

ACTS

.....

MICHAEL KASTING

LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

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WELCOME TO LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY (LWBS)

LWBS is a practical course of study with a special emphasis on the application of God's Word to the life of the individual. While emphasizing practical application, LWBS presents each book of the Bible as the holy, inspired Word of God, the confessional position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Our purpose is to help equip believers to live joyfully in God's redeeming love and to share with others God's plan of salvation.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help you grow in your knowledge and appreciation of our God and His Word. *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* 2 Peter 3:18.

STUDY STRUCTURE

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

- 1. PERSONAL* – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P.A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
- 2. SMALL GROUPS* – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE* – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE* – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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ACTS

MICHAEL KASTING

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Blood and Life – Sermons on the Old Testament

Through the Needle's Eye: Sermons on the Gospels

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INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

“Most Excellent Theophilus”



THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

The story of Jesus Christ is “the greatest story ever told.” That was the title of a 1949 book by Fulton Oursler, later made into a movie. The story is “the greatest,” not only because it has everything a good story needs (important premise, engaging plot, fascinating characters, sharp conflict), and not only because it is true, but because it has impacted and still impacts this world as no other story has done. Those who hear it realize that they are invited in, for it keeps going and growing! At the end of his Narnia series, C. S. Lewis calls it the “Great Story... which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before” (*The Last Battle*, p. 184).

The story of Jesus and the movement He began was shared already long ago by the Evangelist Luke in two parts: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The former narrates “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). The latter continues by telling what the risen and ascended Jesus did through some of His key followers, particularly Peter and Paul, in the decades afterward. The story was long enough that the author recorded it on two scrolls, each about 25–30 feet long. Unfortunately, the scrolls circulated separately, and when they were finally included in the New Testament canon, the insertion of John’s Gospel divided them “unnaturally” (observes Robert Smith). The result has been that some readers do not realize these two books are really one book in two parts.

“MOST EXCELLENT THEOPHILUS”

The two parts of Luke’s story are tied together by the name Theophilus. Each part begins with a formal preface, the kind that was common to historical works of that time. In each one the author states his purpose in writing and identifies Theophilus as the recipient. “Theophilus” means “one who loves God.” It’s possible that the name refers to the readers of the story who love God enough to ponder and accept the message. But more likely it’s the name of one particular man.

The designation “most excellent” (Luke 1:3) may indicate that the recipient was a Roman official. Some commentators assert that Luke is making the case before Rome that Jesus and His followers were innocent of wrong, that they posed no danger of insurrection and had no political agenda. It may, others suggest, be the name of a wealthy patron, “responsible for seeing that [Luke’s] writings were copied and distributed. Such a dedication to the publisher was common at that time” (*Concordia Self-Study Bible*).

LUKE — AN AUTHOR WITH A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

How can we be sure that Luke is the writer? Nowhere in either book does he identify himself by name. But there are clues. He must be a companion of Paul on those mission journeys, for beginning at Acts 16:10 come the well-known “we” sections, indicating that the author was a participant in the mission team. Members of that team are named in Colossians 4:10–

14, which was written from Rome toward the end of Paul’s career. They include Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus, all Jewish Christians. Demas, Epaphras, and Luke are three Gentile Christians also with Paul at the time. Luke and four of the others are mentioned again in Philemon (v. 24), which was written about the same time as Colossians.

Another clue is that Luke and Acts are written in elegant Greek with fastidiously accurate historical details, the mark of an educated man. A “doctor” (so Paul identifies Luke in Col. 4:14) would be such an educated man. That label also helps explain the mention of various ailments and cures in Luke/Acts, as well as a marked compassion for the poor, the sick, and the lowly so evident in its pages.

The clearly dominant interest in the outreach to Gentiles in Luke/Acts (as we’ll see in this study) also fits an author who is himself a Gentile. As the only Gentile author in the New Testament, Luke brings a unique perspective on the Church’s early years and its struggle to bridge the gap between Jews and Gentiles.

The earliest recorded attribution of both “books” to Luke is in the Muratorian Canon (about AD 170). The early historian Eusebius (AD 325) lists information from several places to identify the author as Luke. Luke’s role as author remains the consensus choice among scholars to the present day.

THE OUTLINE OF ACTS

The story in Acts has an astonishing array of events, including

- a young man falling asleep during a sermon
- an earthquake that rocks a jail and frees the prisoners
- a rooftop vision of animals in a sheet
- missionaries mistaken for gods, then later stoned by the same crowd
- a hero who survives a shipwreck, then a poisonous snakebite
- a crazed and pompous king struck down by God

and much more. But amid all these seemingly random happenings in Acts, there is a steady thread of purpose, a predicted order of events that holds the book together and serves as an outline for the history it records.

The geographic heart of Luke is the journey of Jesus that ends in Jerusalem. The geographic heart of Acts is the journey of His message from Jerusalem to Rome, an unmistakable indicator of the spread of the Gospel from Jews to Gentiles. Acts can be very simply divided into two halves, according to the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*:

- a) Peter and the beginnings of the Church in Palestine (Acts 1–12)
- b) Paul and the expansion of the Church from Antioch to Rome (Acts 13–28)

Others prefer to divide the book into three sections. How so? The cue is in 1:8. There, just before His ascension into heaven, Jesus tells the eleven apostles, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” There in a single verse is an outline of Acts, the Spirit-powered propulsion of the Gospel of Jesus from Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish world, to the

“end of the earth,” namely Rome, the capital of the Gentile world. In a single generation after its launch, the message of Jesus the Savior travels 1500 miles, an impressive accomplishment in a world without telephones or automobiles!

The threefold outline (Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the “end of the earth”) is reinforced by repeated Pentecostal outpourings of the Holy Spirit on successive new “people groups.” There is Pentecost Day in Jerusalem (Chapter 2), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the 120 Jewish believers. Later the Samaritans believe the preached message of Philip and receive the Holy Spirit at the hands of Peter and John (Chapter 8). Finally even the Gentiles in Cornelius’s house receive the Holy Spirit (Chapter 10), and the words of Jesus come to pass in dramatic fashion. After the story of the Gentile outreach in Paul’s mission journeys, the book climaxes with Paul preaching the Gospel freely in Rome. “How about that!” Luke seems to say.

Although the Gospel message spreads like the ripples in a pond to a wider and wider circle of people, Jerusalem is never really left behind. Each time a new boundary is crossed, the story bounces us back to Jerusalem before rebounding farther and farther away. Robert Smith describes it in geometric terms: “It is not accurate to say that the old sacred circle with Jerusalem as its center was finally replaced by a new circle with its center in Rome. Rather the old circle has been stretched into an ellipse” (*Acts*, p. 17).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTS

While we have four canonical accounts of the earthly life of Jesus, we have only one of the early years of the Church. The story of the spread of the Gospel in spite of internal struggles (the neglect of the Greek widows, the dispute about what to do with Gentiles) and threats from outside (Jewish resistance, the Herodian persecution, demonic opposition) is crucial for understanding the way

We need what this book brings! We need to learn again what it means to be a follower of “The Way” in our worldly culture. These are the “last days,” and the Holy Spirit is still stirring the hearts of people like us.



God chooses to guide His Church, even now. For there are many who say that our secular and increasingly hostile culture is resembling those times more and more. While we cannot simply replicate the Early Church, there is much to learn from it.

Luke explained to Theophilus that he intended to provide an “orderly account” of the story of Jesus and the Church (Luke 1:3–4) so that readers might have certainty. As one of the few direct accounts of the life of the Early Church, Acts provides a historical grid of dates and places that enables us to understand the chronology of Paul’s letters in particular. Archeological findings have repeatedly demonstrated Luke’s accuracy as a historian and his use of proper terminology from that time. We find certainty and assurance in his remarkable record.

For two thousand years the Book of Acts has provided countless generations the experience Walter Cronkite once called “You Are There.” The anecdotes bring us to the edge of our chairs. The speeches allow us to eavesdrop on those early Christian preachers and teachers as if we sat at their feet. The book becomes not merely something one reads but something one experiences.

In 2006, this writer and his wife went to Kyrgyzstan for a month-long short-term mission. While there we listened to a “pentecostal” array of languages. We taught without notes, following the missionary’s instruction to “let the Holy Spirit tell you what to say” (and He did!). We witnessed opposition from husbands who forced their wives to leave our gatherings, and we heard the dreadful story of the lynching of a teen boy, the son of the first convert to Christianity in his Muslim village. We met a woman who spoke of demons disturbing her sleep, and watched as the missionary team prayed over her. Two weeks later she exulted that the demons had left her. When we came back home, we told people, “It felt as if we were living in the Book of Acts.”

It’s that kind of book. The kind one “lives in,” even while sitting at the kitchen table. We’ll take a journey there together for the next few months. Live there. Listen. Watch. We need what this book brings! We need to learn again what it means to be a follower of “The Way” in our worldly culture. These are the “last days,” and the Holy Spirit is still stirring the hearts of people like us.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 1:1-26

Holy Spirit, You inspired Luke to write this book. Come and help me as I read it. Inspire and equip me to be not merely a bystander, but a participant in Your mighty rescue mission. I ask this in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Review

1. Share with your small group your level of familiarity with Acts before you began this study.

2. What did you learn about the “geographic outline” of the book?

Acts 1:1–11

3. Luke says that his former book (Gospel of Luke) was about “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (v. 1). What does that phrase tell you about the role of Jesus in *this* book?

4. While staying with his apostles during the 40 days after His resurrection, what specific command did Jesus give them? Why was this instruction important?

5. Compare verse 5 with Luke 3:16. Who is the speaker in each place?

What is the difference between John’s baptism and Jesus’ baptism?

6. The apostles ask Jesus a question in v. 6. What do they assume is to happen next? How does Jesus’ answer instruct them?

7. Luke tells the story of the Ascension twice. Read both versions (Luke 24:50–53 and Acts 1:6–11). What is the SAME in each version? What details are unique to each account?

8. Which of these three things would have the biggest impact on you personally:

- a) Jesus’ directive in verse 8?
- b) Seeing Him lifted up into heaven?
- c) The promise of the angels in verse 11?

9. Do you take “you will be my witnesses” in verse 8 as a promise or a command?

10. What holds you back from being a “witness” for Him? Circle your answer.

- a) Lack of knowledge c) Lack of courage e) Nothing...I’m doing it!
 b) Lack of concern d) I don’t know any unbelievers

Acts 1:12–26

11. Whom does Luke identify among the 120 people who waited in that “upper room”? Any surprises? In light of the frequent symbolic use of numbers in the Bible, do you think there might be any possible significance to the number 120?

12. Peter uses Scripture to argue that Judas is to be replaced. Check the footnotes to see what Peter cites and list below.

13. According to Peter, what are the qualifications needed for being an “apostle”? How does he summarize the job description?

Who are the candidates?

14. How did they finally make the selection? Tell what more you learn about this practice in

Joshua 14:2 _____

1 Sam. 14:42 _____

Prov. 16:33 _____

Jonah 1:7 _____

15. How does their method of choosing another leader compare with the way we do this in our congregations today?

Have you ever seen their method employed? _____

What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of “casting lots”?

Memory verse challenge

As a part of this course, you will be challenged to commit selected verses from Acts to memory. New verses will appear in some lessons. In the others, you will be encouraged to review what you have already learned. In this way, the lessons of this wonderful book will be stored in your mind and heart and provide continued spiritual nourishment. The first verse is written below. Make the effort. You can do it!

ACTS 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

| | |
|--|----|
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Watching and Waiting



THE NECESSITY OF WAITING

Something that often frustrates our “gotta have it now” culture is the necessity of waiting. In spite of instant coffee, instant messaging, and other speedy resources now available, there are still many things that require the patience to wait for the right time. Farmers must still wait for the ground to be dry enough for planting each spring. The baker must still wait for the dough to rise. No matter how eager they are, prospective parents must still wait the required nine months (or so) for their baby.

The Book of Acts begins with a strict order from Jesus to His followers: **WAIT!** A desperate world needed the message of hope they were to bring, but there was to be no jumping the gun. Indeed, failure would be inevitable unless they waited for one essential resource — the “go power” only the Holy Spirit could provide. For that power they had to wait. Such waiting for the Lord (Ps. 27:14) to provide is no empty exercise, but is in fact the posture faith must adopt as it prays for guidance day by day and looks for the return of Jesus on the last day.

As the wondrous story of the Early Church unfolds, the apostles wait and pray day after day while little seems to happen. While they wait, God works to provision them. Only after Pentecost, only after God supplies what they need, do they begin to “act.” Then the acts of those apostles are something special to behold!

FORTY WONDERFUL DAYS

ACTS 1:1–5

Luke says that his former book (the Gospel of Luke) was about “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (v. 1). But He wasn’t (and isn’t!) finished. The Book of Acts is the record of how Jesus continued to “do and teach” through the words and work of his followers, Peter and Paul in particular. William Barclay tells the story of a Hindu inquirer who undertook to read the New Testament. He was struck by the account in Acts of how the Church continued the work of Jesus. The man voiced a determination: “I must belong to the church that carries on the life of Christ!”

The equipping of those followers began with forty wonderful days of appearances (including those listed in 1 Cor. 15:5–7) and face-to-face instruction about “the kingdom of God.” Forty days may be a precise measure of time, or it may be a round number signifying a long time — time enough to accomplish what was needed. Moses was 40 days on Sinai (Ex. 24:18) and Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness before His temptation (Matt. 4:2).

Forty days was long enough for important things to happen. Important things like a command and a promise. It was during those days that Jesus laid out for them a command coupled with a promise. The command? “Not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait...” (v. 4). The promise? “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (v. 5). This “promise of the Father” was made centuries earlier through the prophet Joel, a promise Peter will quote in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:17ff.).

This gift Jesus described as being “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” in contrast to how “John baptized with water” (v. 5). In his earlier book Luke records John himself saying, “I baptize you with water, but he... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). “Baptize” is often used literally to refer to the washing John administered or to the Christian sacrament, both mentioned in Acts. Here it is a metaphor for the bestowing of the Spirit. “Baptism with the Holy Spirit” is not a reference to a further work of grace that ushers Christians into a higher, more “charismatic” faith life, as if we needed a second baptism! It is always used in the New Testament to describe the whole saving work of Jesus Christ in contrast to the preparatory work of John the Baptist. All Christians who have been incorporated into Christ by Holy Baptism have been “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). The question now is whether or not we will use that gift and “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16).

But first the disciples had to wait. God’s work could not be undertaken without God’s strength. It is a simple lesson that the contemporary church needs, for we are prone to plunge ahead before we have prayed and waited for the wisdom and strength God would give us. Books, workshops, and seminars have value, but they dare not supplant the prayerful waiting Jesus enjoins upon us all.

THE ASCENSION*ACTS 1:6–11*

Luke is the only one of the Evangelists to record the Ascension of Jesus, and he does it twice. There is a shorter version in Luke 24:50–53 and this slightly longer one in Acts 1:6–11. The contrasting details are interesting:

LUKE 24:50–53

Sounds as if it happened Easter evening (“then...”)

No location specified

No words from the disciples

Jesus “blessed them”

“He parted,” and was “carried up into heaven”

No angels mentioned

Return to Jerusalem/temple

ACTS 1:6–11

It happened after the 40 days of appearances to the disciples

Olivet the location (see v. 12)

Disciples ask about the kingdom

Jesus answers their questions, gives command about being witnesses

He “was lifted up” and a “cloud took him out of their sight”

Two angels (“men”) and the promise of His return

Return to Jerusalem/ “upper room”

The location on Olivet is significant. The prophet Zechariah identified the “Mount of Olives” as the location of key events on the day of the Lord (Zech. 14:4). The Lord’s “feet will stand” there in a climactic battle. Is this prophecy in view when the angels tell the apostles that Jesus will return “in the same way as you saw him go” (v. 11)? Is this prophecy on their minds when they ask about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel? In some fashion, they expect a glorious ending centering on Israel.

But Jesus has a different and far more glorious future in mind, one that is only just beginning at Jerusalem and is then to spread outward like ripples in a pond to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (v. 8). Salvation is not for Jews only, but for all the nations, as Acts will make abundantly clear. The apostles themselves are to have a crucial role: “you will be my witnesses”! It’s a command — their marching orders. The promise that attends the command is the coming gift of the Holy Spirit’s power for the mind-boggling task. A second promise, spoken by the angels, will sustain them in the

dark times ahead and buoy them up even in the face of martyrdom: “Jesus...will come” (v. 11). But for now, the angels make clear, they are to stop gawking and get going back to the city. They must stop being bystanders and prepare to be witnesses.

IN ANOTHER UPPER ROOM

ACTS 1:12-14

The eleven apostles make their way back a little more than half a mile into the city. A “Sabbath day’s journey” was a thousand steps, the limit Jews were allowed to walk before their travel became “work” that violated the Sabbath’s rest. There they joined a larger group in “the upper room.” One writer guesses this might be the same room where Jesus met with disciples for the Last Supper, but many dwellings had upper rooms.

Luke gives us a head count for the fledgling movement. There were “about 120” persons, verse 15 tells us. Is there any significance to that number? We moderns are used to the numberings of crowds at sports events or political rallies. Our ushers count and record the number of attendees at church. But the Jews often attended to numbers as vehicles for deeper meanings. The numbers 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, and 40 readily come to mind. But 120? A reasonable guess might factor 120 into 10 x 12. The meanings of 10 (“all of”) and 12 (“God’s people”) would nicely describe the tiny gathering as “all of God’s people” – at least for the moment! But there is another possibility nearer at hand. In Jewish law, 120 is the number of men required before a community could form its council to do the necessary business. Here in the upper room, the necessary business of choosing a successor to Judas is about to take place. If the Jewish understanding of a “community” is in view, it has been broadened to include both men and women, all of whom will soon receive the Holy Spirit. Luke does not explain, and we are left to surmise.

Let’s go further in describing this group. In addition to the 11 remaining apostles, Luke mentions “the women” being among the 120 people in that upper room. With no further detail, we can only guess whether these included some of the apostles’ wives (referred to by Paul in 1 Cor. 9:5), the women who attended the disciple band (listed in Luke 8:2–3) as well as those women who were the earliest witnesses at the empty tomb (Luke 24:22). The group also includes Jesus’ mother and his brothers, who once had opposed Him for being “out of his mind” (Mark 3:21)! All of them are present.

It is, admittedly, a minuscule number. William Barclay points out that there were at Jesus’ time about 4 million Jews. If accurate, this means that only 1 in 30,000 were followers of Jesus! Yet we know what happened, and that alone ought to encourage those of us who fret that small congregations can’t expect to accomplish much. Was there a “secret” to the wondrous things that followed? Only this, Luke reports, that “all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (v. 14). Does that describe our congregational gatherings? Have we “devoted” ourselves to prayer, or has praying become a kind of “formal bookend” to those gatherings?

THE SELECTION OF MATTHIAS

ACTS 1:15-26

While they wait and pray, an important matter must be addressed. There is a gap in the circle of apostles. Jesus had deliberately chosen twelve men to mirror the twelve tribes of Israel, for a new covenant and a new Israel had begun. But Judas Iscariot is now dead and there are only eleven. Who would see to this task and make sure the circle was complete? Luke tells us that “Peter stood up among the brothers” (v. 15). Was he remembering the charge laid on him by Jesus at their last supper? “When you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Peter begins by taking them all back to Scripture. The death of Judas and the necessity of his replacement were all predicted long ago, he reminds them. He cites Psalm 69:25, changing the original plural (about “enemies”) to the singular: “May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it” (v. 20). He adds a quote from Psalm 109:8: “Let another take his office.” Judas, Peter alleges, is the particular enemy in view.

Before these Psalm citations comes the grisly account of Judas’ death. Matthew says plainly that after taking the money back to the chief priests, Judas “hanged himself” (Matt. 27:5). It’s a sad but straightforward narrative. Here in Acts, however, the story is more complex. Luke says that “this man acquired a field” (v. 18). We wonder when, since Matthew says he returned the money. Acts might be reconciled with Matthew by saying that Judas made that purchase, in effect, by the agency of the priests (posthumously). Luke adds that somehow Judas “falling headlong... burst open in the middle.” Not the usual outcome of a hanging! We might expect this would happen to someone falling from a great height, as if off a building or a cliff. How this happened remains unclear, but Matthew’s account leaves no doubt it was a suicide.

Now must come the “completion of the apostolic circle” (Haenchen). Peter lists qualifications for the apostolate. The replacement is to be a man. He must be one who had accompanied the disciple band from the day Jesus was baptized at John’s hand (as all the Evangelists narrate) until the day of the Ascension – approximately three years. The job description is utterly simple: to “become with us a witness of [Jesus’] resurrection” (v. 22). That was the way Jesus Himself had summarized the task before them: “you will be my witnesses” (1:8).

There are two candidates put forward — Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. Neither has previously been mentioned in the Gospel records. Neither will be mentioned again after this account. But the selection is included, and it has something to teach us about the way the church operated. First came prayer for the choosing: “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen” (v. 24). Then they “cast lots...and the lot fell on Matthias” (v. 26).

Casting lots normally involved writing the names on stones, placing the stones into a vessel, and shaking the vessel until one of the stones fell out. By this practice tribal inheritances were assigned (Joshua 14:2), as were schedules for Temple singers (1 Chron. 26:13–16). Saul employed it to discover who had disobeyed his orders in a battle (1 Sam. 14:42). The pagan sailors discovered that Jonah was the guilty party behind the storm by casting lots (Jonah 1:7). Proverbs 16:33 affirms that God is at work in this process: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

Most of our congregational leaders these days are chosen by voting, hopefully after prayer! Curiously, the word “vote” is never mentioned in the Bible, although there is frequent mention of “choosing” or “appointing” (Luke 6:13; Ex. 18:25; Titus 1:5, for example). Would the practice of casting lots (“pulling a name from a hat” or “drawing straws” would be modern equivalents) eliminate the abuses that can come with voting? Might a return to this ancient practice remove the taint of “politicking” from the selection of our leaders? It has happened in more than one LCMS congregation and has been recommended by more than one writer. It’s something worth discussing.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 2:1-47

Lord Jesus Christ, pour out Your Spirit once more on your dispirited and fearful people. Anoint me also as I study and serve, that I may be filled with the joy and power I need for the task You give me. For Your sake, I ask it. Amen.

Review

1. Why do you think Luke chose to narrate the Ascension twice?

2. What did you decide was the significance of the number 120, if any?

Acts 2:1-4

3. Have you ever traveled where you did not speak the language? What happened? How did you feel?

4. Pentecost was one of three major festivals observed by the Jews. What more do you learn about it from

Ex. 23:14-16?

Deut. 16:9-10?

5. Can you think of any reasons why God chose to send His Holy Spirit on this particular day?

6. What do "wind" and "fire" suggest most strongly to you?

_____ Unpredictability

_____ Power

_____ Change

_____ Something else

Acts 2:5-13

7. How does the story here contrast with the one told in Genesis 11:1-8?

8. Use a Bible dictionary, concordance, footnotes, or do an internet search to find out how far away from Jerusalem are the places listed here.

9. "Other tongues" here means human languages they had not previously learned. What other possibility does Paul mention in 1 Cor. 13:1?

Acts 2:14-21

10. Here begins the first sermon in Acts. How many verses are devoted to it? Can you recall a sermon that had a lasting impact on your life? What was it about?

11. Have you ever heard or seen "speaking in tongues" in use? If so, what was your reaction?

12. Peter makes ample use of the Old Testament (remember who the audience is!). The first quote is from Joel 2:28–32. Read it and select three things that have a specially strong link to the Pentecost events.

Why does Peter end the quote where he does?

Acts 2:22–36

13. What do the listeners already know about Jesus? What more does Peter tell them?
-

14. Which gets more stress in this sermon – His death or His resurrection? Why?
-

15. A sermon ought to “afflict the comfortable” and “comfort the afflicted.” How does Peter do these two tasks?
-

Acts 2:37–41

16. An appropriate response to any sermon is “What shall we do?” Have you DONE anything about any of the recent sermons you’ve heard?
-

17. What is Peter’s two-fold answer to their question?
-

What promise does he make?

What was the result?

Acts 2:42–47

18. Here we read the first summary of the life of the Early Church. List the components:
-

19. What do you think made the Early Church so appealing to outsiders?

a) Great preaching b) Miracles c) Their sharing d) Their joy e) Something else

20. What component of the early Christians’ life seems under-used today? How would you like to change things?
-

Memory Challenge

ACTS 2:38–39 “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” OR

ACTS 2:42 “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”



ACTS

ACTS 2:1-47

| | |
|--|----|
| DAY OF WIND AND FIRE | 15 |
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Day of Wind and Fire

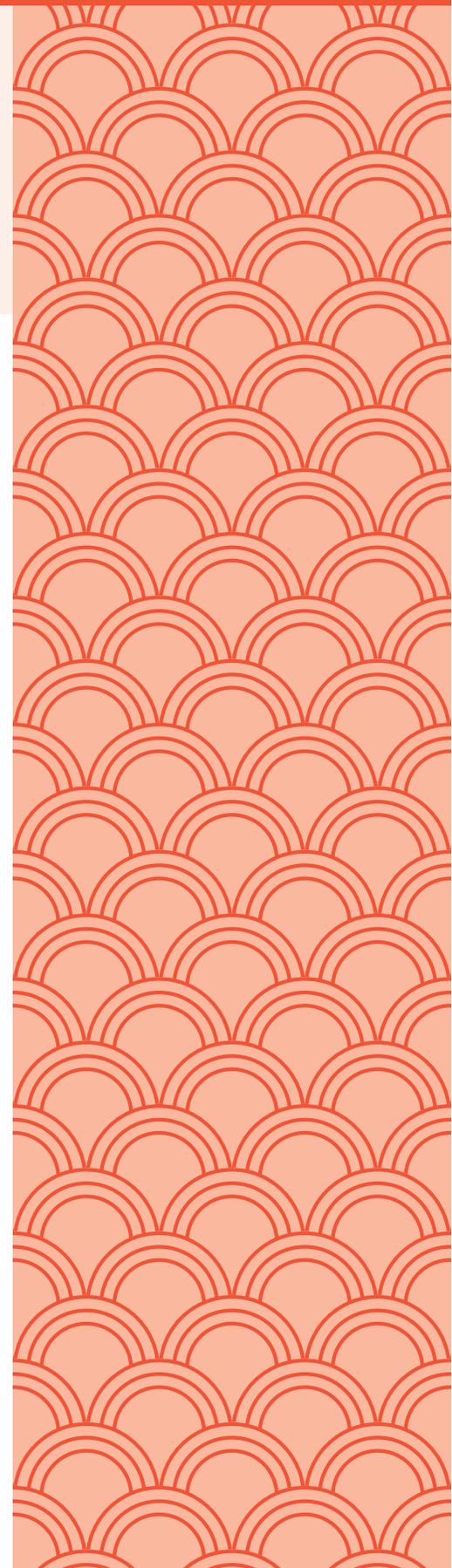


DAYS THAT LIVE IN THE COMMUNAL MEMORY

“Where were you the day the World Trade Center was attacked?” Almost every adult knows the answer to that question. The day known as “9/11” is burned into our communal memory, not only because of the horrific images of jet planes smashing into the twin towers, but because of the realization that “life as we know it” had changed forever. There have been other such days. Older folks will remember November 22, 1963, and a very few will think of that fateful Sunday morning, December 7, 1941.

Not all memorable days are tragic ones. The same oldsters that recall Pearl Harbor will also recall VE Day and VJ Day and the elation brought by the end of World War II. The folks who heard the report of Kennedy’s death in Dallas will also remember Neil Armstrong’s “giant leap for mankind” onto the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969. Communal memory can retain both joyful and sorrowful days, even when the generation that lived through them has passed away. Each kind of day has something important to teach us.

The Book of Acts invites us to relive such a day, a “day of wind and fire” that gave birth to the Christian Church and propelled it across deserts and mountains and oceans with news so good that life as humans had known it would be forever changed. Christians around the world still celebrate “The Feast of Pentecost,” also known as “Whitsun” in the Anglican community.



Just as the Jewish festival signaled the start of the harvest season, so the outpouring of the Spirit this day signaled the start of a great spiritual harvest of people for the kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel.



DAY OF WIND AND FIRE

“The day of Pentecost arrived...” (v. 1).

Pentecost was one of three major festivals observed by the Jews:

- Passover (Unleavened Bread) occurred in mid-April.
- Pentecost (Weeks) came on the fiftieth day, a “week of weeks,” after Passover, in our month of June.
- Tabernacles (Booths) is commemorated between late September and late October.

For the Jews the feast had historical significance, for it recalled the giving of the Law on Sinai. It also had agricultural significance for it coincided with the beginning of harvest or “firstfruits” (Ex. 23:16; Num. 28:26). Interestingly, the Jews had a custom of reading the Book of Ruth during the festival, since its story is connected with the grain harvest theme.

For the fledgling Christian movement, it was a day of wind and fire: “Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house... And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them” (vv. 2–3). Wind and fire are highly evocative. They bespeak the power of God on display. Psalm 29 invites us to witness both at work in nature, as the “voice of the LORD breaks the cedars” (a windstorm) and “flashes forth flames of fire” (lightning). The sound of that wind calls to mind the “blast of the breath of [God’s] nostrils” that drove apart the waters of the Red Sea (2 Sam. 22:16), and the “breath” that came

from the “four winds” to bring life to Israel’s dry bones (Ezek. 37:9–10).

Fire, likewise, was one of the ways God made His presence evident throughout the Old Testament. Moses saw the “flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” at Horeb (Ex. 3:1–3), a fire that did not consume the bush but revealed the place as “holy ground” where God met him, even as the “tongues as of fire” on the heads of the believers did not consume anything but clearly revealed God’s Spirit given to each. Later God would reveal His protective presence in the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21–22) that left no doubt of His presence for those who beheld it. The sound of the wind and the appearance of tongues “as of fire” were an unmistakable sign to the people in that upper room that God was present, endowing them with the power Jesus had earlier promised (1:8).

We are not told why God chose the day of Pentecost rather than some other day. One reason may be that people from near and far converged on Jerusalem for each of the three great feasts — an opportunity for many more lives to be touched (as happened for the eunuch in Chapter 8). Some might also propose that, just as the Jewish festival signaled the start of the harvest season, so the outpouring of the Spirit this day signaled the start of a great spiritual harvest of people for the kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel. Later that day, 3000 people heard a Christian sermon and were “harvested” through baptism (2:41). That’s a “firstfruits” of astonishing proportions!

A COSMOPOLITAN GATHERING

ACTS 2:5–13

The people gathered in Jerusalem are not Gentiles. They are “Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” (2:5). The Gentile outreach is to come later. The plan of God is to start in Jerusalem among the Jews, then branch outward as ripples spread in a pond. Moreover, while we have often pictured these Jews as pilgrims newly arrived in Jerusalem for the festival, that picture may need further examination. The verb used of these Jews in verse 5 is that they were “dwelling” (*katoikountes*) in Jerusalem. The word means to “dwell fixedly,” not merely to “visit,” like the Romans in v. 10 who are “sojourning” for a time (a different verb, *epideemountes*). Many of these people who converge at the strange sounds are probably immigrant Jews born elsewhere who have made their way back to Israel, along with some, like those from Rome, there on pilgrimage for the feast.

Nevertheless, even those immigrants would remember the lands of their birth and marvel to hear the mighty works of God each one “in his own native language (the Greek word is *dialektoo*)” (v. 8). While it is true that the apostles could have communicated the Gospel in Aramaic, which most Jews spoke, or Greek, the common language of the Mediterranean world, it must still have been a thrill to hear the good news in their own language. What was happening here was an epic reversal of the confusion of the languages at Babel in Genesis 11. There God cursed a proud, sinful humanity by making it impossible to understand each other. Here that ancient curse is undone by the Holy Spirit, who bridges the language gulf by enabling the

apostles, “all Galileans” (v. 7), to give voice to their praise of God in every language necessary. Babel’s confusion is replaced by Pentecost’s joyful understanding.

Though Luke says the people there that day represented “every nation under heaven” (v. 5), there are a limited number mentioned. The list goes roughly from east to west. The easterners are “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia” (v. 9). After mention of Judea (the locals), there come peoples from western regions — “Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia” (vv. 9–10). Added to these are southerners from “Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” and finally, as a capper, “visitors from Rome” (v. 10). Excluding Judea, the list includes twelve places — as if one for each of the twelve apostles! As Luke finishes his list of nations, he mentions “Cretans and Arabians” (v. 11), which probably were not references to individual countries. Robert Smith points out that “Cretans” had come to refer broadly to “westerners” and “Arabians” to “easterners,” a summary of the preceding list of nations.

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is sometimes labeled “glossolalia,” from the Greek words *glossa* (“tongues”) and *laleo* (“speak”). The languages spoken on that day of wind and fire were identifiable to the cosmopolitan crowd that gathered and had the purpose of proclaiming God’s mighty acts to listeners in their familiar language. The tongue-speaking spoken in Pentecostal gatherings today, listeners observe, does not sound like any known human language and seems more focused on edifying the speaker or expressing praise than in evangelizing others.

It appears, therefore, that “tongue-speaking” may embrace two different kinds of speech. In 1 Cor. 13:1, Paul makes reference to “the tongues of men and of angels.” If there is a “language of the angels,” we are given no further explanation here. There was a Jewish tradition that a rabbi named Johanan ben Zakkai was able to understand angelic speech because of his outstanding piety. A possible hint of angelic speech is the mention in Rev. 14:2–3 of a heavenly song heard by the seer which could only be learned by the redeemed. Whatever the kind of language used, Paul preferred “prophecy” (in plain language!) to tongue-speaking. He therefore urged that “interpretation” accompany glossolalia in Corinth’s worship gatherings (1 Cor. 14:13, 28), though he allowed that speaking in tongues should not be forbidden.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMON

ACTS 2:14–21

The giving of the Spirit immediately issues in the “witness” Jesus had commanded in 1:8. Peter, as spokesman for the Twelve, preaches the first recorded Christian sermon after the resurrection. While what we read in these 27 verses is doubtless only a summary (“with many other words he bore witness” — v. 40). We get a clear outline of the powerful message we will hear again and again in this book. The components of the message are simple:

- a) the end of history (the “last days”) has come
- b) Scripture has been fulfilled
- c) all this has happened in Jesus and especially His resurrection
- d) God offers salvation — hearers are called to respond.

A Jewish audience needs to know that the message they are hearing is not an invention,

but the outgrowth and fulfillment of all they had heard and read in the prophets, all they had waited for through long centuries. So Peter, starting where the listeners are (wondering about this amazing outburst of speech), explains: “These men are not drunk...this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (vv. 15–16). The quotation serves nicely to introduce the first two points:

- a) These are the “last days”!
- b) This excited talk you hear is just what the Scriptures predicted!

A persistent prophetic theme was the “Day of the Lord” (see for example Amos 5:20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:14; Zech. 14:1), a climactic day at the end of the age when God would bring both judgment and deliverance. Joel echoes that familiar refrain (see Joel 2:1, 31), and Peter cites him particularly because Joel speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit in those last days: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh... sons... daughters... young men... old men... male servants... female servants” (vv. 17–18). What’s new is that this outpouring is not just for a select few charismatic leaders. It will be for *everyone*, regardless of gender, age, or station in life! The “wonders” associated with the end times (“blood, and fire, and vapor... sun...to darkness...moon to blood”) have already begun. There was the darkness at noon on Calvary. This very day there has been wind and fire. The time has come, so listen carefully! Peter purposefully chooses to end the quote mid-verse (Joel 2:32) with the words, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v.22). Now he brings them to those next two points in his sermon:

- a) The work of Jesus (He is that “Lord”!)
- b) The summons to respond: “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

PROCLAIMING JESUS: “BOTH LORD AND CHRIST”!

ACTS 2:22-40

If these are the last days, the listeners will want to know, where is the long-awaited Messiah? The heart of Peter’s sermon is his proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth. Some things the crowd already knew: His name, His “mighty works and wonders and signs” that had astonished many and gained a following. The healings, the feedings, the parables that reverberated in many minds, the demons cast out and the dead raised — all these the crowds had heard about, if not seen with their own eyes. Sadly, they also knew of His death and were complicit in it!

It took courage of the highest order for Peter to look them in the eyes and say, “[him] you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (v. 23).

Jesus’ death, however, was not a sign of God’s curse as Deuteronomy 21:23 had once pronounced, but the very “plan and foreknowledge of God” (v. 23). For see what has happened — “This Jesus God raised up” (v. 32)! Lest the hearers dismiss this testimony as some bizarre invention, Peter again cites Scripture. It is the words of King David himself in Psalm 16:8-11 that proclaim the resurrection: “my flesh will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades or let your Holy One see corruption” (vv. 26-27). This cannot refer to David, Peter argues, for “his tomb is with us to this day” (v. 29). Jesus is that “Holy One,” and He is alive. “Of that we are all witnesses”! Peter is doing the apostolic task — bearing witness of the resurrection (1:22). The resurrection of Jesus forms the

constant theme of Christian proclamation in Acts (3:15; 4:10, 33; 5:30-31; 7:55; 10:40; 13:31; 17:18, 31; 23:6; 24:21; 26:23). The resurrection, writes Robert Smith, was more than a resuscitation, for Jesus was “exalted at the right hand of God” (v. 33). His ascension there, which Peter had seen with his own eyes, was also foretold by David in Ps. 110:1.

The inescapable conclusion? “God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36). Of all the titles ascribed to Jesus by the New Testament, none had more far-reaching implications than “Lord.” That was the honorific title of the Roman emperor — a word that spoke to Jews and Gentiles alike, commanding one’s whole life and allegiance. A second title spoke directly to every Jewish heart. “Christ” (“the anointed one”) is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew “Messiah,” the heir of David who would sit as king on God’s throne and fulfill all His promises. It was a breath-taking proclamation for Jews who had waited centuries to hear this!

The hearers’ reaction is immediate. They ask, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (v. 37). It is the kind of response every preacher prays will result from his message. Peter’s answer is twofold. He combines a command to act, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,” with a sure promise from God, “and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38). The enactment of their new-found faith in Jesus Christ is to be baptized, a process that must have taken the rest of that day. Three thousand “souls” are added on this day of wind and fire, a day that would live in the communal memory.

A PROFILE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

ACTS 2:41-47

The Spirit was given. The Gospel was proclaimed in power. The Church was born! It was no flash in the pan. Just as the 120 had “devoted” themselves to prayer, so the new believers “devoted” themselves to their common life. The profile of the early Christian community had four constituent elements: the “teaching” of the apostles, “fellowship” (*koinoonia*), “the breaking of bread,” and “the prayers” (v. 42).

The verses that follow provide a summary look at this shared life. “Fellowship” is not the potluck and chit-chat that so often transpires in the fellowship halls of our contemporary churches. They “had all things in common” (*koinoonia* means “to have a share in”). In view is a selfless sharing of goods so that no one did without. Their “breaking of bread” might simply mean eating together, but came increasingly to refer to the Lord’s Supper (see Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor. 10:16). The joy of the believers was palpable, and they had “favor with all the people” in these early days before serious opposition formed. Daily the Church grew (v. 47).

Those early days of the Church are sometimes looked at with longing by us who live so long afterward. And with good reason. For those fledgling believers, the Christian life was a feast of praise enjoyed “day by day, attending the temple together” and the table fellowship “in their homes.” For too many of us it has shriveled into an hour a week in what our Roman Catholic neighbors sometimes called a “day of obligation.” There seems little joy and even less growth.

Reading about this day of wind and fire, listening again to Peter’s sermon, we are summoned to have a new look at our own life together. We are called to a new “devotion” to learning, to sharing, to communing, to prayer that girds the fabric of our communal life. Where are we weak? Where do we need renewal? Let us take up Luther’s Pentecost hymn as our heart-felt prayer:

*Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord, with all Your graces now outpoured
On each believer’s mind and heart; Your fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of Your light in holy faith Your Church unite;
From every land and every tongue, this to Your praise,
O Lord, our God, be sung:
Alleluia, alleluia!*

LSB #497, ST. 1