how Jesus' followers began to follow His instructions after His ascension to heaven. He had told them to announce the Good News to all people of all nations, even to the ends of the earth. But this did not happen in one day. In fact, the Good News of Christ is still going out into the world today and will continue to do so until Christ returns.

When Jesus promised that the Father would pour out of the Holy Spirit, He indicated the order in which the Good News would make its way through the world: **"You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"** (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts begins with the preaching of the Gospel in Jerusalem, and then Judea, and then Samaria, and finally to the Gentiles. We could say the book of Acts starts with Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish world, and ends with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world. The Gospel made rapid progress in a relatively short time.

The Holy Spirit's tools in this initial period were the twelve apostles themselves, with the addition of the apostle Paul. All of them were called directly by the Lord Himself. When Judas Iscariot needed to be replaced, Peter stated the qualifications required to be an apostle: It must be someone who has **"accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us"** (Acts 1:21-22). They named two such men, Joseph Barsabas Justus and Matthias, and they asked the Lord to choose one of them as the new twelfth apostle by the casting of lots. Matthias was chosen, and **"he was numbered with the eleven apostles"** (Acts 1:26).

No doubt all the apostles did their work faithfully, beginning in Jerusalem and eventually going to other places. The book of Acts and the rest of the Scriptures tell us nothing about the preaching and the travels of most of the apostles. The little we know of what they did comes from the writings and stories that were collected by Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote a book about the early history of the Church. It seems that some of the apostles went eastward with the Gospel, perhaps reaching as far as India and China. The book of Acts, however, describes only the work done by Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and the work of the apostle Paul and his co-workers, like Barnabas, Silas, Mark, Luke, Timothy, and Titus. Acts mentions the activity of others, including James, the brother of Jesus, as well as two of the seven deacons of the Jerusalem congregation, Stephen and Philip.

In this lesson we will summarize the mission work of the original twelve apostles and their associates, as found in the book of Acts and the letters written by others. We will not talk about the work Paul in this lesson; we will talk the mission work of the apostle Paul in later lessons.

As Jesus foretold, the Holy Spirit was poured out a few days (specifically, ten) after His ascension. The day God chose for this outpouring was Pentecost, which was already a Jewish festival day. There were many Jews from all over the world present in Jerusalem for this festival. There were only 120 followers of Christ in Jerusalem at the beginning of the day, including the twelve apostles, the four brothers of Jesus, Jesus' mother Mary, and other women who had been loyal followers of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit made His presence known by three astounding miracles: the sound of the wind, the tongues of fire, and the sudden ability of the believers to speak the praises of God in specific foreign languages. These miracles attracted many Jews who were from Jerusalem and far-off places. What amazed them in particular was that these men from Galilee were speaking in the languages of other nations: **"The multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language"** (Acts 2:6). Fifteen foreign peoples are listed, and these foreigners asked: **"How is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?"** (Acts 2:8). No doubt all of these visitors were Jews, for by this time in history the Jewish people had been scattered in many different countries, as far as Mesopotamia in the east and Rome in the west.

The book of Acts tells us what the apostle Peter said on that day of Pentecost about Christ's death and resurrection, and how many people responded to what he said by confessing their sins and being baptized in Christ's name for the forgiveness of their sins. The Holy Spirit blessed the preaching of the Gospel. **"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers"** (Acts 2:41-42). Notice that their baptism was followed by a careful listening to the teaching of the apostles, in keeping with Jesus' instruction to make disciples by baptizing and teaching.

What began on Pentecost continued in the days that followed: **"So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved"** (Acts 2:46-47). The young congregation in Jerusalem used the Temple itself as a place to spread the Gospel. They were certainly a mission-minded congregation, and the Lord blessed their testimony with daily additions to His Church.

As we continue to read the book of Acts, we see that this growth continued for some time. We are told: **"Many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men**

came to be about five thousand” (Acts 4:4). **“And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women”** (Acts 5:14). The Gospel spread from Jerusalem to the neighboring countryside in Judea, as Jesus had foretold. **“A multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed”** (Acts 5:16). The miracles confirmed the Word, but the Word itself was the Holy Spirit’s main tool. **“Daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ”** (Acts 5:42). Teaching and preaching Christ – this is how mission work is done, and the Holy Spirit blesses the Word as He wills.

The early growth continued for some time. **“The number of the disciples was multiplying”** (Acts 6:1). **“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith”** (Acts 6:7). Remember that many of the priests belonged to the sect of the Sadducees, whose members did not even believe in the resurrection of the dead or in angels. The Holy Spirit worked in their hearts also through Law and Gospel, and now they became believers in Christ, who did rise from the dead. Later we are told that there were also **“Pharisees who believed”** (Acts 15:5).

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He told His disciples: **“These signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover”** (Mark 16:17-18). The book of Acts gives many examples of this last sign: the healing of the sick. There are examples of all the other signs as well, except for the drinking of poison, but we can be sure this occurred as well, since Mark reports: **“They went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs”** (Mark 16:20).

Amazing things took place, beginning with the special signs on Pentecost. We are told: **“Many wonders and signs were done through the apostles”** (Acts 2:43). One of these signs took place at the gate of the Temple. There a lame beggar hoped to receive a gift of money from Peter and John. But Peter gave him much more. **“Peter said, ‘ ... In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.’ And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them – walking, leaping, and praising God”** (Acts 3:6-8). This miracle at a public place with many witnesses gave Peter an opportunity to preach the Law and Gospel: **“They taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead”** (Acts 4:2). Not even the threats and punishments of the Jewish leaders could stop them. **“With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus”** (Acts 4:33).

Most of the signs were signs of healing. But there was one sign that was a sign of judgment that made a deep impression on the citizens of Jerusalem. Ananias and his wife Sapphira

wanted to give the believers the impression that they were just as generous as others who sold property, like Barnabas, who gave all of the proceeds of the sale to the congregation. Ananias and his wife also sold some property and gave proceeds to the congregation, but they kept back part of it for themselves and yet pretended to give it all. Peter accused Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit, and when Ananias heard Peter's words he **"fell down and breathed his last"** (Acts 5:5). Before his wife learned of her husband's death, she repeated the same lie and **"immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last"** (Acts 5:10). The result was that **"great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things"** (Acts 5:11).

Such signs continued for some time in the circle of the apostles, as is clear from Acts and other New Testament books. The question is sometimes raised as to whether the Holy Spirit is still confirming God's Word with such miracles today. There is no doubt that the almighty God is able to perform miracles of any kind whenever He chooses to do so. But it seems from a study of church history that for the most part God has chosen not to confirm the Word among us by such miraculous means, since we now have the entire written Scriptures, which the early Christians did not have. Paul told the Christians in Corinth that the miracles he performed were signs that proved that he was a true apostle, just like the original twelve: **"Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds"** (2 Corinthians 12:12). The letter to the Hebrews refers to these signs as having been done by those who were witnesses of our Lord's death and resurrection, saying: **"How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"** (Hebrews 2: 3-4).

Church history shows that the miraculous signs that were so abundant during the apostolic times gradually dwindled as the apostles and that whole generation passed away. Some of the signs claimed by later teachers were probably not authentic at all. We must remember the warning that the apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **"The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish"** (2 Thessalonians 2: 9-10).

In our day, it seems that most of those who claim to be doing miracles in Christ's name are not doing these miracles by the power of God, for they are using these so-called signs to confirm their false teachings, not the truth of God. Some of these alleged faith healers and miracle workers are nothing but frauds, attempting to get rich at the expense of their deluded followers. We need to remember Moses' ancient warning: **"When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously"** (Deuteronomy 18:22). Moses also warned: **"If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder**

comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’ – which you have not known – and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:1-3). We need to test every teacher and alleged miracle worker by means of the Scriptures, to determine whether he is a true teacher or a false teacher. This is the case whether the signs seem genuine or not.

The early Christians combined their zeal for missions with fervent prayer. Even before Pentecost we find the 120 Christians in Jerusalem continuing **“with one accord in prayer and supplication”** (Acts 1:14). They prayed for the Lord’s guidance in choosing a twelfth apostle to replace Judas of Iscariot. After the Holy Spirit was poured out on them on Pentecost, **“they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”** (Acts 2:42).

One of their prayers is recorded at some length. After they were commanded by the Jewish authorities **“not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus”** (Acts 4:18), **“they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: “Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ.” For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus”’** (Acts 4:24-30). This is a good pattern for all mission prayers. It first calls attention to who God is and what He is capable of doing; He is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Then the prayer reminds God, so to speak, of what He had said about His Christ, His Anointed One, in the second psalm. Then they bring their request to God; they do not request that persecution should come to an end and their life made easier, but that they be given boldness to proclaim the Word of God; they also ask that God keep His promise to confirm the preaching of the Word with signs and wonders. God answered their prayer by filling them with the Holy Spirit, so that **“they spoke the word of God with boldness”** (Acts 4:31).

The apostles recognized that prayer was one of their privileges and duties; it was even more important than distributing food to the hungry. When the apostles were unable to handle all the tasks that needed to be done in the growing congregation, they chose seven helpers (or deacons) to handle the food distribution to the poor. They themselves said: **“We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word”** (Acts 6:4).

The first believer to lose his life because of his confession of Christ was Stephen, one of those seven deacons. He died praying like his dying Master, for he prayed as Jesus prayed: **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,”** and: **“Lord, do not charge them with this sin”** (Acts 7:59-60).

Since there were many poor Christians in the Jerusalem congregation – particularly widows who had no one to support them – the apostles and the more well-to-do Christians helped them. One of the reasons the Gospel of Christ was attractive to the heathen world around these early Christians was the love and generosity they had towards one another. Such love and generosity are a necessary fruit of faith in Christ. From the very beginning, **“all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need”** (Acts 2:44-45). The apostles did not make this into a rule that everyone had to follow, but it was something the early Christians joyfully volunteered to do. **“The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. ... Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need”** (Acts 4:32-35). When the apostles became too busy with this distribution of food and were unable to handle it properly, seven helpers were chosen to oversee this important work. It was important to support the material needs of the Christians. It was important for those who had, to share what they had with those who did not have. This kind of concern for helping others with earthly things is one of the best advertisements for the Christian faith, especially among those whose religion or culture knows little or nothing of such concern for others.

As we have already seen, the bold zeal of the Christians to proclaim the Gospel of Christ triggered hostility from the unbelievers, particularly the Jewish authorities. Already on Pentecost, some of those present in the crowd said the apostles were drunk, and that was the cause of their miraculous speaking in other languages. After Peter and John healed of the lame beggar, they were imprisoned overnight and summoned before the Jewish council on the next day. The Jewish authorities had a problem on their hands. It was obvious to the public that a miracle had taken place in the name of Jesus, whom they had crucified. What were they going to do? They commanded them not to teach in Jesus’ name and threatened to punish them if they disobeyed. But **“they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done”** (Acts 4:21).

Not long after this, the high priest and his henchmen **“laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison”** (Acts 5:18). This time they were set free by an angel from the Lord who **“opened the prison doors and brought them out”** (Acts 5:19). Again they were brought before the council. When Peter and the others freely admitted that they did not intend to obey the Jew’s commands to not talk about Jesus, **“they were furious and**

**plotted to kill them"** (Acts 5:33). It was dangerous to be a confessing Christian. But Gamaliel, a respected leader among them, advised restraint and they listened to his counsel.

This respite from persecution did not last long, however. When the deacon Stephen became especially bold in his witness about Christ and was given power to do miracles to confirm his teaching, the Jewish leaders **"stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him (Stephen), and brought him to the council"** (Acts 6:12). After listening to Stephen's address, **"they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. ... They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him"** (Acts 7:54-58). They followed up this assault on Stephen with **"a great persecution ... against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria"** (Acts 8:1). The early Christians and their leaders were willing to endure ridicule, shame, persecution, and even death for the sake of the Gospel.

### Questions

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1. Where does the book of Acts begin, and where does it end?
2. What was special about the twelve apostles and Paul?
3. What happened on the day of Pentecost?
4. What is meant by the speaking in tongues?
5. What must we say about the claims of miracles and tongues in our day?
6. What is the test we must give to all who claim to teach God's Word?
7. What are the main points of the prayer in Acts 4:24-30?
8. What did the apostles consider to be their main responsibility?
9. How did the Christians in Jerusalem handle the problems of the poor?
10. Why did Christ's enemies refrain from punishing the apostles?
11. What form of persecution did the early Christians in Jerusalem endure?