

NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
NOTES FOR SESSION #1: PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

Welcome to our class! This basic format of this class is a slow reading of the *Acts of the Apostles*. We have several goals in mind:

- 1) To learn more about the early church, what was important to the original Christian church, and how they converted an entire empire in several generations.
- 2) To be edified in our own spiritual life by this knowledge
- 3) To learn not only basic information, but also how to read and pray with Holy Scripture
- 4) To build true Christian community by fulfilling the directive written in the *Acts of the Apostles* itself: “*And they held steadfastly to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers (Acts 2:42).*”

HOW TO DO THE READING: I am going to suggest a simple reading plan of anywhere from 4-6 sessions per two weeks. In other words, I am *not* going to provide a daily reading schedule (because it seems to much for many people), but I *will* provide a reading plan that gives you specific passages to read 2-3 times per week – it will be up to you to plan where in your schedule those sessions should fall. You are not bound by the schedule that I give you. It is simply a suggestion. Some people may even want to pray multiple sessions at once but do it several times, which is quite appropriate. That way, some structure will be given but it will not be too rigid or unreasonable!

AUTHOR OF ACTS: St. Luke is an evangelist, an author of a gospel, a traveling companion of St. Luke, and likely even one of St. Paul’s secretaries. The author of Acts is St. Luke. St. Luke identifies himself as someone who was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus but rather a reliable historian and recorder of events, making him likely a second generation Christian though he may have met Jesus himself. (See prologue of Luke 1). St. Paul identifies him as a doctor who has worked with him in his ministry (Col 4:10-14). Some of the early fathers of the church number Luke among the 70 disciples mentioned in Luke 10. Luke quotes about 350 verses of Mark and apparently personally knows St. Peter and likely a few other apostles as well. The Greek he uses is very good.

TIME OF ACTS: Luke likely wrote Acts around 63 A.D., soon after the account of St. Paul’s imprisonment in the closing chapter (28:16). Keep in mind that this is a full generation – about 33 years – *after* the death of Jesus and the Pentecost of the young church! We can infer this from what Luke conspicuously leave out of Acts – he makes no mention of the massive Roman fire, nor of the Christian persecution of Nero in 64 A.D., nor the conquest of Jerusalem in 70 A.D, but is familiar with most events that directly precede these.

READERSHIP OF ACTS: The Book of Acts is obviously written for a Gentile (non-Jewish) congregation. The book is addressed to Theophilus, who is likely a Roman patron who paid to have the book copied and distributed. It is possible that Theophilus is simply a literary convention, considering that the name literally means “a friend of God.”

PURPOSE OF ACTS: Acts records highlights of the first 30 years of Christian history from the Ascension of Jesus in Jerusalem to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome in about 63 A.D. We must remember that it is a sequel of the Gospel of Luke, which ends with Jesus’ Ascension and his promise of sending the Holy Spirit. It also contains the Lord’s directive to preach *forgiveness of sins* and *repentance to all nations in His Name* (Luke 24:47). Thus, the Acts of the Apostles tells how the early

church carried out this mission in the power of the Spirit, focusing particularly on the missions of its two greatest preachers – Peter and Paul.

HOLY READING – A FEW POINTERS!

THE 4 STEPS OF HOLY READING:

1. *Lectio* (The reading itself – the early Christians read OUT LOUD).
2. *Meditatio* (Meditation – What strikes me? What is this saying to me? What do these words mean?)
3. *Oratio* (Oration/Prayer – talk to God, sing, or journal about what your reading. Try to establish a connection between you and God.)
4. *Contemplatio* (Contemplation – rest in God’s presence or listen closely to what he is telling your heart.)

Please remember this cardinal rule: *If you feel inspired, or understand the Lord is speaking to you, stop reading and PRAY!!!!*

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN YOU READ SCRIPTURE:

1. What does this reading mean to the people who originally heard its message? How do you think it would have sounded to them?
2. What does this reading have to say to *me* and to the church *today*?
3. What words strike me? What passages? *Why* is that the case?

NOTES FOR CLASS #2: THE KINGDOM & THE SPIRIT

Session #1: Kingdom, Witness, Spirit

- Read Acts 1:1-11
- Kingdom: Read Matt 19:13-14; Mark 40:30-32; Luke 17:20-21; John 18:36
- Witness: Read Luke 21:5-19

QUESTIONS: Do you realize that in your baptism and confirmation that you have been “baptized in the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5; Matt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; John 1:33)? What did this mean for those at Pentecost? What does it mean to you? What does it mean for you to be a witness for Jesus (Acts 1:8)?

Session #2: The New Apostle and the Remnant

- Read Acts 1:12-26
- The brethren and the women: Luke 8:2-3; Jn 7:5
- The baptism of John: Matt 3:9-12

QUESTIONS: What do you imagine those early meetings looked and felt like for the first Christians? It was very important that a replacement be chosen for Judas the Betrayer. Why?

Session #3: Pentecost

- Read Acts 2:1-36
- Read Luke 24:44-46 (Keep in mind that in Peter’s sermon, he quotes the prophet Joel as well as Psalm 16, 132, and 110!)
- Read Genesis 11:1-9 – Pentecost, in a way, *reverses* the Tower of Babel. Think about it!

QUESTIONS: It seems strange to us, but what do you make of the gift of tongues? Why do you think that gift was given at Pentecost more than others? What do you make of St. Peter’s first speech after Pentecost? What is he really trying to say – what is his main theme?

Session #4: The First Converts

- Read Acts 2:37-47
- The Promise: Isaiah 57:19; Joel 2:32; Luke 24:48-49
- An Evil Generation: Matt 16:4; Acts 2:40; Matt 12:45

They asked Peter and the others, “*Brethren, what shall we do?*” (Acts 2:37).” What do you think of Peter’s answer? What does it mean to you? What do you think that life among those first believers must have been like? They lived together, ate together, prayed together and learned together – do you think the church does this the way that it should? What is missing? What is good?

Some Key Words:

1. **Kingdom of God** (1:3,6) = The Kingdom of God refers to several things. It refers primarily to Jesus’s final reign over the world, but this reign *begins* in the hearts, minds and actions of his followers. We pray every day in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done....”
2. **Pentecost** = Jesus promised during his preaching ministry that he would send an “advocate” that would teach and guide his believers, which is the Holy Spirit. Pentecost literally means “50th”, and refers to the 50th day after the Resurrection when the disciples received this promise of the Holy Spirit.
3. **Witness** = Jesus refers several times to his disciples being his witnesses (*martus* in Greek.) It originally means one who has seen or heard something important. It could refer to seeing a contest or battle, etc. It was also used in the courtroom as the word for a “witness.” Please

note that the Greek word is related to our English word *martyr*, meaning “one who has witnessed to his/her belief in Jesus Christ by shedding his blood”!

ASSIGNMENT FOR CLASS #3: THE MINISTRY OF PETER AND THE FIRST TWO IMPRISONMENTS

Session #1: Peter, John and the Lame Beggar

- Read Chapter 3
- Read Deut 18:15-19

Place yourself in this scene. This is a very traditional meditation practice when praying with Holy Scriptures. Who are you in the scene? Peter? John? The blind beggar? A bystander? What are your feelings as you read it? Peter stresses repentance several times in his speech? What does that make you think about personally? What do you think he wants you and the world to “repent” from?

Session #2: Peter & John Testify Before the Elders

- Read Acts 4:1-22

Verse 4:4 says that the number of Christians has grown to about 5,000. That is about a 3,000 person increase from Pentecost shortly before. What accounts for the growth? What needs to happen in our world to see such growth? Notice how much Peter stresses JESUS (See 3:16; 4:10). How comfortable are you preaching and witnessing to *Jesus Christ*, or do we stress a Gospel that is much more non-specific? Peter says, “*For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (4:20).*” What have you seen and heard about Jesus and the Gospel?

Session #3: The Early Believers

- Read Acts 4:23-31
- Read Psalm 2:1-2

What do you think about this prayer? Are you able to join in it and understand it? *What are they really asking for?* What would you ask for?

Session #4: The Believers & Their Possessions

- Read Acts 4:32-37
- Re-read Acts 2:44-45

Here we see some of the earliest examples of church offerings. How do we feel about our possessions? What holds us back from giving more?

TURN (See 3:19, 26) = In Greek, *apostrophō*. I thought it was significant that in Peter’s speech he stressed this word meaning “to turn around, return, or turn back.” Peter very much wants to stress that following this new path means you have to turn away from your old one!

ANAPSUCHIS (“Times of refreshment”)(3:19) = literally means “a recovery of breath.” Isn’t it interesting that Peter says that when we repent we will receive a “recovery of breath”? One of the primary symbols and definitions of the Holy Spirit is “breath”!