

Small Group Guide – Week 45

The Mission

The Church at Brook Hills

November 8-14, 2010

Acts 1-2

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

Acts 1-2

The book of Acts is the second volume in a two-part history written by Luke. Luke was a doctor and a travelling companion of the apostle Paul. Luke joined Paul at Mysia on his second missionary journey, just before they entered into Macedonia and preached the gospel in Europe for the first time. The book of Acts provides reliable historical testimony about the earliest days of Christianity. Luke was an eyewitness of the events of the second half of the book, and he had access to firsthand testimony from the eyewitnesses of the first half of the book.

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke will show how Jesus is carrying out His redemptive mission through His church. Chapters 1-2 recount the birth of the church and the earliest stage of her mission:

I. The Promise of the Mission (Acts 1:1-11)

Study the Text...

The first book that Luke refers to in verse 1 is the Gospel that we today call *The Gospel According to Luke*. Both books are addressed to a man named Theophilus, whose name literally means "Lover of God." There is some debate as to whether Theophilus was an actual historical person or whether Luke uses him as a pseudonym (symbolic name) for any Christian. Either way, the historical and theological meaning of the book remain unchanged.

Luke says that his first book (*The Gospel According to Luke*) dealt with what Jesus "began" to do and teach. The book of Acts is the second part of this story, which tells the story of what Jesus continued to do through His disciples after His ascension to heaven. What we find in this book is that Jesus is continuing His mission of bringing salvation to the nations through His church.

Jesus' mission and the church's mission are really the same mission: "that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:46-47) The church is Jesus' vehicle for carrying out His redemptive plan to bring salvation to the nations...and there is no plan B.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He commanded His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5; cf. Lk. 24:49). Throughout the *Gospel According to Luke*, we see that Jesus did many miracles and performed His entire ministry in the power of the

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Holy Spirit. Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, emphasizes that Jesus' ministry was Spirit-driven and Spirit-empowered. Jesus here promises His disciples that they would receive this same Holy Spirit so that they would be able to carry on the same ministry that He began with the same power He had.

After Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit, the disciples asked whether He would now restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). They still did not understand that Jesus' kingdom was not limited to one ethnic group (the Jews). Jesus corrects their misunderstanding by telling them that their mission is to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8)." In other words, they will tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection not only to Jews, but to Gentiles as well. Jesus will set up a kingdom that includes people from every nation under heaven and the disciples will be the means by which He will extend His kingdom. They will announce that Jesus is the King and will call people from every tribe and tongue and nation to submit to His Lordship.

It is important here for us to understand how Jesus and the New Testament writers see history differently than the Old Testament writers. For the writers of the New Testament, everything in human history is interpreted in light of the finished work of Christ in His death and resurrection. The Old Testament looked forward to a day when the coming Messiah would establish a universal Kingdom in Jerusalem to which all the nations would stream (see for example texts like Isaiah 2:1-4). This is probably what the disciples had in mind when they asked Jesus about the restoration of the kingdom in Acts 1:6. Jesus, however, tells them that the nations will not be streaming to a geographical location. Rather, they, as the newly-formed people of God, will disperse to the ends of the earth with the gospel of His death and resurrection.

So, is Jesus restoring the Kingdom here? Well, yes and no. He is inaugurating His Kingdom, but not in the way that the disciples are expecting. He is establishing His Kingdom by sending out His disciples to declare the gospel and proclaim His Lordship to all nations, but His Kingdom will not be fully consummated until He returns at His second coming (1:11). This is what theologians call the "already/not yet" tension. The Kingdom is **already** here as Christ reigns by His Spirit in His church, but it is **not yet** fully realized. The entire Christian life, and the ministry of the church, are lived out in this tension between the "already" and the "not yet."

This picture of the Messiah's kingdom presented in Acts 1:8 was radically different from the picture that most Jews had in Jesus' time. Most Jews at this time viewed people from Samaria and the end of the earth as outside of God's saving purposes. Jews did not associate with Samaritans or Gentiles because Jews thought that these people were unclean and wicked. Throughout the book of Acts, we will see that the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the gospel to extend the borders of Christ's kingdom throughout the earth.

Jesus calls the disciples his "witnesses." (1:8) The job of a witness is to witness...to testify about an objective event. Their job is not to tell people about themselves, their

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experiences, or their ideas; their job is to be heralds, news reporters who tell the story of what Jesus has done in His death and resurrection. The fundamental means by which the followers of Jesus will advance the Kingdom of Jesus and see the new creation advanced is by proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Their job is not primarily to conduct social reform or to change culture. It is to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and to call people to repentance and faith.

Acts 1:8 provides an outline for the advancement of Jesus' kingdom in the book of Acts. In Acts 2-7, the disciples are preaching the gospel in Jerusalem and the church is formed there. In Acts 8-12, the disciples begin to preach the gospel in all Judea and Samaria and the church extends to these regions. In Acts 13-28, we see the apostle Paul taking the gospel to the ends of the earth and churches springing up all over the Roman Empire.

We today are still a part of this story. We are disciples of Jesus who have been commanded to preach His gospel in every place on earth. We are witnesses who are called to proclaim the death and resurrection of King Jesus and to call all people to submit to Him as Savior and Lord. We will continue to do this as we look forward to His promised return (Acts 1:9-11).

Immediately after Jesus commissions His disciples to be His witnesses in all nations, they see Him lifted up into the heavens. Angels then appear and declare to them that He will return from heaven. These twin realities, the exaltation of Jesus (ascension) and His impending return (2nd Coming), are the dual motivation for Christian mission. As Pastor David has often said, "Passion for the kingdom is fueled by passion for the King." When we recognize that Jesus is the exalted King of the cosmos who is coming again to judge the living and the dead, we will seek to declare His glory and extend His kingdom to all nations.

Group Discussion...

- We saw in Acts 1:6 that the disciples had a myopic view of the kingdom that was much narrower than God's view of the Kingdom. What are some ways in which our own views of the Kingdom might be too narrow? How will you intentionally move outside of your narrow view of God's Kingdom to get involved in God's redemptive plan to bring salvation to all nations?
- What is the primary mission of the church? What are some ways that we get distracted from that mission? Is it possible for good things to get in the way of our central mission?
- How does a right understanding of the glory of Christ and the immanence of His return create a sense of urgency in us to take the gospel to the nations? How can you cultivate this in your own life, in your family, small group, church?

II. The Preparation for the Mission (1:12-26)

Study the Text...

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After Jesus' ascension, the disciples obeyed His command to return to Jerusalem and to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. As they were waiting, "with one accord, they were devoting themselves to prayer." The Greek verb here is in the present tense, signifying that they were continually devoting themselves to prayer (1:14). They had seen Jesus ascend before their very eyes, they had received an impossible commission from Him, they were desperate for the power of His Spirit, and so they were continually crying out in prayer. Furthermore, they were absolutely united in one mind and in one spirit. They realized that all that they had was each other and God and so they cried out to God together.

While they were praying and waiting to receive the Holy Spirit, Peter, the leader and spokesman of the apostles, perceived that the Lord was leading them to officially recognize another apostle. It is interesting to note that Peter realizes that both Judas' betrayal of Jesus and the need to replace Judas are nothing less than the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; "The Scripture had to be fulfilled." (1:16) This is a theme that will reverberate throughout the apostolic preaching in the book of Acts: the enemies of God and of His Christ conspired together to kill Jesus, but God raised Him from the dead and triumphed over them. In the end, all of their sinister plots only served to advance the mighty saving purposes of God (see for example Acts 4:27-28).

It was necessary to replace Judas with one and only one apostle, although there were two men who met the qualifications. The number twelve was highly symbolic, signifying that the apostles represented the twelve tribes of Israel and thus the church is to be seen as the people of God, the new Israel.

The disciples selected Judas' replacement by recognizing two men who met the qualifications of apostleship, which were: (1) he must have been a companion of Jesus from the time of John the Baptist until the Lord's ascension, and (2) he must have been an eyewitness to the resurrection. It appears from the text that both Barsabbas and Matthias were equally qualified, so the disciples prayed, cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias. While casting lots was a regular practice in ancient Israel, it is noteworthy that this is the last time we see it practiced in the Bible. It may be no coincidence that this final instance of casting lots to seek the guidance of the Lord immediately precedes the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God would come to indwell believers. Because believers are now indwelt by the Spirit, the church has no need of such practices to guide its decision-making processes.

Group Discussion...

- Have you ever experienced the kind of desperate, unified prayer that the early church experienced in Acts 1:14? Why is this experience so foreign to us in the context of the church in America? How will you cultivate this practice of desperate prayer in your own life, family, and small group?
- What practical effect does it have on your life to know that God was sovereign even over Judas' betrayal of Jesus? Is anything outside of God's control? Does this change the way that you look at tragic events that come into your life?

III. The Power of the Mission (2:1-13)

Study the Text...

Chapter two, verse one states that all of the disciples were gathered together in one place on the Day of Pentecost. It is unclear whether this place was the upper room where they had gathered for prayer in chapter one or another location. Due to the fact that Pentecost was a holy day, it is quite possible that they were gathered together in the temple, but it is not possible to be sure.

It is, however, significant, that God pours out His Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost was the fiftieth day after Passover, and was commonly referred to as “the day of first-fruits,” (Num. 28:26), because it was the day when the first-fruits of the wheat harvest were offered to God (Ex. 34:22a). On this particular day of Pentecost, a great harvest will begin, a harvest of God’s redeemed from every nation under heaven beginning in Jerusalem.

When the Spirit rushes upon the disciples, they hear a sound like a mighty rushing wind (2:2). Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “Spirit” can also be translated “breath” or “wind.” What the disciples were experiencing here was nothing less than the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezk. 37:1-14). The Spirit/breath of God was filling them, giving them life, and sending them forth as an army to advance the Kingdom of God by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit also manifests His presence to them as “divided tongues as of fire.” (2:3) Although we are not exactly sure what these tongues looked like, we do know that fire is symbolic of God’s presence throughout the Bible. For example, when God appeared to Moses, He appeared as a bush that burned but was not consumed (Exodus 3). Here in Acts 2, God is demonstrating that He is present among His people in an especially powerful way.

The most important aspect of the Spirit’s work among them is what He empowered them to do. The Spirit empowered and motivated the disciples to preach the gospel. This is the pattern throughout the book of Acts. Every time individuals are filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin to proclaim the gospel (see for example Acts 4:8, 31; 9:17-20; 13:8-11).

Verses 4-11 state that the Spirit supernaturally gave these Galileans, who primarily spoke Aramaic and Greek, the ability to proclaim the gospel in at least fourteen other languages. Many scholars have noted that what we have here at Pentecost is nothing less than the reversal of Babel. At Babel one language fell into confusion, but at Pentecost many languages all heard the same message. At Babel man tried to set up His own kingdom in the heavens, but at Pentecost, God established His Kingdom on earth. At Babel man tried to ascend to God, but at Pentecost God came down to man.

Group Discussion...

- The disciples realized that they were utterly incapable of fulfilling their mission apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. What crutches have we replaced the Holy Spirit with in our ministries?
- One of the primary works (if not the primary work) of the Holy Spirit throughout the book of Acts is to empower believers to proclaim the gospel. Inspect the fruit of your own life. A life lived under the authority of Christ and the power of the Spirit is a life characterized by gospel proclamation. Does that characterize you?
- How does the presence of the Holy Spirit help you overcome fear in evangelism?

IV. The Preaching of the Mission (2:14-40)

Study the Text...

Verses 12 and 13 record the reaction of the crowd. While some were amazed and perplexed, others mocked the disciples and said that they were drunk, “filled with new wine.” There is a bit of irony in even their accusation here, for wine was seen throughout the prophets as a blessing of the restoration of Israel. For example, Joel 3:18 prophesies that the mountains shall drip with sweet wine in the day of the LORD. The irony that was lost on those who mocked the disciples was that the disciples were in fact being filled with the blessings of the promised day of the LORD, something far greater than mere wine!

In verses 14-21, Peter explains to the crowd that they are observing the fulfillment of God’s promises to pour out His Spirit on all flesh. This is what God had promised He would do in the last days (2:17).

There is a great deal of confusion in American evangelicalism about the “last days,” and so we must be certain that we understand the last days the way the Bible understands the last days. According to the Bible, the last days began at Jesus’ birth when the age to come invaded the darkness of this present evil age, and the last days will continue until Jesus returns in glory. Everything in between is considered “the last days.” One of the defining marks of the last days is that at the beginning of the last days, God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh. As we will see, all those who repent and believe in Jesus receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In verses 22-35, Peter transitions from talking about what the crowd was observing to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The tongues have gotten the crowd’s attention (2:5-13), and Peter has demonstrated that this is a movement of God’s Spirit (2:14-21), but the church’s mission is to bear witness to Jesus Christ, and that is what he does here (2:22-35).

Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost is the first sermon in the history of the church, and it is really a pattern for the preaching that we see throughout the book of Acts. As we read the apostolic preaching presented in the book of Acts, four main elements emerge.

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The first element of Peter's sermon is an announcement that the age of fulfillment has arrived (2:17-21). Peter tells the people of Israel that what they have been waiting for has finally happened. The day of the Lord is here, the gift of the Spirit is being poured out, and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

The second element is a basic overview of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and triumph through His resurrection (2:22-24). Peter makes it very clear in these verses that God put His stamp of approval on Jesus, not only by empowering Jesus to perform the miraculous deeds that he accomplished during His life, but ultimately by giving Him victory over death. Peter does not shy away from confrontation at this point. He puts his finger in the face of the crowd, exposes their guilt, and implicates them in the death of Jesus. And yet, this was all done according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

Thirdly, Peter shows how Jesus' death and resurrection fulfills Old Testament prophecy, specifically prophecy related to David. The early church, from the apostles onward, interpreted the exaltation of Jesus as a direct fulfillment of God's promises to David (see especially passages like Ps. 2; 110; 2 Sam. 7). In verses 25-28, Peter quotes Psalm 16, in which David seems to claim that he will escape death. Peter makes an obvious observation to anyone honest enough to admit it: David is dead! You can go visit his grave. So, if you believe that the Psalms are really the inspired Word of God, as any God-fearing Jew did, then you had to recognize that David was talking about someone else, most likely the greater Son of David who was to follow him and reign on His throne forever (2 Sam. 7:13). Peter here demonstrates that Jesus is the greater Son of David who conquered every enemy, death included, and was exalted to the right hand of the Father, and who as the Anointed One, possesses the Spirit in fullness and now pours out the Spirit on all who are in Him (2:33). Remember that David was a "small m" messiah (anointed one) who was anointed with the Holy Spirit (1 Sam. 16:13). Jesus is the Messiah who has the Spirit in fullness, and because He has now conquered the final enemy and ascended to the right hand of power and has been declared publicly to be both Lord and Messiah (2:36), He is now able to pour out the Spirit in fullness on all who will receive Him (2:33).

The fourth element of the apostolic preaching is a call to repent. Peter ends his sermon in verse 36 with his thesis statement: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." In essence, Peter told them, you killed God ("Lord" is the way the Jews referred to Yahweh) and His Messiah (Christ). If there was ever a hopeless situation, this was it! You can hear the desperation in the response of the crowd, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

This is the kind of desperation that characterizes true conversion. It might not manifest itself with outward wailing or with dramatic events, but for a person to truly come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ we must despair of ourselves and our own righteousness, we must see ourselves as enemies of God under the wrath of God, and we must turn and trust in the work of Christ in His death and resurrection alone as the payment for our sins.

Peter tells them that they must “repent and be baptized.” To “repent” means to “turn around.” It signifies a complete change of mind and life. They once thought of Jesus as a man cursed by God who died by hanging on a tree. They must now submit to Him as Lord and Christ.

Peter also calls them to be baptized. The word “baptize” literally means to “immerse.” They were literally to “be immersed into the name of the Lord Jesus.” Baptism in the New Testament is the means by which one who has repented and trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins publicly identifies with Jesus and with His body, the church. It is noteworthy that Peter does not separate repentance from baptism. In fact, throughout the book of Acts, we find that the typical “gospel invitation” is “repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” For the apostles and the rest of the early church, repentance and baptism were seen as inseparable. As the renowned New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce writes, “The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the NT.”¹ (*sic*)

All those who repent and are baptized, all whom the Lord calls to Himself (2:39), will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter certainly does not back down from calling them to repentance, but neither does he shy away from boldly holding out the promises of forgiveness of sins. This is the pattern of all true gospel preaching. We must be willing to confront sin and call to repentance, even allowing the Scriptures to drive our hearers to despair, and then holding out the promise of forgiveness and the Spirit for those who truly repent and trust in Christ.

Group Discussion...

- What is the biblical “gospel invitation?” What does the word repentance signify and how can we make that clear to people as we share the gospel with them?
- Why do we sometimes separate baptism from repentance? Is it possible to be baptized and not be truly repentant? Is there anything in the water of baptism itself that saves a person? Why do the apostles link baptism and repentance so closely together?
- The crowd that heard the gospel felt condemnation and despair before they felt hope and forgiveness. Peter preached judgment before he preached salvation. Is this the way that we understand and proclaim the gospel? Why or why not?
- Peter’s gospel presentation focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Peter says nothing about himself or his personal conversion experience. What does this tell you about the focus of the gospel? Is it about us or is it about Jesus? How should this affect the way that we share the gospel?

V. The Product of the Mission (2:41-47)

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts in The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Edited by F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 77

Study the Text...

The preaching of the Word had its intended effect. As God spoke the first creation into existence (Gen.1), so here He was speaking through His witnesses to bring a new creation into existence. We see that new creation described in verses 41-47.

Verse 41 says that roughly three thousand souls were added to the church in one day. This was clearly a work that could only be accomplished by the sovereign Spirit of God and the powerful Word of God. These believers entered the faith community through baptism and immediately became immersed in the life of the church.

It needs to be stressed that God used the preaching of the gospel to create a **community** of believers. The goal of the preaching of the gospel is the establishment of the local church. This is the pattern presented throughout the book of Acts and it is the prescriptive pattern throughout the New Testament. We will search the New Testament in vain for any inkling that the Christian life in general or evangelism in particular can ever be carried out in a biblical manner apart from a close and vibrant connection to the local church. She is the center of God's redemptive plan and the Bride for which He died.

Verse 42 lists four practices to which those earliest believers devoted themselves within the context of their local church gatherings. The "apostles' teaching" was the authoritative rule for everything regarding the life of the early church. Jesus had vested His authority in His apostles and therefore, to obey Jesus was to obey the teachings of the apostles. It is the same in the church today. These same twelve apostles are not with us today, but we do have their writings preserved in the pages of the New Testament. The apostles' teachings must always remain the absolute authority for all matters of faith and practice in the life of the Christian and the church. If Jesus is Lord, and if Jesus mediates His authority through the teachings of the apostles, then the apostles' teaching contained within the pages of Holy Scripture is the absolute, final, and unquestioned authority for our lives and for the life of our church.

The second practice mentioned in verse 42 is "fellowship," which is sometimes translated "partnership" or "sharing." The idea is one of sharing life together. These early Christians realized that they were organically connected to one another, not because they liked each other or enjoyed hanging out together, but because they were all united to Christ. Suddenly, people who once had nothing in common with each other were closer than blood relatives because they were all united to Christ. Their fellowship was so strong that they were willing to sell their own possessions and give to their brothers and sisters who had need (2:44-45).

One of the tangible practices by which they reminded themselves of this fellowship was the "breaking of bread." This phrase may include a common meal that the believers shared, but it probably specifically refers to the Lord's Supper. The early church likely observed the Lord's Supper every time they met together. This meal reminded them not only of their union to Christ, but of their union to one another.

Finally, they devoted themselves to “the prayers.” The use of the definite article “**the** prayers” indicates that the early church was probably using a prayer book to guide their prayers, most likely the Psalms. As we read the book of Acts, we see that they understood the Psalms to be pointing to Christ. However, we do find other places throughout the book of Acts where the believers are offering more impromptu prayers, often in conjunction with quoted portions of the Psalms (see for example Acts 4:24-31). Therefore, it is probably best simply to observe that the early Christians devoted themselves to prayer and that their prayers were informed by Scripture. They were desperate for the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Lord was faithful; He continued to add daily to their number those who were being saved (2:47). It is ultimately Jesus who is continuing to carry out the mission that He has begun to bring salvation to the nations.

Group Discussion...

- What was the means by which new believers entered into the faith community (2:41)?
- To what practices did the early church devote herself (2:42)? Can you say that you devote yourself to these practices within the context of the local church? How will you be more intentional about devoting yourself to these practices?
- Did the preaching of the gospel merely create individual isolated believers or a community of believer? What does this tell you about God’s redemptive plan?
- The early believers sold their possessions in order to give to their brothers and sisters in need. How can you sacrificially live out the gospel in this way?
- How do you think all of this affected the daily family life of those who were married and had children?