

Study 25: Acts of the Apostles I – The Gospel of the Spirit

Background. *The Acts of the Apostles* is really the second volume of a two-volume work written by St. Luke in which the evangelist continues proclaiming the significance of the *Mystery of Jesus* which he introduced in his Gospel. In *Acts* we encounter the realization of the promises of Jesus, promises that extend the salvation of Israel to the Gentiles, and so to the entire world. We witness the work of the Holy Spirit accomplished through those men whom Jesus prepared during His ministry and formally commissioned after His Resurrection [Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-18; Jn 21:15-17]. But Luke provides us with a detailed history of only part of the early Christian community, that part in which two disciples – Peter and Paul – played a key role.

Peter's leadership was apparent in all four gospels, and it continues in Luke's history of the early Church. Time after time Peter is depicted as the leader of the disciples [e.g., Acts 1:13-15], and is extolled as the one largely responsible for the remarkable growth of the Christian community during its earliest days [Acts 2:4, 4:4].

Paul's leadership is of a different sort. Called to conversion by the risen Jesus, Paul is singled out as God's "*chosen instrument...to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel*" [Acts 9:15].

The Acts of the Apostles focuses on the ministries of these two men as they lead the early Church in Jerusalem, Asia Minor, Greece and eventually in the very heart of the empire, the city of Rome itself. And as Luke relates this history we also witness the development of Christianity as it expands rapidly from a tiny group gathered in the upper room on the first Pentecost to a truly universal ("catholic") Church with followers throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

It's important to realize that while Luke describes the ministries of Peter and Paul, the other apostles were engaged in similar ministries and missionary activity in different parts of the known world. For example, both tradition and the writings of many early Church Fathers tell us of the work of these other apostles:

- ✠ Andrew, a fisherman like his brother, Peter, preached the Gospel in northern Greece, Epirus and Scythia, and was martyred on the X-shaped cross that bears his name at Patras in Greece about 70 A.D.
- ✠ John, the youngest of the apostles, wrote both a Gospel and the Book of Revelation, and apparently died of old age in Ephesus near the end of the first century. Tradition tells us that he cared for Mary, Jesus' Mother, until her death.
- ✠ James, son of Zebedee (James the Greater) and with his brother, John, was one of the "Sons of Thunder." James was the first apostle to die, suffering martyrdom by the sword in 44 A.D. at Jerusalem under Herod Agrippa. There is a wonderful tradition about James traveling to Spain where he is venerated at Santiago de Compostela.
- ✠ Matthew, called Levi by Luke, was a Galilean tax collector and, like John, wrote a Gospel. The early Church disagrees with modern scholars and claimed that Matthew wrote the first Gospel, sometimes in the 40s. A number of accounts have him spreading the Good News in Judea, Ethiopia, Persia and Parthia. He was apparently quite the traveler. He, too, suffered martyrdom.
- ✠ Simon, the Zealot, is said to have preached throughout the Middle East and suffered martyrdom by being sawed in half.
- ✠ Thomas, known both for doubting the risen Jesus and his subsequent act of faith, preached the Gospel from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf and eventually made his way to India where he was martyred at Madras.

- ✠ Jude Thaddeus, author of the catholic letter that bears his name, spread the Gospel in Mesopotamia and Persia. He too was martyred.
- ✠ Philip, tradition tells us, preached in Phrygia (in the center of modern Turkey) where he was martyred.
- ✠ James the Less may or may not be the same person as James, the “brother” of the Lord who led the Church in Jerusalem and is the traditional author of the Letter of James. If the two men are not identical, then it would seem we know little of James the Less other than his name and the fact that he was an apostle.
- ✠ Bartholomew, also called Nathaniel, was the friend of Philip and an active missionary who spread the Good News to Ethiopia, India, Persia and Armenia, where he was martyred by being flayed and beheaded.
- ✠ Matthias, the disciple of Jesus chosen to replace Judas. Several traditions indicate that he preached throughout Palestine as well as in Cappadocia or Ethiopia.

We know little of the lives of these apostles since, unlike Peter and Paul, they had no Luke to record their ministries. But apparently the Holy Spirit decided that Luke’s account of the early Church was sufficient for those of us who came after. And although Luke devotes much of *Acts* to the ministries of Peter and Paul, the real hero of *Acts* is the Holy Spirit Himself.

The Gospel of the Spirit. In his Gospel, Luke described those events that led up to Jesus’ redemptive act on the Cross, His Resurrection, and Ascension to the Father. In his *Acts of the Apostles*, he presents us with an account of the important role played by the Holy Spirit, the “advocate” who desires to bring all men to Christ.

Throughout this wonderful book of personal, contemporary history we encounter the consistency of God. For just as God in the Old Testament again and again turned tragedy into triumph for His People, so too in *Acts* we see the Holy Spirit’s saving intervention at each moment of crisis in the growth of the early Church. God led His People out of slavery. He repeatedly saved them from themselves and their unfaithfulness. He sent his messengers, the prophets, to call them back to His love. He returned them to the Promised Land after a long captivity. And all of this was done to prepare them and the world for the arrival of the Promised One, His Son, Jesus Christ.

In *Acts* we encounter the Holy Spirit actively bringing that promise to reality. It is the Holy Spirit who, at Pentecost, first strengthens and drives the apostles to commence their mission to spread the Good News to others. It is He who intervenes during the meeting of Peter and Cornelius to answer the great question of the place of the Gentiles in Christ’s new Church. It is He who leads Paul after His miraculous conversion away from the comfortable world of the East to the very center of Western civilization, to the city of Rome. It is the Spirit who is given the spotlight in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Acts: The Link between Gospels and Letters. When one reads *Acts* as an element of the New Testament, it quickly becomes apparent that the book provides a unique link between the four Gospels and the large body of apostolic Letters. These Letters, written by Paul and others, are not the mere disconnected musings of one person or another about things religious. No, each was written for a specific purpose, to address the very real daily concerns of the Church as she carried out her mission of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, the promise of salvation, to every creature. In *Acts* we see how this nascent Church, founded by Jesus Himself and spurred on by the Spirit, preaches the Gospel to an unbelieving world. The means by which this Spirit-filled work is carried out, as well as the obstacles confronted and overcome, are addressed in *Acts*, but

are described for us in detail in the Letters. *Acts*, then, forms a kind of link between the Gospel, as proclaimed by Jesus Christ to His disciples, and the proclamation of this same Gospel message to all the world, a message declared most clearly in the apostolic Letters.

The Roman World Encountered in Acts. As might be expected, God chose the perfect time for the Incarnation and the subsequent establishment of His Church. After the devastating civil wars that followed the death of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., the empire experienced a period of peace under Caesar's grandnephew, Octavius (Caesar Augustus), who reigned from 27 B.C. until 14 A.D. This "Peace of Rome" or *Pax Romana* lasted over 200 years and enabled the propagation of Christianity throughout the empire. Roman power and governance attracted the attention and the envy of the known world. Even the barbarians found the empire irresistible. And as the empire grew in size and influence, Roman engineers extended its remarkable system of paved roads and Roman military power kept its highways and sea lanes free of bandits and pirates. The people's ability to travel and communicate was unsurpassed until the technological revolution of modern times.

But there were other factors that aided in the spread of Christianity. Among them was the Diaspora of the Jews. For centuries before the time of Christ, Jews had been emigrating from the Holy Land to Egypt, Rome and all points in between. Julius Caesar, who had been supported by the Jews of Rome, repaid them by issuing a decree that stated, among other positive things, "All other measures notwithstanding, I allow these persons [The Jews] to gather and to organize their community following the customs of their fathers and according to their own laws." The decree was not only approved by the Roman Senate but continued under Caesar Augustus.

As a result of the Diaspora, Jews lived in almost every province of the empire. We get a sense of this from Acts 2 when on that first Pentecost the inspired disciples go out into the streets of Jerusalem to preach the Good News and encounter Jewish pilgrims from throughout the empire:

We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs... [Acts 2:9-11]

How many Jews were there? We don't know exactly, but Philo, for example, states that there were over one million Jews in Egypt alone, and some demographers estimate that Jews made up as much as 10% of the empire's population. Addressing the influence of the Jews throughout the empire, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-100 A.D.) wrote:

"For a long time now, there has been great zeal among the masses for our religion; there is scarcely a Greek or barbarian city or nation in which the custom of resting on the seventh day is not observed."

Lamenting this, the Stoic philosopher Seneca (6 B.C. – 65 A.D.), no friend of the Jews, added:

"This custom of that despised race is so widespread that it has been adopted in practice in all countries: the conquered have imposed their law on the conquerors."

We know that the city of Rome was home to many Jews who were served by a large number of synagogues. And it was always the synagogues that Paul first visited on his missionary journeys.

Not only did those first converts, baptized on Pentecost by Peter and the other disciples, return to their cities to spread the Gospel, but they also formed a cadre of believers anxious to hear more from Peter and Paul and other missionaries who followed them.

Another key factor in the spread of Christianity was the legacy of Alexander the Great in the form of the Greek language. Greek, not Latin, had become the common language, the *koiné*, of the empire. As a result those first Christian missionaries faced little in the way of linguistic barriers and could communicate easily wherever they traveled.

Interestingly, Christianity was also well served by the increasing decadence of Roman society. This decadence affected not only the moral life of the citizens but also the empire's official pagan religion. Religious piety had all but disappeared turning pagan worship into a collection of empty rituals. The great pagan gods became little more than a parody of the worst elements of human behavior, and certainly offered no positive example to those who worshipped them. When it came to such things as happiness and salvation and eternity, the Roman world was ruled by pessimism. In the words of Catallus (84-54 B.C.), "Once the ephemeral flame of our life is extinguished, we must sleep an eternal sleep."

And yet this pessimism couldn't suppress the desire and hope for the transcendent that resides in all human beings. This led to a growing interest in the mystery religions of the Middle East and Egypt with their focus on removing fear and misery from the hearts of believers and the promise of eternal rewards. This was an age of spiritual yearning, an age ripe for the Revelation of the one, true God in the Person of Jesus Christ.

In this first study guide devoted to *The Acts of the Apostles* we will study only chapters one through eight which focus on the activities of Peter and the Apostles during the Church's earliest days.

Now open your Bible and read *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapters 1 to 8. As you read, make the following notations in the margin alongside these sections of *Acts*:

- ✠ The Selection of Matthias – Acts 1:12-26
- ✠ Pentecost – Acts 2: 1-13
- ✠ Peter and the Spirit – Acts 2:14-4:31
- ✠ Miracles and Persecution – Acts 4:32-5:42
- ✠ Deacons and St. Stephen, protomartyr – Acts 6-7
- ✠ Saul persecutes, Philip spreads the Gospel – Acts 8

Holy Spirit, Miracle Worker. We encounter the Holy Spirit from the very beginning of *Acts* as Luke reiterates Jesus' promise: "...you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" [Acts 1:5]. And again: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" [Acts 1:8]. It is a promise fulfilled only days later when the Spirit manifested Himself to the Mary, the apostles, and the rest of the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room. It is a promise continually fulfilled throughout the life of the Church, even to today, 2,000 years later. Only the presence of the Holy Spirit can explain the Church's consistency and endurance through the centuries. And this is an important point for us to remember. Just as the Spirit was present at the first Pentecost, so is He present today. Just as the first disciples responded in faith, so too must we. And just as the early Church experienced miracle upon miracle, so too can we expect similar wonders. For

despite our human weaknesses the Church founded by Jesus Christ and guided by the Spirit will prevail until the end of time.

Pentecost. Not until Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit did the disciples understand the fullness of Jesus' promises and reality of His Kingdom. Only with the Spirit did they have the power to preach the Good News in ways that moved the hearts of others. Only with the Spirit can they (and we) follow the example of Jesus and live the lives the Father desires for his people. It is the descent of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost that infuses the infant Church with the spiritual power it needs to begin the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity. For God's Spirit is life-giving. He breathed that Spirit into the first man:

...then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [Gen 2:7].

...and he breathed His Spirit into the nascent Church, giving it life:

And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting [Acts 2:2].

Peter and the Spirit. The manifestation of the Holy Spirit and His power is most strikingly apparent in the person of Simon Peter. In the gospels we encounter a Peter who is full of bluster and false courage. His weaknesses always seems to outshine his strengths, leaving him confused and at a loss for words. But in Acts, a Spirit-filled Peter is a new man, a man confident not in himself but in the power of the Holy Spirit. Read his address to the people of Jerusalem [Acts 2:14-42] and listen to the Spirit's words, words that led 3,000 people to be baptized on that first day alone. For the Spirit's Word is more than a collection of mere words; the Word is alive and makes things happen. It leads those who hear it to ask of Peter, "What shall we do?" [Acts 2:37] and Peter responds with words demanding action:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to Him [Acts 2:38-39].

Note the three elements of Peter's explanation of the part we must play in God's plan for our redemption. We must *repent* just as the prophets commanded, and as John the Baptist and Jesus Himself preached to the people [e.g., Mk 1:14]. We must be *baptized* following the command of Jesus to His disciples in His great commission [Mt 28:19]. We must accept the gift of the *Holy Spirit*, the promise that will remain with His Church through the ages [Jn 14:16-17], for we are those "that are far off," those who continue to enjoy the fulfillment of God's promise.

Miracles, Persecution and Martyrdom. The Church in those first days was powerless in a worldly sense, but energized by the Holy Spirit, it seemingly had unlimited spiritual power. As Peter responded to the crippled beggar in those first days:

I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, [rise and] walk [Acts 3:6].

The power of the Holy Spirit was far greater than any human power; the fruit of the Spirit's work had more value than all the wealth of the empire. The Spirit brought healing to those broken in body and spirit, and hope to a world sunk in despair. In a word, the Spirit brought *Joy!*

To ensure the Spirit's continued work among them, the disciples did as Jesus had instructed them – “Do this in memory of me” [Lk 22:19] – and offered Thanksgiving (Eucharist) as Jesus had at the Last Supper:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers [Acts 2:42].

From its very beginning, though, the Church was a persecuted Church. It began, of course, with Jesus who offered Himself on the Cross as a redemptive sacrifice for the entire world. And it continued after Pentecost, just as Jesus had predicted [Jn 15:18-20; Lk 6:22; Mt 24:9]. Once the religious authorities in Jerusalem realized that Jesus' disciples were attracting thousands of converts, they were determined to nip it in the bud.

It took no time at all before Peter, preaching in the Temple area and accompanied by John, is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. Here we see Peter as the true “Rock” on which Jesus built His Church. Unafraid and moved by the Spirit, Peter boldly proclaims the Good News to the Jewish religious authorities. Fearful of the reaction of the people, the authorities release the two apostles [Acts 4:1-22]. Miracle followed miracle in those early days and all who came to the Apostles for healing were cured [Acts 5:16].

Even when the high priest and the Sadducees jailed the Apostles, God sent His angel to free them. Boldly, the Apostles returned to the Temple area and once again preached the Good News. When questioned why he refused to do as the authorities had commanded, Peter replies: “We must obey God rather than men” [Acts 5:29].

It is now that the wise Gamaliel, a Pharisee and the teacher of Paul, issues his famous warning to the Sanhedrin:

So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God [Acts 5:38-39].

The Apostles, of course, even after being flogged, return again to the Temple and their homes to spread the Word.

In chapter six Luke describes the selection and ordination of the first seven deacons, “reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom” [Acts 6:3], who will serve those in need. Among them is Stephen, a man “filled with grace and power” who “was working great wonders and signs among the people” [Acts 6:8]. Arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, Stephen speaks eloquently of God's plan as it was played out the history of salvation and fulfilled in Jesus Christ [Acts 7:2-53]. In his final words, Stephen condemns those who oppose the work of the Holy Spirit:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the Holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They put to death those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. You received the law as transmitted by angels, but you did not observe it [Acts 7:51-53].

Infuriated by Stephen's words, his listeners accused him of blasphemy, seized him, dragged him outside the walls of the city, and stoned him to death [Acts 7:54-60]. Stephen, echoing the words

Jesus prayed from the Cross, prays, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” [Acts 7:60]. Stephen the deacon, then, becomes the Church’s first martyr whose feast day is celebrated on December 26.

Holding the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen was a young Jew named Saul [Acts 7:58] who took a leading role in the severe persecution that followed. As Luke tells us:

Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment [Acts 8:3].

Luke goes on to describe how the apostles Peter and John traveled to Samaria to lay hands on those who had yet to receive the Holy Spirit [Acts 14-17], and subsequently preached in many Samaritan villages. We then encounter Philip the deacon who in a miraculous meeting with an Ethiopian eunuch opens the Word of God to the man and baptizes him. Both events thus foreshadow the work of Paul and others who would follow the Lord’s command to “make disciples of all nations.”

Unity of the Two Testaments. As we might expect, in these first chapters of *Acts* we encounter the Old Testament again and again. The apostles, after all, were preaching mostly to Jews and would be intent on revealing how Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies relating to the Messiah. Peter, for example, in his address to the people immediately after the descent of the Holy Spirit, begins by quoting the prophet Joel [Jl 3:1-5]:

‘It will come to pass in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy. And I will work wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord, and it shall be that everyone shall be saved who calls on the name of the Lord’ [Acts 2:17-21].

In this same address, Peter goes on to cite the Psalms on several occasions, each time pointing to Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

Stephen, too, relies heavily on the Old Testament during his passionate address to the Sanhedrin. As he reviews the history of salvation, he speaks of Abraham, of Joseph, of Moses, of the gift of the Law on Sinai, of David and Solomon, and how the people resist God’s Word and time and again break the covenant.

And Philip, in his encounter with the Ethiopian, is called on to interpret the prophecy of Isaiah [Is 53:7-8] in light of the Good News of Jesus Christ:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opened not his mouth. In (his) humiliation justice was denied him. Who will tell of his posterity? For his life is taken from the earth [Acts 8:32-33].

Liturgy and Life. In *The Acts of the Apostles* we hear the first descriptions of the liturgical life of the early Church. As we have already mentioned above, what Luke describes as the “breaking of the bread” is no less than the early Mass [Acts 2:42]. We are told that this was a daily occurrence, a major part of the life of the early Christian community:

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved [Acts 2:46-47].

Paul goes on to describe the meaning of this Eucharistic liturgy in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? [1 Cor 10:16].

And...

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself,* and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself [1 Cor 11:23-29].

Things to Think About; Things to Do:

1. When God gave us the Holy Spirit He gave us His greatest gift. How do you use that gift? Read Luke 11:5-16, and then pray and meditate on this Word of God.
2. What event does Peter proclaim as the greatest, definitive proof of Jesus divinity?
3. From the start it was clear that salvation can be found only in the Church, the mystical Body of Christ, because only the Church has the means – grace and the sacraments and the gifts of the Holy Spirit – necessary to attain salvation. But the Church is open to everyone. Has the Church taught this continually over the centuries? [See the Vatican II decree, *Ad gentes*, 7]
4. What do these first chapters of *Acts* tell us about St. Peter?
5. We mentioned a few Old Testament references above. As you read these chapters of *Acts*, take note of any other references. Look them up and share them with us all.
6. Among the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room on Pentecost, Luke mentions only the apostles and Mary by name. Why do you think he specifically mentioned Mary?