

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 18 – Acts - the story of the Early Church

Key Questions:

- How did the message about Jesus spread from a few followers in Jerusalem across the world?

The Book of Acts

Acts is a sequel to Luke's gospel, written by the same author (the physician Luke) to the same person (Theophilus). The name "Acts" is actually an abbreviation of the book's full name, which is "*The Acts of the Apostles*". The apostles were the eleven disciples whom Jesus had trained to become leaders of the Christians after He left earth (there had been twelve, but Judas had betrayed Jesus and was now dead), plus another man called Paul (see *Part 19*). So, this book records the activities (or "acts") of these leaders of the early Church. It begins with the Ascension of Jesus to Heaven, and ends in around AD 62. The key verses to understanding the book's message are Acts 1:8-9. The apostles were still expecting that the risen Jesus might overthrow the Romans and make Himself King right then (verse 6), but Jesus told them that their job would be to spread the message about Him across the world, starting in Jerusalem, followed by the region of Judea, then the neighbouring region of Samaria and eventually across the whole world. Acts tells how the good news about Jesus spread outwards in this way from Jerusalem to many nations across the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

The Holy Spirit comes to live in Christians

The Bible clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit is God and that He is a person who is able to reason and make decisions and who has real feelings, so we must be careful not to think of Him as just an impersonal "force" or source of power. On the night before He died, Jesus promised the Twelve that the Holy Spirit would come after He had left them. His teaching is recorded in John 14:15-31 and John 16:5-16. From these passages we learn seven things about the Holy Spirit:

1. **He is a "Counsellor" who will represent Jesus to His followers** – He does everything for us that Jesus did for His disciples when He was on earth (14:15, 26)
2. **He lives with and in Jesus' followers** (14:17) – this is a very close, permanent relationship
3. **He is the Spirit of Truth who teaches people God's truth** (14:26, 16:13)
4. **He could not come until Jesus had left the earth** (16:7) – this is why Jesus did not stay on earth forever
5. **He convicts people of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement** (16:8-11) – in other words, He shows people that they have sinned and that they deserve God's judgement so that they will realise their need of God's forgiveness and come to Him.
6. **He brings glory to Jesus** (16:14) – just as the Son gave glory to the Father, so the Spirit gives glory to the Son
7. **He helps the disciples to speak to others about Jesus** (15:26-27)

The relationship Jesus describes is permanent, as the Spirit makes His home in Christians. Although the Holy Spirit was active in the Old Testament, helping people to fulfil special tasks given by God and giving God's words to the prophets, this kind of relationship between all of God's people and the Holy Spirit was something new. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was never said to **live in** God's people. He settled on them to give power for a certain job for a limited time. Some Old Testament prophets, notably Joel and Ezekiel, foresaw a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on and live in His people. These prophecies were fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came on the church just as Jesus had promised.

In Acts chapter 1, Luke records Jesus' last words to the apostles before He ascended to Heaven. He told them to wait in Jerusalem for a "*few days*" until they were "*baptised with the Holy Spirit*" (verse 5). The promises about the Holy Spirit given by Jesus before His death were soon to be fulfilled. Jesus gave them their great mission – they were to be His witnesses across the world – but said that this would not be possible until the Holy Spirit came on them to give them power (verse 8). Shortly after saying this, Jesus ascended to Heaven (verse 9).

The apostles waited in Jerusalem as Jesus had told them, praying (verse 14). Finally, on the feast Day of Pentecost (50 days after the Passover, and so 50 days after the death of Jesus), something supernatural happened. Luke describes it in Acts 2:1-13. The disciples heard (verse 2) and saw (verse 3) something unusual, and they were given a special gift of speaking in other languages. This caught the attention of many people in the city who heard them speaking in their own languages, and even their own local dialects. The disciples were speaking about what God had done, and many people began to wonder what the significance of this amazing event was (verses 11-12). Other people in the crowd, however, would not listen and instead accused the disciples of being drunk (verse 13). The attention of the crowd was now focussed on the apostles, and they now had power from the Holy Spirit to speak with courage about Jesus!

Not surprisingly, it was Simon Peter (from now on he is simply called Peter as he has now become the rock in God's church) who spoke to the crowds. The people he was speaking to were all familiar with the Old Testament, as they were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) who had come to worship God at the Temple (these Gentiles who worshipped God but did not fully convert to Judaism were often called "God-fearing" Gentiles). Peter, therefore, began his message with a quotation from the Old Testament prophet, Joel, who had foreseen a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all of His people (Joel 2:28-32), marking a new age of salvation. Peter's message (Acts 2:14-40) contains several main points:

1. **The supernatural gift of speaking in other languages was a sign of the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy** (verses 14-21). In other words, the gospel is God's plan to save people, promised by Him and now fulfilled.
2. **Jesus is the Lord and Messiah** (verses 22-36)
 - a. God endorsed Jesus' message through His miracles, which they had seen themselves (verse 22)
 - b. The people had executed Jesus, but this was also part of God's plan (verse 23)

- c. God raised Him from the dead as King David had foreseen, and as the apostles had witnessed (verses 24-32)
- d. Jesus is now seated beside God the Father in heaven (verse 33)
- e. Jesus is now pouring out the Holy Spirit on the apostles (verse 33)

Conclusion (verse 36): The evidence is clear – Jesus is the Lord and Messiah!

3. **They must respond to the message** (verses 37-38)
 - a. *Repent* – “turn from your sins” (verse 38)
 - b. *Trust* – “turn to God” (verse 38)
 - c. *Be baptised* (verse 38) [for teaching about the meaning of baptism see *Part 20*]
4. **God will respond when they repent and believe by giving them the Holy Spirit** (verse 38) – Christians believe that our lives can only really change by God’s power, not by our own effort.

This was the first time that the Christian “gospel” (meaning simply “good news”) was preached, and the results were amazing: 3000 people responded and were baptised. This was the beginning of the Church (see *Part 27*).

The Gospel spreads out from Jerusalem

The first Christians were all either Jews or God-fearing Gentiles. The biggest question for the early Christians was whether the message about Jesus was only for the Jews, in which case Gentiles who wanted to become Christians should follow Jewish cultural and religious practices, or whether it was possible to really be a Christian and remain Gentile. In particular they were unsure about circumcision, which was the sign of God’s Old Testament covenant with Abraham. Should Gentiles who wanted to become Christians be circumcised?

Over the first months after the Day of Pentecost, the Church in Jerusalem continued to grow as new people became Christians. God performed miracles through the apostles, and the Christians continued to meet together. Peter and John preached the message about Jesus even to the Jewish leaders who had executed Jesus (see Acts 4:1-22). Not surprisingly, they faced opposition from the High Priest and his closest followers, who had been the most bitter enemies of Jesus. One young man called Stephen was stoned to death by these Jewish leaders for preaching boldly about Jesus (Acts 7). On this occasion a man called Saul was involved. He became the leading enemy of the Christians, trying to destroy the Church (Acts 8:1-3). However, the Christians who had to run away from Jerusalem to escape this persecution took the message out to the regions of Judea and Samaria. The opposition they faced actually helped the Church to grow! The apostle Philip preached to people in Samaria and even shared the good news with a God-fearing official from Ethiopia, who became a Christian (Acts 8).

These new Christians were still Jews, Samaritans (who shared many of the cultural and religious beliefs of the Jews) and a few God-fearing Gentiles (like the Ethiopian official). The question still remained whether the Christian message was for all nations and cultures. In Acts chapter 10 we read about a God-fearing Roman army officer called Cornelius (verses 1-2). An angel told him to send for Peter to come and visit him (verses 3-6). The next day Peter was given a special vision by God. In it he was told to eat various animals that the Old Testament Law did not permit Jews to eat (verses 9-16). Peter received this same vision three times, but he could not figure out what it meant (verse 17). Just then, Cornelius’ messengers arrived. Peter went with them to Cornelius’ house. He finally realised the significance of his vision: that **God will accept people from any nation who respond to the message about Jesus** (verse 34). Many of the Gentiles accepted the message, and they received the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other languages just as the apostles had on the Day of Pentecost, which proved that they had received the Spirit in exactly the same way as the Jews (verse 47). Some Christians disagreed with Peter about his decision to preach in the home of a Gentile, but when Peter told them that the Gentiles had also received the Holy Spirit these Christians accepted that the gospel was for all nations.

Although opposition to Christianity continued (see Acts 12), the message about Jesus continued to spread. The remainder of the book of Acts (from chapter 13 onwards) focuses on the work of Paul, who carried the message out to many Gentile countries (see *Part 19*). When some Christians still tried to teach Gentile converts that they must be circumcised, the apostles met together in Jerusalem to decide this matter. Paul and Peter spoke about the things God had been doing among the Gentiles. When the others heard this, they agreed that the Gentiles should be accepted as true Christians without having to be circumcised or follow other Jewish religious practices (this event is recorded in Acts 15). Since then, the Christian message has continued to spread across the world to every culture. People do not need to change their culture to become Christians, but they do need to make God’s will the first priority in their lives and allow the teachings of the Bible to shape their culture, strengthening what is good and correcting what is not helpful.

Peter’s two letters

Peter wrote two letters in the New Testament. They are named after him – I and II Peter. These letters were written to Christians who were suffering for their faith (as Christians increased in number they also began to face opposition from the Roman Empire). Peter encouraged them to keep living for God because they have the hope of eternal life. He told them that it is worth suffering for Jesus because God will reward those who suffer for doing what is right. In these letters we also discover what Peter came to understand about the death of Jesus:

- **I Peter 1:18-20** – Peter says that Jesus died as a perfect sinless Lamb (the picture is of the Old Testament sacrifices for sins) to pay the ransom price to free people from their sins.
- **I Peter 2:21-25** – Peter referred back to the great prophecies of Isaiah chapter 53 and showed how Jesus has fulfilled these by dying to carry away our sins (compare these verses with Isaiah 53:4-12)

Peter was fulfilling Jesus’ special command to him to “*feed my sheep*” (John 21:17), by encouraging Christians to keep on growing in their faith. He also challenged all church leaders (known as “elders”) to do the same (I Peter 5:1-4).

Key Lesson: The gospel of Jesus spread because the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles

The disciples were transformed into apostles of Jesus by the Holy Spirit who came to live in them on the Day of Pentecost. They began to spread the good news about Jesus across the world, and it continues to spread today. The gospel is good news for people of all cultures and races, and can still transform lives today.