



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

New Testament Survey

Lesson 17 – The Beginning of the New Testament Church

The Book of Acts

The book of Acts is really the second part of Luke's Gospel. The physician Luke was a companion of Paul on his mission journeys. Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts for a new convert named Theophilus. Acts was probably written between 60 and 70 AD.

The theme of the book of Acts is the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem, which was the center of Judaism, to Rome, which was the center of the ancient world. We read how the apostles of our Lord carried out His command to preach the Gospel to every creature, beginning at Jerusalem. They started preaching to Jews, then to Greek-speaking Jews called Hellenists, then to Samaritans, then to Gentiles of all kinds. The chief agents of this work of God whose stories are told in Acts are: Peter, James, John, Stephen, Philip, James (the brother of the Lord), Barnabas, and Paul. The era covered by the book is the thirty years from 30 AD to 60 AD.

The Holy Spirit: the Hero of the Book of Acts

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised to send the Holy Spirit. This promise was kept ten days later at the Jewish festival of Pentecost, which means 50th, because it was 50 days after Passover. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down in a visible and audible way to the followers of Jesus who were gathered together in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit then began through them His great work of proclaiming to the world the message of the crucified and risen Messiah in whom there is forgiveness of sins for all people. Therefore, the book of Acts can rightly be called "the Gospel of the Holy Spirit".

The Holy Spirit was of course active before Pentecost. He created the world. He spoke through the Old Testament prophets. He empowered the Virgin Mary to conceive and give birth to the Son of God. He was with Jesus in His ministry. On Easter Sunday evening Jesus gave His disciples the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the keys. But on Pentecost the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples of Jesus in an especially rich measure. It was the Holy Spirit who guided and directed the activity of Jesus' apostles and the early Christians. He opened their mouths to proclaim the Word of God. Later, the Holy Spirit guided their pens in the writing of the New Testament.

The Gospel proclaimed by the Holy Spirit had two different effects: the conversion of many and the opposition of many. It has these effects today, as it will until the end of the world.

Those upon whom the Holy Spirit works and in whom He creates faith in the Gospel by means of the Gospel are the Church of God, that is, the believers in Christ, the dwelling places of the Holy Spirit; they are the beloved children of God and heirs of the Father.

The Preaching of Jesus' Apostles

Notice that the message of the apostles was centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and their meaning for all sinners, namely, the forgiveness of sins. Their message, especially to the Jews who treasured the Old Testament, was that Jesus was the Messiah promised to the Jewish people. The apostles often quoted Old Testament prophecies and showed how Jesus was the fulfillment of those prophecies. Jesus had promised to confirm the preaching of the apostles through signs and miracles. In the early months and years after Pentecost there were many such signs.

Read the listed passages in Acts as you study each of the events below:

Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to His disciples (Acts 1:1-8)

"Wait for the promise of the Father" (v. 4).

"You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (v. 5).

"When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, ... you shall be witnesses to Me" (v. 8).

Jesus ascends to heaven at the Mount of Olives (1:9-12) – (Beck suggests May 18, 30 AD as the date)

"He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight" (v. 9).

Two angels said: **"This same Jesus ... will so come in like manner as you saw Him go" (v. 11).**

The eleven apostles, Jesus' brothers, other disciples, Mary and other women wait (1:13-14)

The total number of those waiting in Jerusalem was 120.

The disciple Matthias is chosen to become an apostle to replace Judas Iscariot (1:15-26, Ps. 69:25, 109:8)

Peter: **"One of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection" (v. 22).**

The Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples at Pentecost (2:1-13)

The threefold miracle:

"a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind" (v. 2).

"divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them" (v. 3).

"they began to speak with other tongues (languages)" (v. 4).

The speaking in tongues on Pentecost was the speaking of unlearned foreign languages.

The Holy Spirit uses Peter to preach **Sermon One** (2:14-36)

"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (v. 16, see Joel 2:28-32)

"Him ... you ... have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up" (vv. 23-24, see Ps. 16:8-11)

"Being exalted to the right hand of God" (v. 32).

"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (v. 36, see Ps. 110:1)

Note: The sermons of the apostles were generally based on Old Testament prophecies.

Peter preaches the Good News of forgiveness to the troubled Jews (2:37-41)

"They were cut to the heart, and said ... : 'What shall we do?'" (v. 37).

Peter: **"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized ... for the remission of sins"** (v. 38).

"That day about three thousand souls were added to them" (v. 41).

The first Christian congregation rejoices in the Gospel (2:42-47)

"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (v. 42).

Note: True Christian fellowship is based on a continuing in apostolic doctrine today also.

"All who believed were together, and had all things in common" (v. 44).

Note: This was a voluntary communism, much different from that in communist countries today (which is forced upon the people).

Peter and John are given power by Christ to heal a lame beggar (3:1-11)

Peter: **"Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you"** (v. 6).

Peter: **"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk"** (v. 6).

"They were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him" (v. 10).

Note: In the early days of the Church the apostles voluntarily kept the Old Testament customs.

Peter uses this opportunity to preach **Sermon Two** (3:12-26, see Deut. 18:15-20; Genesis 12:3)

Peter: **"You ... killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead"** (vv. 14-15).

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (v. 19).

"God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him (through our preaching) to bless you" (v. 26).

The Jewish leaders put Peter and John into prison (4:1-4)

Peter testifies to the Jewish leaders (4:5-12, see Ps. 118:22)

“By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole” (v. 10).

“There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (v. 12).

Note: The true Gospel is both inclusive and exclusive. Forgiveness of sins is for all, but only those who trust in Jesus will receive it. Jesus is the world’s only Savior.

The Jewish leaders command Peter and John not to preach the Gospel (4:13-22)

The leaders: **“That a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all” (v. 16).**

Nevertheless **“they ... commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” (v. 18).**

Peter and John: **“We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (v. 20).**

The Christians pray for boldness to speak the Word of God (4:23-37, see Gen. 1, Ps. 2)

“Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them” (v. 24).

“Against ... Jesus ... both Herod and Pontius Pilate ... were gathered together” (v. 27).

“Grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word” (v. 29).

“With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (v. 33).

“Barnabas ... having land sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (vv. 36-37).

God shows His hatred of hypocrisy by killing Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)

They **“sold a possession ... and brought a certain part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (vv. 1-2).**

But they wanted people to think that they had given all the proceeds to the apostles.

Peter: **“Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? ... You have lied to God” (vv. 3-4).**

Note: Their sin was hypocrisy: pretending to give all while they were only giving only a part.

Note: Peter pointed out that they had the right to keep part of the money if they wanted.

Note: Peter plainly taught that the Holy Spirit is God. A lie to the Holy Spirit is a lie to God.

“Ananias ... fell down and breathed his last” (v. 5). Later Sapphira **“breathed her last”** (v. 10).

“Great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things” (v. 11).

The apostles are given power to work many miracles of healing (5:12-16)

“Believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (v. 14).

The Jewish leaders imprison the apostles and question them (5:17-28)

They **“put them in the common prison. But ... an angel ... opened the prison doors”** (vv. 18-19).

The report: **“The men whom you put in prison are ... teaching the people”** (v. 25).

The high priest: **“Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? ... You have filled Jerusalem with this doctrine”** (v. 28).

Questions:

1. For whom did Luke write his Gospel and the book of Acts?
2. What is the theme of the book of Acts?
3. What is the special work of the Holy Spirit?
4. What is meant by the baptism with the Holy Spirit?
5. What miracles took place on the day of Pentecost?
6. What was the main point of Peter’s sermon on Pentecost?
7. Why were Peter and John put into prison?
8. Why did Peter and John openly disobey the orders given to them?
9. What did Peter say that tells us that there is only one Savior?
10. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?
11. What was the purpose of the miracles done by the apostles?