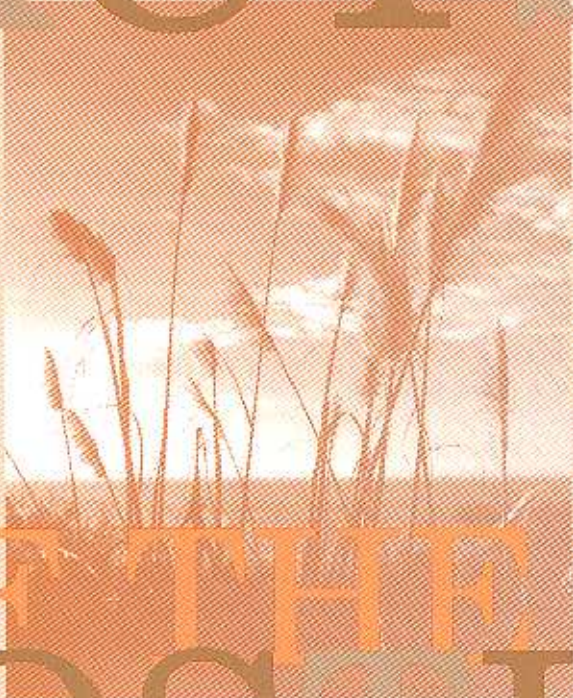


THE
ACTS
OF THE
APOSTLES



A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

by John C. Purdy

The Acts

of the "Apostles"

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Acts of the Apostles

table of Contents

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study.....		3
Introduction to Acts of the Apostles		5
session one	<i>The Ascension</i>	7
	<i>*Spirits</i>	
	<i>*Brainstorm</i>	
session two	<i>Pentecost</i>	10
session three	<i>Before the Council</i>	13
	<i>*What Is at Issue?</i>	
session four	<i>Gentiles Admitted</i>	16
	<i>*Different Traditions</i>	
session five	<i>Paul in Thessalonica</i>	19
	<i>*Conflict</i>	
session six	<i>Paul Before Agrippa</i>	22
	<i>*Tradition, Scripture, and Experience</i>	
session seven	<i>Paul in Rome</i>	25
	<i>*A Mysterious Silence</i>	
the writer	<i>Biography</i>	29

INTRODUCTION

Men's Bible

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, and one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1) **We will treat no question as stupid.** Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

1) **We will stick to the Scripture in this study.** The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

2) **We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals."** Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

3) **We will remember that we are here to hear God speak.** Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

4) **We will listen for "the question behind the question."** Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

5) **We will agree to disagree in love.** Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

6) **We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study.** Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passage. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the story that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leader will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Acts of the Apostles

INTRODUCTION

Because it is unique in all the world's literature, Acts presents a special challenge: *We must fight the temptation to reduce it to a familiar form!* Although it provides our most detailed account of the beginnings of Christianity, it is not history in the strict sense of that word. Although it is called "Acts" and presents a series of loosely connected scenes—many of which are very dramatic—it is not a play. Acts argues strenuously from Scripture that Jesus is God's Messiah, but it is not a polemic argument. It tells a fascinating story, with memorable characters, but it is not a novel. By word and deed, Acts testifies to the risen Christ, but it is more than a testimony or proclamation.

The Acts of the Apostles is *unique*; there is no literary or artistic or dramatic form to which it may be accurately compared or contrasted. So how can we study it? We cannot rewind the tape of time and get into the mind of the author of Acts, who is generally conceded to be the same person who wrote The Gospel According to Luke.

But if we are to judge by the completed work, we can imagine that the author saw his task something like that of writing a libretto for an opera. An opera is the most complex of all artistic forms: It must speak to the ear, the eye, the mind, the heart; it depends on an abstract medium—music—to display human character; it makes demands on the audience unequalled by any other form. The Acts of the Apostles also placed great demands on the author—and it demands much of the reader. He or she who begins the study of the book starts on the journey of a lifetime!

Writing a Libretto

Perhaps the notion of writing an opera is the most useful approach to Acts. Lay aside any prejudices against opera. Try to imagine that you have been commissioned to write a libretto (a script) for an opera based on The Acts of the Apostles. What a wealth of materials from which to choose! There are major characters of heroic proportion to match any in *Otello* or the Ring Cycle: Jesus, Peter, Saul of Tarsus. No opera, however grand, can match Acts' historic locations: Athens, Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth. There are scenes as dramatic as anything in *Aida*, *Salome*, or *Carmen*: Jesus' ascension, the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost, the stoning of Stephen, Paul's Damascus road conversion, the Council of Jerusalem. There are speeches to match any aria in *Figaro* or *Lucia* or *Butterfly*: Peter's Pentecost sermon; Paul's defense before Agrippa; Stephen's appeal to his killers.

When the notion of scripting Acts as an opera was proposed to one lay Bible study leader, he said, "But what about the lack of women?" Ah, but it can be argued that the main character in Acts is the Holy Spirit, who can be represented by a soprano voice singing off-stage!

A Fanciful, Impossible Task

A fanciful task—as well as an impossible one? Of course. But the very act of imagining what it might be like to create such an opera forces us to acknowledge the many, many dimensions of Acts. It keeps us from making too narrow an approach to the book—reducing it to a history, a testimony, a collection of scenes, a travelogue, or some combination of those forms.

Also, in a study series committed to dealing with whole books of the Bible in seven one-hour sessions, the scripting of Acts for an opera has this benefit: It forces us to decide what elements simply *must* be included in any serious study of the book.

We cannot leave out Jesus, of course; it is his commissioning of the apostles and his ascension that connect Acts with the Gospels and prepare the way for the coming of the Spirit.

Peter and Paul have to be included. Peter, as representative of the Twelve, dominates the first half of Acts. Paul, the peripatetic missionary, dominates the second half.

In filling minor roles, we need persons who represent major themes or emphases in Acts. One of those themes is the fierce opposition on the part of certain Jews to the spread of the Jesus movement. Rather than single out one or two persons to personify that opposition, we might do best to feature the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) in Jerusalem. That will demonstrate how the Way of the apostles was regarded as a deadly threat to established institutions.

The selection of scenes can, in an understated way, demonstrate the *spread* of the movement from Jerusalem—the center of Judaism—throughout the Roman Empire and finally to the capital city itself. These scenes can also be chosen to mark various *crises* in the early years of Christianity—not only opposition from Jews, but internal stresses, conflict over policies, betrayal, survival.

Of course, one severe limitation we put on ourselves in imagining Acts as an opera is that of *space*. An opera takes place on a stage; it is confined to one location at a time. Voyages, such as Paul's missionary journeys, can only be referred to in passing, they cannot play a major

role in the development of the work. One advantage of staged scenes, however, is that they provide an opportunity to demonstrate the tactical operations of the movement—the day-by-day working in synagogue, council room, marketplace.

The Proposed Study Scheme

It was with such an approach to Acts in mind that the following seven passages are proposed for study:

Scene I: The Ascension 1:1–14

Scene II: Pentecost 2:1–21

Scene III: Before the Council 4:1–22

Scene IV: Gentiles Admitted 11:1–18

Scene V: Paul in Thessalonica 17:1–9

Scene VI: Paul Before Agrippa 26:1–29

Scene VII: Paul in Rome 28:16–31

This is, at best, a bare-bones approach to the Acts of the Apostles. Some will argue, with justification, that some of the vertebrae—maybe even whole limbs—are missing! Those who are familiar with Acts may even be stunned by the omission of such scenes as Paul's Damascus road conversion, the stoning of Stephen, and the Council of Jerusalem.

The Overture

What is missing in any outline, of course, is the vitality of the piece. Where, one rightly asks, is the power and the glory? Well, an opera usually begins with an overture in which its characters, themes, and events are previewed. Some overtures have proved such grand successes that they have become concert pieces in their own right. It has already been suggested that the presence of the Holy Spirit might be represented through singing. Our *Presbyterian Hymnal* provides a variety of musical presentations of the Spirit:

There is Isaac Watts's "Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove," in which the Spirit appears as a vivifying, reenergizing presence.

There is James Manley's contemporary ballad "Spirit," with an emphasis on gentleness and spontaneity.

"Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow," by Thomas Troeger, is robust and vigorous; it is a tribute to the power of God's Spirit.

The African-American spiritual "Every Time I Feel the Spirit" is subjective, personal, inward-looking.

A medley of these and other hymns might be the most faithful representation of the person and work of the Spirit.

The Power of the Spirit

The power of the Holy Spirit is witnessed and expressed nowhere in Scripture, as it is in Acts. The reader sometimes has to confront the reality that this is not the Acts of the Apostles, but the Acts of the Spirit working through the apostles. In order to focus our attention upon the power of the Spirit and the ways in which the Spirit works in communities of faith and individuals like us, it is suggested that as part of each class, time might be taken to sing or reflect upon a hymn of the church that teaches us of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

On the final pages of this workbook, you will find a collection of hymns that you might like to use.

A Word to Leaders

The average American citizen knows little about opera and cares less! Opera is for snobs, for the rich, for the long-hairs, for folks who don't like baseball or trout fishing. If you try to sell your group on the parallels between Acts and opera, you will likely ring up NO SALE! This suggestion that Acts and opera have a lot in common has only one purpose: to prevent you—or anyone—from selling Acts short by passing it off in some cut-down version. No chart, no resume, no set of dates, no illustrated map, no story, no collection of character vignettes can do the book justice. It is at least as demanding as opera—probably even more so!

That is something that all of you—leaders and learners—must face together. Don't worry! Treat Acts with respect for its uniqueness, and it will reward you beyond all deserving.

one

The ASCENSION

Acts 1:1—14

The book of Acts is a treasure chest containing the only extended record of the earliest witness of the church. The key which unlocks this chest is found in 1:8—"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 ends of the earth."¹

(To the leader(s): It is not always helpful to immediately attempt to answer in detail every question when it is asked. Some answers will come as the study proceeds; some need reflection—and perhaps research—on the part of the leader.)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(Suggestions to leader or leaders: The first and the last of these learning activities are the most important. The first provides a narrow focus on a specific text; the last broadens out the study to include many concerns. If yours is a team of leaders, one may choose responsibility for the first activity, another may choose the last. Be sure to allow time for both.)

Invite group members to read Acts 1:1-14. Ask them to underline verse 5 and then to write down one word that might help them remember what is said in specific verses about being baptized with the Spirit:

For example: *promised*

v. 4 _____

v. 4 _____

v. 5 _____

v. 5 _____

v. 8 _____

v. 8 _____

Ask each member to share his findings with the total group.

On newsprint or chalkboard, write down questions that members raise about Acts 1:1—14 or about the study as a whole. Let those questions stay before the group as an unspoken promise that answers will be sought sometime during the time together.

Spirits

Invite members to share experiences of various kinds of "spirits," such as:

- team spirit
- the Christmas spirit
- school spirit
- distilled spirits
- spirited animals
- low spirits
- the American spirit
- high spirits
- the spirit of giving

Then ask for responses to the question: How might we expect the gift of the Holy Spirit to be like—or unlike—these experiences of spirits?

Brainstorm

(To the leader(s): Brainstorming is a technique for learning groups in which members are invited to suggest any and all sorts of responses to an idea or statement without any attempt on the part of the rest to evaluate, criticize, compare, or otherwise comment. Usually, key words from member responses are written on newsprint or chalkboard. The purpose is to develop an inventory of what is on members' minds.)

Spend some time brainstorming responses to this statement: "If Acts 1:1—14 is the introduction to the actions of Jesus' apostles, then in the rest of the book we might expect

¹ Arnold B. Rhodes, *The Mighty Acts of God* (Richmond, VA: The CLC Press, 1973), p. 323.

Ask members to read and respond to the following statement from a church historian:

The Messiah had to reveal Himself in Jerusalem, for it was here that the Master's death had in fact taken place—hence here also must He return in glory, riding on the clouds of heaven, in order to set up God's kingdom in all its might and splendour. Even in apocalyptic hope, Jerusalem remained, as it had ever been, the central point of divine action, the capital of the new, as of the old, Israel; and from it the disciples must not depart.²

(Allow fifteen minutes at the end of the session for this exercise.) List on newsprint or chalkboard the following themes that are introduced in Acts 1:1—14:

prayer
witnessing
empowerment
the work of the Spirit
promises
the resurrection
community
mission

Encourage members to tell which of these themes they want to pursue throughout the seven sessions. Invite members to identify other themes that have special interest for them.

Afterword

(Leader(s): Call attention to the Afterword. There are suggestions for daily Bible reading and meditation for those so inclined, as well as brief selections designed for individual reflection after the study sessions are over: stories of other men's experiences, poems, hymns, quotations, etc. Some leaders may choose to use these selections within the study session—especially if some of the suggested learning activities do not strike fire. Of any such selection it is always profitable to ask a group: (1) What does the author say? (2) What does the text mean? (3) What good use can we make of it?)

My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gaged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!"

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, "So this is the God of the preachers."³

Heaven⁴

My employer who gives food for my family
is my heaven.

When I go to the hospital
With hands pressed by a machine,
The doctor who can give
And take away my life
Is my heaven.

Without wages for two months
I was taken by police, for
I organized a Labor Union.
The policeman who takes an innocent person
Is my horrible heaven.

The judge who can make me guilty or innocent
Is my fearful heaven.
The officer who sits in the office and
Can help or destroy me
Is my fearful heaven.

The person of high position,
The powerful person, and
The Rich person
Are all heavenly beings.

² Hanz Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961), p. 62.

³ Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, as quoted in *The New Yorker*, March 20, 1995, p. 52.

⁴ Park No-hae, in *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective*, Jung Young Lee, ed. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), p. 169. Used by permission.

... the comments of a Kenyan pastor who was introduced to decaffeinated coffee: "It looks like coffee, it smells like coffee, and it tastes like coffee, but it doesn't have the punch and power of real coffee."

I've seen a good many Christians who lack the punch and power . . . That seems to describe the Presbyterian church's situation.⁵

All revelation is summons and sending . . . God remains present to you when you have been sent forth; he who goes on a mission has always God before him. . . .⁶

That which in the New Testament is central and controlling in the service of God is the presence of Christ, the head of the Church, by the Holy Spirit given to the Church.

The Holy Spirit was given to the Church, not to be a useful possession of the believers, but to possess them in order to direct them, to reveal to them and in them the grace of God in Christ.⁷

Suggestions for Daily Reading

If your group meets on a weekly basis, you may elect to spend time during each of the intervening days in Bible reading, prayer, and meditation. Here are suggestions for each of those seven days:

Day 1: Read Acts 1:1-5. Reflect on your own baptism and its implications for service and ministry.

Day 2: Read Acts 1:6-11. Meditate on the promise of Jesus' return.

Day 3: Read Acts 1:12-14. Reflect on what it might mean to constantly devote oneself to prayer.

Day 4: Read Acts 1:15-26. Reflect on the fact that one of the original Twelve proved unfaithful to his calling!

Day 5: Read Acts 2:1-4. Think of the apostles gathered together in one place, trusting in the promises of the risen Jesus that the Spirit would be given.

Day 6: Read Acts 2:5-13. Consider that some who were present at Pentecost saw only what they supposed were drunkards!

Day 7: Read Acts 2:14-36. How does this sermon of Peter's compare with the one you heard last Sunday in worship? Or with any sermon you have ever heard?

⁵ Abraham Hsu, in *Dear Hearts: Conversations with Presbyterians*, Vic Jameson, ed. (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1994), pp. 112-113.

⁶ Martin Huber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 115-116.

⁷ Leonard J. Trinterud, "The Presbyterian Ethos," in *The Church and Its Changing Ministry*, Robert Clyde Johnson, ed. (Philadelphia: The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1961), pp. 50-51.

two

PENTECOST

Acts 2:2—21

With the death and resurrection of Christ, the gift of the Spirit to persons—rare in the Old Testament—becomes a possibility for all who respond to God's act in Christ in faithful obedience. The Spirit becomes the power of Christ himself at work in the life of the believer. The mistake of the modern church is to identify the work of God's Spirit in the believer either with private moments of ecstasy or with individual purification from sin, particularly from a short list of ritual pollutants, such as alcohol and tobacco. This is a hopelessly impoverished view. The working of God's Spirit in the life of the believer means an involvement in the world where men are suffering. When the Spirit of God gets hold of a man, he is made a new creature, a creature prepared to move head-on into the evils of this world, ready to die for God.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader(s): In any study session, the first order of business ought always be any unfinished business from the last time the group met. Ask if there are any burning issues or questions left over from the previous session. You may have some new questions to add to the list you started at that time. If you are part of a leadership team, one of you might make it his responsibility to keep a running list of questions that get raised and to see to it that they all get answered by the end of the series.)

Ask members to read Acts 2:1-13. There is a great deal of disagreement among Christians about just what happened on the Day of Pentecost. Here—in exactly 25 words—is one person's description: *A rushing sound filled the room; over each apostle a firelike tongue appeared. They spoke to outsiders in every known language about God's mighty acts.*

Invite members of the group—working individually—to see if they can improve on that description without exceeding the 25-word limit!

Ask that results be shared with the total group.

Ask members to read vs. 14-21, which give us the interpretation that the apostle Peter gave to the events described in vs. 1-13. Discuss how Peter countered the charge that the apostles were drunk. Here are some questions that may help the discussion:

(1) In his speech Peter quotes from one of the Hebrew prophets. What do members understand by prophets and prophecy? How might the gift of tongues be related to the phenomenon of prophecy?

¹ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 57-58.

(2) What is the significance of prophecy being given to all ages, genders, and classes of persons (cf. vs. 17, 18)? Is this something novel?

(3) In what sense is the prophecy by Joel "fulfilled" by what happened at Pentecost?

Recall for the group the promise of Jesus in 1:5, "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Baptism suggests water; the tongues in 2:3 appear to be like fire. Discuss the possible meaning of "tongues of fire." One way to begin is to ask, What are some of the associations we have with fire in the Bible? See if some of these associations, such as the burning bush in Exodus 3, are helpful in understanding the Pentecostal fire.

Examine the official seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).



Represented in the seal are the following:

- The descent of the Spirit
- Fire
- Baptism

How are each of these represented? Does the seal label Presbyterians as a "Pentecostal" group? Why or why not?

At the end of the first session, eight themes prominent in Acts were identified: *prayer, witnessing, empowerment, work of Spirit, promises, resurrection, community, and mission*. Spend the final part of the session going through this list of themes and asking volunteers to comment on how Acts 2:1—21 enlarges our understanding or appreciation of each. See what linkages there are between themes. For example:

(1) How does the Spirit work to empower believers?

(2) How was the power to witness given as fulfillment of a promise?

(3) Was it an accident that the Spirit was given when the apostles were together as a community?

Afterword

(Leader(s): Call attention to the Afterword. Encourage members to consider daily Bible reading and prayer, not as "homework" or as an "assignment" but as a way of enrichment and personal growth. Suggest as a daily prayer these words from Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.)

Corner Meeting²

Ladder, flag, and amplifier
now are what the soap box
used to be.

The speaker catches fire,
looking at listeners' faces.
His words jump down
to stand
in their
places.

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the *Yes* function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. To the poor and the unlettered it stands in the place of symphony concerts and of literature; and it is part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what in its totality is so degrading a poisoning.³

Anyways [said Casey], I'll tell you one more thing I thought out; an' from a preacher it's the most unreligious thing, and I can't be a preacher no more because I thought it an' I believe it. . . . I figgered about the Holy Spirit and the Jesus road. I figgered, "Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe," I figgered, "maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang.... "

Joad's eyes dropped to the ground as though he could not meet the naked honesty in the preacher's eyes. "You can't hold no church with idears like that," he said. "People would drive you out of the country with idears like that. Jumpin' an' yellin'. That's what folks like. Makes 'em feel swell. When Granma got to talkin' in tongues, you couldn't tie her down. She could knock over a full-growed deacon with her fist."⁴

Suggestions for Daily Reading

Day 1: Read Acts 2:22-37. Reflect on the scriptural arguments that Peter makes for the vindication of Jesus as the Messiah through the resurrection.

Day 2: Read Acts 2:37-47. Think about the creation of community through faith, repentance, and the gift of the Spirit.

Day 3: Read Acts 3:1-10. Recall that when we pray for something, we end with: "In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray."

Day 4: Read Acts 3:11-16. Consider the healing that accompanies faith in Jesus Christ.

Day 5: Read Acts 3:17-26. Remember what our Brief Statement of Faith says: "In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all the families of the earth . . . Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant."

Day 6: Read Acts 4:1-12. Reflect on the opposition that the apostles faced from the very religious authorities who rejected Jesus as the Christ.

Day 7: Read Acts 4:13-22. Truly good news cannot be kept secret. Meditate on Peter's statement to the council, "[W]e cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (v. 20).

² Langston Hughes, "Corner Meeting," in *Collected Poems by Langston Hughes*. Copyright 1994 by the Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf Inc.

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), p. 297.

⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 24-25.

three

Before the COUNCIL

Acts 4:1—22

In 1521 Martin Luther was brought before the Diet of Worms. When Emperor Charles V asked him to recant his denials of certain decisions of church councils, Luther replied: "It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be in the wrong by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reasoning; I cannot trust either the decisions of Councils or of Popes, for it is plain that they have not only erred, but have contradicted each other. My conscience is bound to the Word of God, and it is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience. God help me!"¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader(s): Each session need not begin with members reading the biblical text to themselves, silently. Sometimes the text may be read aloud, as in this session. Some of the texts may be done as dramatic readings, in which one person reads the narrative portion and individuals are assigned to read the various speeches. Most parts of the Bible were never intended for private reading; they were intended to be read aloud in the hearing of believers! That is one of the compelling reasons for group study of Scripture.)

Ask a member of the group to read aloud Acts 4:1–22. Before the reading, appoint individuals to listen for the roles played in the narrative by the following:

Peter and John
one who was healed
the Jewish officials
the people
the Holy Spirit

After the reading, ask those with assignments to describe various actors in the drama: What are we told about them? What role do they play? How would the story be different if they were not present and active? (For example: What if the one who had been healed was not present as indisputable evidence?)

Discuss briefly how the events in Acts 4:1–22 relate to the "key verse" in ch. 1: "[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

What Is at Issue?

Quickly scan the third chapter of Acts to see what triggered the arrest of Peter and John. Then discuss: What is at issue between the Jewish Council and the apostles? Is it any of the following?

- civil liberties (the right of persons to make converts to their ideas)
- doctrine (Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection)
- civil disobedience (the Jewish authorities had reason to worry about revolutionary movements, which could bring down the wrath of the Roman overlords)

How would you characterize the conflict?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Consider the natural tendency of each generation to read biblical narratives as if they were happening in its own time. For instance: Clashes between Jewish religious leaders and Christians, such as portrayed in Acts 4:1–22, have been used to justify anti-Semitism.

How would you defend The Acts of the Apostles against the charge that it promotes anti-Semitism? How can we study the opposition encountered by the Jesus movement without "demonizing" its opponents?

¹ Robert Hastings Nichols, *The Growth of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1941), pp. 190-191.

Embedded in Acts 4:1–22 is one of the best-known verses in the New Testament: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (v. 12).

What, in the context of this story, do members understand this verse to mean?

How familiar are members with attempts by the "Christian establishment" in this country to curb the activities of movements like the Unification Church? How far can any society go in permitting the activities of groups and movements that undermine traditional religious institutions? Is this what was at issue in Acts 4:1–22? Or was something much different happening?

How much weight should be given to the name of Jesus and how much to the promise of salvation?

When we end our prayers with the phrase "In Jesus' name we pray," are we invoking some special power or powers?

How is it possible for reasonable, responsible public leaders to turn a blind eye to such signs and wonders as a miraculous healing? Might such healings not necessarily have been "proofs" of the apostles' legitimacy?

Afterword

(To the leader(s): If you have not already done so, see if you can link individual members of the group with special emphases identified in the first session. You may, for instance, have a member who wants to find out more about the power of prayer. You may have another who is particularly interested in missions. In the closing minutes of each session, try to give each of these persons a chance to share what he has been discovering. This works better than assignments at promoting learner contributions.)

Look at the list of issues or concerns that you identified in the first session, e.g., prayer, mission, etc. Encourage those who expressed a particular interest in each of those concerns to tell how the story in Acts 4:1—22 relates to that concern. For example:

empowerment—Clearly the apostles did not behave before the Jewish Council like ordinary citizens!

witnessing—The apostles did not miss the chance to make their cause public!

One night, following a threatening phone call, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sat in his kitchen, ready to quit the struggle in Montgomery, Alabama. He put his head in his hands and prayed.

"Oh, Lord, . . . I'm down here trying to do what is right. But, Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my power. I have nothing left. I can't face it alone."

He sat there, his head still bowed in his hands, tears burning his eyes. But then he felt something—a presence, a stirring in himself. And it seemed that an inner voice was speaking to him with quiet assurance: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even unto the end of the world."

And he understood it to be the voice of Jesus, telling him to fight on.²

An article in the *Christian Century* of September 26, 1945, describes these attempts by the Japanese government to suppress the Christian movement in Korea during World War II:

One step followed another, each more drastic than the last. In 1940 an edict brought an end to all Sunday schools in Korea. In 1942 orders were issued for an amalgamated Christian church, which came into being in February 1943 as the Federation of Reformed Christian Churches of Korea. But the Japanese overlords were still not satisfied. They said the Old Testament must be banished as based on Judaic thought, while in the

New Testament all allusions to Christ's return and to the final day of judgement must be eliminated. The Shinto shrine tablets must be placed within the churches. A permit from the local police must be obtained for each gathering, and meetings must not occur oftener than once a week for not more than an hour's duration. Sunday was not a holiday, so business and work continue as usual. . . .³

At the name of Jesus
Every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess Him
King of glory now;
'Tis the Father's pleasure
We should call Him Lord,
Who from the beginning
Was the mighty Word.⁴

Suggestions for Daily Reading

- Day 1:* Read Acts 4:23-5:16, which gives us a peek at what life was like in the early days of the Christian movement. Reflect on the eagerness of Christians to share the wealth with one another.
- Day 2:* Read Acts 5:17—42, in which the Christian movement encounters more opposition. Reflect on what it would be like to "suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (v. 41).
- Day 3:* Read Acts 6:1—8:3, the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. His sermon is a remarkable summary of the Old Testament.
- Day 4:* Read Acts 8:4—40, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Recall, with gratitude, the person or persons who first shared with you the good news about Jesus.
- Day 5:* Read Acts 9:1—31, the remarkable story of Paul's conversion. How might you tell the story of how you came to believe in Jesus as the Christ?
- Day 6:* Read Acts 9:32—42, which tells of some more remarkable works of the apostle Peter. Reflect on Peter's commands to "get up." Is there a message there for you?
- Day 7:* Read Acts 10:1-48, a crucial turning point in the life of the Christian movement, when Gentiles first believe the gospel and receive the Spirit. Consider the difference that one person can make.

² Stephen B. Oaths, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 88-89.

³ Sung C. Chun, *Schism and Unity in the Protestant Churches of Korea* (The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1979), pp. 235-236.

⁴ Caroline Maria Noel, "At the Name of Jesus," in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), No. 148. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press.

four

Gentiles ADMITTED

Acts 11:1—18

[W]hen Peter ate with and baptized uncircumcised Gentiles (Acts 10—11), everyone at the headquarters church back in Jerusalem knew he was wrong! They had not only the weight of a thousand years of traditions behind them to show that Peter had gone astray, but also direct, clear, incontrovertible statements of Scripture. But they had not counted on the Holy Spirit—that wind that blows where it wills, without asking our permission—which had an entirely different interpretation to put on those ancient Biblical texts.¹

The Spirit is free, and he breathes where he will. And behold, here he is, moving in the heart of a Gentile, and a Roman officer at that! The Church was taken by surprise and was much embarrassed. She had not foreseen such a happening. All Peter's conviction was needed to overcome their instinctive opposition to the whole proceeding, and to help them to "glorify God" for it. Alas! the Church is always so slow to understand the love of God in its infinite height and length, and breadth and depth.²

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader(s): You have come to the middle session of the study, which is always the most difficult. Very likely in the first sessions, members were content to be like Mary in Luke 10:38-42—sitting quietly and listening. But if they are like members in most small groups, they have become more and more like Martha—distracted by many things. How will you help them to focus on the biblical text and its message? A technique used in writing workshops is to hammer at the question, "But what is this story about?" The first exercise in this session is borrowed from that technique.)

Read Acts 11:1-18. Ask each member, working by himself, to write down in a single sentence the answer to the question, "What is this story about?"

Ask that the sentences be shared in the total group, but not yet discussed. Ask members to save their comments for later in the session.

Consider together the choice of this story to represent Acts 9—15, which tells about the expansion of the Jesus movement to include Gentiles (non-Jews). You might want to ask if members are more familiar with other stories in this section: the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus, Peter's vision of the unclean animals, the Council of Jerusalem. Encourage members to tell these stories, if they are familiar with them.

Why, do you suppose, was Acts 11:1-18 chosen to represent this critical moment in the life of the Jesus movement?

¹ David R. Ord, in *Presbyterian Survey*, April 1995, p. 32.

² Suzanne de Dietrich, *Free Men: Meditations on the Bible Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 92.

Would you have chosen one of the other, more dramatic, accounts? Why? Why not?

It has been said that "God is in the details." Consider together these details of Acts 11:1–18, to see what they contribute:

- the emphasis on food and eating
- the importance given to visions
- the reference to Jesus' promise of the Baptism of the Spirit
- the several works of the Spirit
- the role of witnesses

Different Traditions

Sometimes surprising things happen when we ask of Any biblical passage, "How might persons in a tradition different from ours read this text?" Ask members of the group how the following might hear Acts 11:1–18:

- Orthodox Jews
- Baptists
- psychiatrists
- a women's study group
- members of a charismatic sect

Ask about circumcision. Have any members of the group heard circumcision interpreted in sermons? Has anyone been present for the ritual of circumcision in a Jewish family? Why is circumcision important to Jews? What would you like to ask Jewish acquaintances about circumcision?

(To the leader(s): In a study of the Acts of the Apostles, there is no way to avoid discussion of Christian–Jewish relations. In a brief study—and lacking the presence of Jews to speak for themselves—there is no reasonable expectation of improving understanding between the two faith groups. But care can be taken not to encourage anti-Semitic attitudes or remarks. You cannot act as policemen, but you can encourage the group to police its conversation. When you hear what you consider anti-Semitic comments, call this to the attention of the group and ask for their judgment.)

3 Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit* (Irving, TX: Word, Inc., 1978), p. 62.

Afterword

Allow time at the end of the session for paying attention to the issues and special interests identified in the first session. Acts 11:1–18 is, of course, of great importance for the mission of the church, and for the *work of the Spirit*. But it also shows how the church has been forced to reexamine Scripture and to deal with new and surprising developments.

Many years ago when I was attending a small Bible school in Florida, I visited what was called a "brush arbor revival meeting." The speaker was an old-fashioned Southern revival preacher. The little place seated about two hundred people and was filled. The speaker made up in thunder what he lacked in logic, and the people loved it.

"Have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?" he asked the audience during the sermon.

Apparently he knew a great many in the audience because he would point to someone and ask, "Brother, have you been baptized with the Spirit?" And the man would answer, "Yes, bless God."

"Young man," he said, spotting me, "have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?" "Yes, sir," I replied.

"When were you baptized with the Holy Spirit?" he asked. He had not questioned the others on this.

"The moment I received Jesus Christ as my Savior," I replied. He looked at me with a puzzled expression, but before going to the next person he said, "That couldn't be."

But it could! It was.

I do not doubt the sincerity of this preacher. However, in my own study of the Scriptures through the years I have become convinced that there is only one baptism with the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer, and that takes place at the moment of conversion.³

... Our Lord the Holy Spirit. . . cannot be grasped by us, but we must be grasped by Him. He cannot be caught and put in a pot, and the lid fastened down on Him, for He is like fire and wind and flowing water. If you shut up fire in a pot it goes out; if you shut up wind in a pot it becomes still and stale; if you shut up flowing water in a pot it becomes stagnant. So you cannot trap the Spirit in any form or pattern of ecclesiastical organization.⁴

4 Stephen Verney, *Fire in Coventry* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1964), p. 67.

These awakenings, when they have first seized on persons, have had two effects. One was, that they have had them immediately to quit their sinful practices and the looser sort have been brought to forsake and dread their former vices and extravagances. When once the spirit of God began to be so wonderfully poured out in a general way through the town, people had soon done with their old quarrels, backbitings, and intermeddling with other men's matters; the tavern was soon left empty, and persons kept very much at home.⁵

Suggestions for Daily Reading

- Day 1:* Read Acts 11:19–30, about the mission to the Greeks in Antioch. Consider the usefulness of men like Barnabas, who seem to have been unflagging in both zeal and energy.
- Day 2:* Read Acts 12:1–25, in which the church in Jerusalem comes under persecution again. Reflect on the trust that the church placed in intercessory prayer.
- Day 3:* Read Acts 13:1–52, about the missionary work of Paul. Consider the important role that the Jewish synagogue played in his strategy.
- Day 4:* Read Acts 14:1–28, which tells of more opposition. Reflect on the statement of the disciples, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God."
- Day 5:* Read Acts 15:1–40, the Council at Jerusalem. Reflect on how the church has had to reform its understanding of obedience to the will of God.
- Day 6:* Read Acts 16:1–40, in which the congregation at Philippi is organized. Note the role played by Lydia and the hospitality she afforded the apostles.
- Day 7:* Read Acts 17:1–9, which finds Paul in Thessalonica. Note the strategy of the Jewish opposition—to create a public uproar and bring down the wrath of civil officials on the Jesus movement.

⁵Jonathan Edwards, in Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards: *Selections from Their Writings*, Carl Van Doren, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), p. 291.

five

Paul in THESSALONICA

Acts 17:1—9

The same Spirit
 who inspired the prophets and apostles
 rules our faith and life in Christ through
 Scripture,
 engages us through the Word proclaimed,
 claims us in the waters of baptism,
 feeds us with the bread of life and the cup
 of salvation,
 and calls women and men to all ministries
 of the Church.

In a broken and fearful world
 The Spirit gives us courage
 to pray without ceasing,
 to witness among all peoples to Christ
 as Lord and Savior,
 to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
 to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
 and to work with others for justice,
 freedom, and peace.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader(s): The further you go in this study, the more large chunks of material will have been leapfrogged. To get from Acts 11:1—18 to 17:1—9, you have skipped over Paul's first missionary journey and the Council of Jerusalem! We have all been taught to "cover the entire text." How will you deal with such frustration?)

1. *Point out the limitations of a seven-week study.*
2. *Encourage members to do the Daily Readings, which do provide for a reading of the entire text of Acts.*
3. *Admit to frustrations of your own, but point out that such frustration is simply a factor present in any Bible study: The Bible is so rich and complex that it always leaves us well short of anything we might call mastery.)*

Read Acts 17:1—9, about the establishment of the Christian fellowship in the Greek city of Thessalonica. This passage occurs in the midst of a section of Acts 15:39—18:21, which describes the second of three missionary journeys undertaken by the apostle Paul. See what members can deduce about Paul's missionary strategy and tactics.

Ask them, working individually, to draw up something like a business plan:

Goal

Organization

Finances

Message

Other

Then ask that these findings be shared in the total group.

¹ From *A Brief Statement of Faith*, copyright 1990 by the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Used by permission.

Point out to the group that Paul wasn't the only one with a strategy and tactics. Verses 5–8 describe the familiar tactics of Jewish opposition to the Jesus movement. They charged that it was subversive of public order. The issue of church and state would be around until the present day. One of the reasons given for the writing of The Acts of the Apostles was to assure the Roman establishment that the church was indeed not subversive of the Empire!

How was the issue of subversion raised against the Jesus movement in Thessalonica? How is it sometimes raised against the church today? Are we—should we want to be people who "have been turning the world upside down"?

Conflict

A primary emphasis of Acts—conflict between the Christian movement and Judaism—appears again in Acts 17:1–9.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

To what does the author of Acts attribute the anger of the Jews in Thessalonica? Does that suggest a continuing source of friction between Jews and Christians? Why? Why not?

Afterword

Allow time at the end of the session to review major themes and issues, such as prayer, opposition, work of the Spirit.

Note the continued emphasis in the apostolic teaching on the resurrection as a vindication of Jesus as the promised Messiah.

This session might be particularly useful in discussing the meaning and strategy of what we call "evangelism." The account of Paul's work in Thessalonica suggests both message and method—and the two not separated.

On July 30, 1902, a thick shapeless procession, estimated by the police at 25,000 and by the Yiddish papers at twice that number, coiled its way through the East Side, stopping at synagogue after synagogue, to follow the coffin of Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph. There was no music save the chanting of pupils from the Hebrew schools. A gentle soul, Rabbi Joseph had been invited in 1887 to come from Vilna and assume the post of chief rabbi, a title without clear warrant in the synagogue structure of New York. His tenure had been unhappy, and he had shown few gifts for adapting to the coarseness of New York life. Now, as if in expiation, the whole Jewish community came to mourn his death.

Passing along Grand Street, the funeral procession reached the factory of R. Hoe and Company, makers of printing presses. Suddenly, from the second floor of this building, missiles started to descend upon the tightly packed Jews. A contemporary, non-Jewish account picks up the story:

Instead of turning up their faces to the factory windows and protesting with words and gestures, as the merry pressmakers expected, the Jews set up a mighty shout and, with a common impulse charged upon the factory. Before the clerks and workers on the ground floor knew what had happened they were surrounded by bearded men and bewigged women, jabbering excitedly and clutching at things as though intent upon wrecking the place... The fray took its most serious turn when the police arrive.... They set to work at once swinging their clubs vigorously as they drove the Jews from the factory. Scores of persons were hurt, mostly by the policemen's clubs.²

² Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 123.

After I left North Beach, the Presbyterian church let me set up an arts center in an abandoned church in the Mission district. But when the ministers working with addicts and the mentally ill saw all the happiness in our theaters and galleries, they demanded that most of our funding be cut and handed over to them. They suddenly discovered that our building was crucial to their social work; they took over the downstairs, demanded that we approach our art in terms of discussion groups after every show about "the problems of modern man."³

Suggestions for Daily Reading

- Day 1:* Read Acts 17:10-33, in which Paul makes a public address in Athens. Reflect on how the Jewish Paul tried to find common ground with the Greek Gentiles.
- Day 2:* Read Acts 18:1-19:20, which describes a considerable portion of Paul's third missionary journey. Reflect on why in this study the term "Jesus movement" is so frequently used.
- Day 3:* Read Acts 19:21-20:36, which describes contrasting events in Ephesus. This gives us a rare glimpse of Paul as pastor. Pray for the pastor of your congregation.
- Day 4:* Read Acts 21:1-22:30, in which Paul goes to Jerusalem and is arrested. This contains one of three accounts of Paul's Damascus road experience. What do you make of it?
- Day 5:* Read Acts 23:1-23, in which Paul is taken to the provincial capital and handed over to the governor. Consider that Paul was never again to be a free man.
- Day 6:* Read Acts 24:1-16, in which Paul defends himself before the Roman governor. Notice how different this is from Paul's defense to Jewish audiences.
- Day 7:* Read Acts 24:27-26:32, in which Paul makes his defense before King Agrippa. What does Paul's third account of his Damascus road experience add to your appreciation or understanding of the man?

³ Pierre Delattre, *Episodes* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1993), p. 80.

six

Paul Before **AGRIPPA**

Acts 26:1—19

God had struck one gigantic first blow in the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius. His second blow was the conversion of the fiercest persecutor of the Church: Saul of Tarsus, the apostle to the Gentiles, the apostle of liberty.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader(s): This sixth session should be the best—the climax of your study. Paul's Damascus road experience is a key to the Acts of the Apostles, as well as to the spread of the Jesus movement. Members of your group ought to be ready to see this jewel in its proper setting.)

Read Acts 26:9-18. This is the *third* account in Acts of Paul's Damascus road conversion. The others appear in 9:1—8 and 24:1-11. Ask members to compare and contrast the account in 26:9—18 with these other two—and to list any details that have been added in 26:9-18.

What has been added to the account in ch. 26?

What do you make of these additions?

What do they tell us about the significance of Paul's conversion experience?

(To the leader(s): You will have to decide at this point whether or not to encourage members of the group to talk about their own conversion experiences. In some groups this will be appropriate; not so in others. Be sensitive to the needs of members—both to keep their experiences private and to share those experiences.)

Read the entire speech of Paul to King Agrippa, Acts 26:2-23. Paul calls this "my defense"; he is acting as his own attorney. Discuss the effectiveness of the speech as a piece of rhetoric, that is, a speech designed to persuade and convince the audience of Paul's innocence.

1. *What appeal does Paul make to the traditions that he shares with his audience?*
2. *What appeal does Paul make to the Scriptures?*
3. *What appeal does Paul make to his own experience?*

Tradition, Scripture, and Experience

Reflect together on preaching that members have heard during their lifetime. How much importance do they attach to tradition? Scripture? experience? Are all three of equal weight? Why? Why not?

Read the closing statement in Paul's speech to Agrippa, vs. 22—23. Compare it with 17:3, "explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This is the

¹ Suzanne de Dietrich, *Free Men: Meditations on the Bible Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 93.

Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you." How does this sit with the group as a summary of the Christian gospel? How does it compare, for example, with John 3:16?

To stimulate discussion on major themes of Acts, have someone read aloud the "key verse," 1:8. What does Paul's defense before Agrippa tell us about the meaning of *witnessing*? What significance is there to the speech being made in the provincial capital, not Jerusalem? How may we discern the *work of the Spirit*? How was Paul's Damascus road experience *empowering*? *Why* so much emphasis on the *resurrection*?

Afterword

So by daylight on July 3rd, morning thoughts of a stiff sobriety were plainly in order. But in the midst of such circular thinking, an actual happening intervened with no trace of warning. I was suddenly not propped in my brass bed or even contained in my familiar house. By the dim new, thoroughly credible light that rose around me, it was barely dawn; and I was lying fully dressed in modern street clothes on a slope by a lake I knew at once. It was the big lake of Kinnereth, the Sea of Galilee, in the north of Israel—green Galilee, the scene of Jesus' first teaching and healing. I'd paid the lake a second visit the previous October, a twelve-mile-long body of fish-stocked water in beautiful hills of grass, trees and small family farm.

Still sleeping around me on the misty ground were a number of men in the tunics and cloaks of first-century Palestine. I soon understood with no sense of surprise that the men were Jesus' twelve disciples and that he was nearby asleep among them. So I lay on a while in the early chill, looking west across the lake to Tiberias, a small low town, and north to the fishing villages of Capernaum and Bethsaida. I saw them as they were in the first century—stone huts with thatch-and-mud roof, occasional low towers, the rising smoke of breakfast fires. The early light was a fine mix of tan and rose. It would be a fair day.

Then one of the sleeping men woke and stood.

I saw it was Jesus, bound towards me.

He looked much like the lean Jesus of Flemish paintings—tall with dark hair, unblemished skin and a self-possession both natural and imposing.

Again I felt no shock or fear. All this was normal human event; it was utterly clear to my normal eyes and was happening as surely as any event of my previous life. I lay and watched him walk on nearer.

Jesus bent and silently beckoned me to follow.

I knew to shuck off my trousers and jacket, then my shirt and shorts. Bare, I followed him.

He was wearing a twisted white cloth round his loins; otherwise he was bare and the color of ivory.

We waded out into the cool lake water twenty feet from shore till we stood waist-deep.

I was in my body but was also watching my body from slightly upward and behind. I could see the purple dye on my back, the long rectangle that boxed my thriving tumor.

Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back till water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke once—"Your sins are forgiven"—and turned to shore again, done with me.

I came on behind him, thinking in standard greedy fashion, It's not my sins I'm worried about. So to Jesus' receding back, I had the gall to say, "Am I also cured?"

He turned to face me, no sign of a smile, and finally said two words—"That too." Then he climbed from the water, not looking around, really done with me.

I followed him out and then, with no palpable seam in the texture of time and place, I was home again in my wide bed.²

*Sometimes a Man Stands Up During Supper*³

Sometimes a man stands up during supper and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking, because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.

And another man, who remains inside his own house, dies there, inside the dishes and in the glasses, so that his children have to go far out into the world toward that same church, which he forgot.

Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), pp. 42-43.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, in *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, Robert Bly, James Hillman, Michael Meade, eds. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 60.

On the eve of the Assumption of the Virgin [in the year 1578] the Prior of the Convent entered his cell, and after kicking him brutally and rating him for his disobedience, promised to release him if he would abandon the Reform and return to the mitigated rule. Juan replied that he could not break his vows, but asked if he might be allowed to say mass on the following day, as it was the feast of the Virgin. The Prior angrily refused and went out. But that night Our Lady appeared to Juan in a dream. Filling his cell with light, she commanded him to escape, promising her assistance. This dream drew out an early memory. Once as a little boy at Fontiveros he had fallen into a pond. As he struggled in the mud and water he had seen a well-dressed lady on the bank whom he had taken to be the Virgin. He had stretched out his arms to her, but with closed fists because his hands were too dirty to take hers. Then someone else had pulled him out. He now felt assured that, in spite of his weakness, with her help he would be able to escape from prison.⁴

Suggestions for Daily Reading

- Day 1:* Read Acts 27:1-8, in which Paul sets sail for Rome. Note the specificity of persons and places. The gospel advances in the real, everyday world.
- Day 2:* Read Acts 27:9-26, in which there is a storm at sea. Consider the providence of God, by which the agents of God's purposes are upheld.
- Day 3:* Read Acts 27:27-44, in which Paul and his companions survive a shipwreck. Consider the significance of the breaking of bread at the moment of greatest crisis and danger.
- Day 4:* Read Acts 28:1-6, in which Paul escapes being killed by a poisonous snake. Why are we not surprised?
- Day 5:* Read Acts 28:7-10, in which Paul cures many sick persons on the island of Malta. Consider that Paul—like Peter—had the power to cure.
- Day 6:* Read Acts 28:11-15, in which Paul finally arrives in Rome. As ever, Paul remembers to give thanks to God.
- Day 7:* Read Acts 28:16-30, which describes the two years Paul spent in Rome. Consider how Paul could scarcely wait until he could meet with the leaders of the Jewish community.

⁴ Gerald Brenan, in *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, Willis Barnstone, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 14.

seven

Paul in ROME

Acts 28:16—31

Whatever else can be said of Paul, it can be said with certainty that he was a Jew, that he saw himself as a Jew and was proud to be one, and that it seems most unlikely that any of those who knew him would have thought of him as anything but a Jew. The greatest hurdle that we must overcome if we would understand him is not that we are of the twentieth century and he was of the first, but that we are Gentiles and he was a Jew.

He was of course an unusual Jew. There is evidence to think that he shared with his Master the probably minority status of being of the Pharisaic persuasion, but what made him truly unusual was the fact that he bore, so he was convinced, a special commission. He had, he was convinced, and we have every reason to hope that he was right, a prophetic calling from God to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles, to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. And that brings us face to face with Paul's problem, so different from ours. Paul's problem, causing him so much pain . . . was that most of his fellow Jews not only did not share his commission, but, if aware of it at all, they doubted its authenticity. One could say that his problem was an all-too-typical one of a Jewish prophet. As it had been for an Amos and a Jeremiah, so it was for Paul: his word was not heard by most of his fellow Jews as the Word of God.¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader(s): It is no accident that the final session is devoted to Paul: He dominates the second half of The Acts of the Apostles—that section of Acts deals mainly with the spread of the movement to the Gentiles, which was Paul's special commission. Also, following Acts in the New Testament are thirteen letters that are either written by Paul or one of his followers.)

It is also a useful teaching strategy to end a series with a person rather than with an idea, an issue, or a problem. That helps learners apply the discoveries of the series to their own lives. So try, as much as possible, to avoid drifting off into generalities. Keep the focus on Paul.)

Read Acts 28:16-31. If you have not tried a dramatic reading in the series, why not do so now? Ask one member to read aloud the narrative portions, another to take the part of Paul, and the rest to be a chorus, speaking for the assembled Jews. What familiar themes are sounded in these final verses from Acts? How does the life and ministry of Paul exemplify those themes?

A Mysterious Silence

Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a mystery story called "The Dog that Didn't Bark." There is a mysterious silence about the church in Acts 28:16-31. Discuss why there is no mention made of Christian believers in this account.

Make a list on newsprint or chalkboard of questions that members would like to ask Paul—if he were present and accountable.

This list can prove useful when and if members of the group undertake studies of some of Paul's letters.

Afterword

(To the leader(s): Any study series implies a "learning contract" among the participants. Each person brings certain expectation, as does the leader or leaders. It is always useful at the end of the study to spend some time reviewing—not the content of the course, but the contract. You, as the leader(s), tell the group some of your expectations and how they were or were not met. Invite each member of the group to do likewise.)

It is also helpful for the leader(s) to prepare a brief closing exercise: a prayer, a time of silence, a friendship circle, an invitation to join another study group, a statement of appreciation for the member's participation. Do whatever seems comfortable.)

¹ Paul M. van Buren, "The Church and Israel: Romans 9-11," in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, supplementary issue, Number 1, 1990, pp. 9-10.

The followers of Jesus
remained at first within the people of Israel.
As persons from all nations joined them,
they were separated from the Jewish community.
Yet they continued to accept Israel's story as their own
and to consider themselves part of the people of God.

We can never lay exclusive claim to being God's people,
as though we had replaced those
to whom the covenant, the law, and the
promises belong.
We affirm that God has not rejected his
people the Jews.
The Lord does not take back his promises.
We Christians have often rejected Jews
throughout our history
with shameful prejudice and cruelty.
God calls us to dialogue and cooperation
that do not ignore our real disagreements,
yet proceed in mutual respect and love.
We are bound together with them in the
single story
of those chosen to serve and proclaim
the living God.

—Declaration of Faith, PCUS, 1976

In an effort to warm relations between two
organizations that have collided loudly of late, the
executive director of the Christian Coalition told
leaders of the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith
tonight that some Christian conservatives "have been
insensitive" to the sufferings that Jews have endured
throughout history. . . [Ralph Reed], citing "barbarous
acts" against Jews like pogroms, the establishment of
ghettos and the Holocaust, also said that he had an
obligation to teach the history of Jewish persecution to
the 1.5 million members of the coalition, a
religiously based conservative political organization.²

Hail to the brightness of Zion's glad morning,
Long by the prophets of Israel foretold!
Hail to the millions from bondage returning!
Gentiles and Jews the blest vision behold.

- 19th Century American hymn

The Jews

Poor nation, whose sweet sap, and juice
Our scions have purloined, and left you dry:
Whose streams we got by the Apostles' sluice,
And use in baptism, while ye pine and die:
Who by not keeping once, became a debtor;
And now by keeping lose the letter:

O that my prayers! mine, alas!
O that some Angel might a trumpet sound;
At which the Church falling upon her face
Should cry so loud, until the trump were drowned,
And by that cry of her dear Lord obtain,
That your sweet sap might come again!

—George Herbert, 1593–1633

² Gustav Niebuhr, "Olive branch to Jews from Conservative Christians," in *The New York Times*, April 4, 1995, p. A1.

Hymns

Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove	pg. 126
Breathe on Me, Breath of God	pg. 316
Spirit of the Living God	pg. 322
Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart	pg. 326
Spirit Divine, Attend Our Prayers	pg. 325

The above hymns are from the Presbyterian Hymnal (1990).

What People Are Saying About the Men's Bible Study Series

"I found the study materials and questions among the most refreshing of any Bible study materials I have ever seen within the Presbyterian Church for men.

Thanks so much for doing them... "

*Bill Richard
Presbyterian Stone Church
Ogdensburg, New York*

"We would like more of this kind of study."

*Jim Palmer
First Presbyterian Church
Bellevue, Washington*

"(The) men had been so used to listening to lecture type Sunday School lessons (that) I was afraid that drawing them into a discussion would be like pulling teeth. The surprise came on that first Sunday morning when all ten men in the class chimed in with their thoughts."

*Gene Wylie
First Presbyterian Church
Vicksburg, Mississippi*

"An excellent presentation ... with good balance between Biblical work and reflection. Questions with contemporary applications are nicely done."

*Dr. Youngil Cho
National President (1993—1995)
Presbyterian Men*

THE Writer

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