

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

*A BIBLE STUDY BY STEPHEN K. RAY
EDITED BY JENNIFER PHELPS*

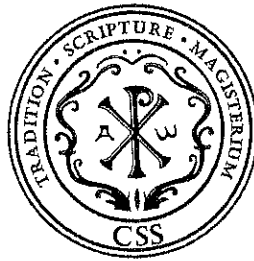
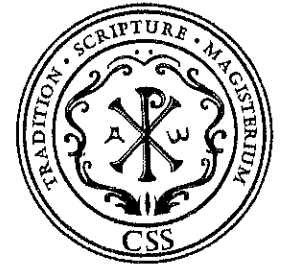


Table of Contents

The Acts of the Apostles

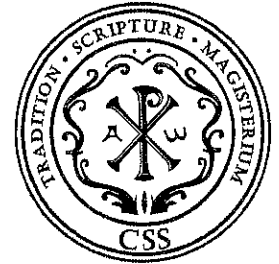


INTRODUCTION:	The First History of the Church	1
LESSON 1:	Witnesses to the End of the Earth (<i>Acts 1:1-26</i>)	7
LESSON 2:	They Were All Filled with the Holy Spirit (<i>Acts 2:1-47</i>)	19
LESSON 3:	Peter Heals a Lame Beggar (<i>Acts 3:1-26</i>)	31
LESSON 4:	The Boldness of Peter and John (<i>Acts 4:1-37</i>)	43
LESSON 5:	Ananias and Sapphira (<i>Acts 5:1-42</i>)	55
LESSON 6:	Seven Men of Good Repute (<i>Acts 6:1-15</i>)	67
LESSON 7:	The Martyrdom of Stephen (<i>Acts 7:1-60</i>)	77
LESSON 8:	Simon the Magician; Philip and the Eunuch (<i>Acts 8:1-40</i>)	91
LESSON 9:	Saul on the Road to Damascus (<i>Acts 9:1-43</i>)	103
LESSON 10:	Baptism of Cornelius and His Household (<i>Acts 10:1-48</i>)	115
LESSON 11:	The Disciples Were for the First Time Called Christians (<i>Acts 11:1-30</i>)	129
LESSON 12:	James Is Martyred; Peter Is Imprisoned (<i>Acts 12:1-25</i>)	141
LESSON 13:	Barnabas and Paul Begin Their Journeys (<i>Acts 13:1-52</i>)	151
LESSON 14:	Paul Is Stoned and Left for Dead (<i>Acts 14:1-28</i>)	163
LESSON 15:	The Council at Jerusalem (<i>Acts 15:1-41</i>)	173
LESSON 16:	Paul and Silas Are Beaten and Imprisoned (<i>Acts 16:1-40</i>)	187
LESSON 17:	Men Who Turned the World Upside Down (<i>Acts 17:1-34</i>)	199
LESSON 18:	Paul's Visit to Corinth (<i>Acts 18:1-28</i>)	211
LESSON 19:	No Little Stir Concerning the Way (<i>Acts 19:1-41</i>)	223
LESSON 20:	Paul Goes to Macedonia and Greece (<i>Acts 20:1-38</i>)	235
LESSON 21:	Paul Is Arrested at the Temple in Jerusalem (<i>Acts 21:1-36</i>)	247
LESSON 22:	Paul Defends Himself and Tells of His Conversion (<i>Acts 21:37—22:30</i>)	259
LESSON 23:	Another Plot to Kill Paul (<i>Acts 23:1-35</i>)	271
LESSON 24:	Paul's Defense before Governor Felix (<i>Acts 24:1-27</i>)	283
LESSON 25:	Appeal to Caesar (<i>Acts 25:1-27</i>)	293
LESSON 26:	Paul's Defense before King Agrippa (<i>Acts 26:1-32</i>)	303
LESSON 27:	Shipwreck on the Way to Rome (<i>Acts 27:1-44</i>)	315
LESSON 28:	Paul on the Island of Malta and Preaching in Rome (<i>Acts 28:1-31</i>)	327
	SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSES	339

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles

The First History of the Church



THE FIRST HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

*A BIBLE STUDY BY STEPHEN K. RAY
EDITED BY JENNIFER PHELPS*

Fishermen and travelers in the 1st century probably became nauseated while bobbing up and down on the seas of the Roman Empire. It's easy to imagine Luke sailing with Paul on one of the later missionary journeys, keeping notes and recording memories as he sat in the bow of a ship as it cut through the water. Writing with quills and parchment, Luke created two of the most important and well-written documents known to the modern world—details about the life of Jesus Christ and a history of the early Christian Church. These books of Scripture are known as the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles, and they make up a large portion of the New Testament.

AUTHORSHIP, TITLE, AND PURPOSE

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul implies that Luke is not “of the circumcision,” that is, Luke isn't Jewish (*Col* 4:11-14). This means that Luke is the only Gentile author in the Bible. Because of this, the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles are unique. This is a significant detail in the study of the book of Acts, which focuses on the struggle between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians and the problem of how both can be assimilated into the early Church.

Luke's history of the early Church—mostly written from firsthand investigation, acquired tradition, and the author's own experiences with Paul—has come to be known as The Acts of the Apostles. It doesn't include acts of all of the apostles, however. It primarily deals with the two apostles Peter and Paul, and even those stories are sketchy and incomplete. In part, the work appears to have been written to validate the apostolic authority of Paul. Although the book of Acts is a true history of the early Church, it seems that Luke's primary motivation for writing is to teach and defend the faith. Thus, the book of Acts is a work of apologetics.

Alternate titles have been proposed for the writing—including Acts of the Holy Spirit and Acts of Peter and Paul—but the accepted title comes from the first centuries of the Church. The earliest Christians recognized The Acts of the Apostles as an inspired text, and the councils of the Church included it in the canon of Scripture. The book of Acts doesn't provide a complete history of the early Church but rather an outline of some crucial events and turning points experienced by the early Christian community. It weaves together theology, history, and eternal truth.

DATE OF COMPOSITION

In his Gospel Luke tells the story of Jesus' life, which covers the first 30 years of the 1st century. The book of Acts covers the next 30 years, and in it Luke tells the story of Jesus Christ in the life of his Church. Readers often get the mistaken idea that the events Luke is recording in the book of Acts all happened in a very short period of time. In reality, Acts covers only key vignettes that occurred in the Church over a period of about 30 years.

The Letter of James was written quite early, around 48-49 A.D., before the Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D. Paul's Letters also are considered to have been written relatively early, prior to 67 A.D. when he was beheaded in Rome. Based on the events they describe, the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles were written after 60 A.D. and prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The original scrolls weren't titled "The Gospel According to Luke," and the Bible itself doesn't identify Luke as the author. There are only a few references to Luke in the Bible—in the Letter to the Colossians 4:14, Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician" and also implies Luke was a Gentile; in the Letter to Philemon 1:23, Luke is described as Paul's fellow worker; and lastly, in his Second Letter to Timothy 4:11, Paul, writing from prison in Rome around 67 A.D., discloses that "Luke alone is with me."

Although the Bible never says that Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke or the book of Acts, Catholic tradition regards Luke as the author of both. The biblical text also provides strong hints of this. In about the middle of the book of Acts, the author begins including himself in the story. It's known that Luke was with Paul during the time the "we" sections were written (*Acts* 16:10-17, *Acts* 20:5-15, *Acts* 21:1-18, and *Acts* 27:1-28:16). Irenaeus, writing in 180 A.D., verifies that Luke is the author of the Gospel and of the book of Acts, and he quotes Luke as an authentic witness. The Muratorian Canon, an amazing fragment of writing from about 150-200 A.D., is the oldest extant list of biblical books. It states that the third book of the Gospel is written according to Luke, the well-known physician. The same fragment also records that The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke.

GENERAL OUTLINE

The opening words of the book of Acts indicate the existence of an earlier document: "In the first book, O Theophilus" (*Acts* 1:1). Here Luke is referring to his Gospel, which was written prior to the book of Acts. The recipient of both works, Theophilus, probably was a Roman dignitary interested in learning the full story of Christianity, which was at that time was a new and relatively unknown religion. Luke assumes that his initial audience for the book of Acts is familiar with the key events of Jesus' life from reading about them in the Gospel of Luke.

Mark and Luke provide New Testament accounts of Jesus' Ascension into heaven (*Mk* 16:19, *Lk* 24:51 and *Acts* 1:2-11). Luke outlines not only the deeds and actions of Peter and Paul but also God's plan for geographical expansion of Christianity beginning in the 1st century and continuing in the present-day Church. Before disappearing into the clouds, Jesus tells his disciples: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (*Acts* 1:8). This is exactly what happened, and this passage accurately prophesies the geographical spread of Christianity described in the book of Acts.

Luke sets the scene for Pentecost by describing 120 disciples huddled in an upper room in Jerusalem, waiting for the power of God to descend—or for armed soldiers to break down the doors (*Acts* 1:12-13). On the day of Pentecost, tongues of fire settled on each disciple's head, and the gift of tongues was given. The power of the Holy Spirit leads Peter to preach the first full-fledged Gospel sermon, which concludes with the words: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Acts* 2:38). Notice here the fulfillment of Jesus' words to Nicodemus about new birth through water and the Spirit (*Jn* 3:5). Peter doesn't reduce the Gospel to "faith alone." He instructs those who desire salvation to do something—to strive for holiness and to participate in the sacraments in obedience to the risen Jesus Christ.

CHRISTIANITY'S EXCLUSIVELY JEWISH BEGINNINGS

The book of Acts explains that the 3,000 believers who were baptized on the day of Pentecost were Jews from many nations visiting Jerusalem for the ancient Hebrew feast of Pentecost celebrated by the Jews. Despite the language differences, there were no Gentiles in the crowd who responded to Peter's inspired preaching. The amazing truth is that for about the first decade after Jesus' Ascension, the Church was exclusively Jewish. In this way, Jesus' apostles fulfill the initial phase of his final instructions to them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, the holy city that was the central location for the religion of Judaism.

The second step in the expansion of the Church required the apostles to bear witness to Jesus Christ beyond the confines of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. The book of Acts describes how this is accomplished through bitter persecution of the first Christians. This includes the vicious actions of Saul, who later becomes known by his Roman name of Paul. Stephen's lengthy sermon at his own martyrdom sets the stage for broader inclusiveness of the Gospel message. Philip the deacon spreads the Gospel to Samaria, where he gathers a great harvest of new believers, whom the apostles are called to confirm (*Acts* 8:14-17).

With the dramatic conversion of Saul (*Acts* 9:1-19), the expansion of the Church moves into the third stage, and the apostles begin witnessing to the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ by spreading the Gospel to the end of earth. Peter, Paul, and the other apostles fan out to preach and establish the Church. The thirteenth chapter of Acts describes the beginning of the exciting expansion of the Church beyond Judea and Samaria, zooming in on the life and apostolate of Paul. In the book of Acts, Luke gives very little information about the other apostles. Most of the information Christians know about them comes from snippets recorded elsewhere in the New Testament and from other historical records and tradition.

PETER AND PAUL

The book of Acts can be roughly divided into two broad sections: the ministry of Peter described in the first 12 chapters and the ministry of Paul described in the last 16 chapters. Peter makes an important reappearance in the fifteenth chapter, which can be viewed as the pinnacle of the entire historical account and should be held precious by all Gentile Christians. It was there that Peter stood and exercised the authority over the Church to proclaim that the Gentiles could be included in the full life of Jesus Christ and the Church without first being

circumcised. The Gentiles now could partake of the fullness of God and the blessings of Abraham. Even though the first Gentile converts, Cornelius and his household, had been filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized at the hands of Peter (*Acts* 10:46-48), this new development needed to be explained and defined by the Church. The first general council of the Church in Jerusalem, presided over by Peter, the apostles, and the elders, resulted in an authoritative decree of the Church that was binding upon all the churches. Precedent was set for future ecumenical councils.

THE NEW COVENANT REFLECTS THE OLD

The depth of Luke's thought and the profound interrelationship of the New Testament with the Old can be graphically demonstrated in the book of Acts. Luke is the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible, yet he demonstrates a penetrating understanding of the Old Testament and God's covenants. With the brilliance and perception of a prophet, he demonstrates a direct parallel between the Old Covenant and the New. At the new Passover, Jesus is the innocent Lamb whose blood is shed on the cross, providing a way through water (the sacrament of Baptism) to leave behind the bondage of sin and to journey to the Promised Land of eternal life. Fifty days (which is what *Pentecost* means) after the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, wind was heard and fire settled on Mount Sinai where God originally wrote the Law with his finger on tablets of stone. At the new Pentecost, God once again descends in fire 50 days after Jesus, the Passover Lamb, is sacrificed. This time the writing isn't on tablets of stone but on human hearts—as Paul describes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (*2 Cor* 3:2-3).

The Jews as a whole rejected Jesus, however. Like the Israelites of old who rejected God to worship the golden calf and then all died within 40 years without entering the Promised Land of Canaan, this new generation is destroyed by Roman troops who level Jerusalem and the Temple there 40 years after Peter's Pentecost preaching to the Jews: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” (*Acts* 2:40). Peter connects the 1st-century Jews with the generation of Israelites who followed Moses out of Egypt but were destroyed in the wilderness due to their unbelief. Peter isn't primarily referring to salvation of souls, he's issuing a prophetic warning that destruction is coming on this new generation of unbelieving Jews—just as their ancestors had been destroyed in the wilderness. The new is a mirror image of the old, and Luke uses great precision to paint a portrait that reflects this understanding. As St. Augustine phrased it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.

The book of Acts has a very unsatisfactory ending in the sense that there is no real ending. Luke stops his story in mid-stream, and readers are left wondering what happens to Peter and Paul. Luke's inconclusive conclusion points out that the story of the Church is never-ending. The Holy Spirit still is at work in and through the Church. The story won't end until Jesus Christ returns in the clouds just as he left—a promise made at the beginning of the book of Acts: “And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’” (*Acts* 1:10-11).

OUTLINE OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

1. Prologue (1:1-5)
2. Ascension to Pentecost (1:6—2:13)
 - A. Ascension of Jesus (1:6-14)
 - B. Replacement of Judas (1:15-26)
 - C. Pentecost (2:1-13)
3. The Gospel in Jerusalem (2:14—8:3)
 - A. The Descent of the Holy Spirit (2:14-47)
 - B. Peter's Ministry and First Imprisonment (3:1—4:31)
 - C. Donations and Discipline (4:32—5:11)
 - D. Peter's Ministry and Second Imprisonment (5:12-42)
 - E. Selection of the First Deacons (6:1-7)
 - F. Stephen's Ministry and Martyrdom (6:8—7:60)
 - G. The First Persecution of the Church (8:1-3)
4. The Gospel in Judea and Samaria (8:4—12:25)
 - A. Philip's Ministry in Samaria and Judea (8:4-40)
 - B. The Conversion of Saul (9:1-31)
 - C. Peter's Ministry in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea (9:32—11:18)
 - D. Conversions of Gentiles in Antioch (11:19-30)
 - E. Persecution of the Church, and the Death of Herod Agrippa (12:1-25)
5. The Gospel to the End of the Earth (13:1—28:31)
 - A. Paul's First Missionary Journey: Cyprus and Asia Minor (13:1—14:28)
 - B. The Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35)
 - C. Paul's Second Missionary Journey: Asia Minor, Greece, Ephesus (15:36—18:22)
 - D. Paul's Third Missionary Journey: Asia Minor, Ephesus, Greece (18:23—21:14)
 - E. Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem and Imprisonment in Caesarea (21:15—26:32)
 - F. Paul's Journey to Rome (27:1—28:16)
 - G. Paul's Ministry in Rome (28:17-31)

VOICES OF THE SAINTS

What is the Word of Christ? It is the Word by which all things are made. The Lord commanded, and heaven was made. The Lord commanded, and the earth was made. The Lord commanded, and the seas were made. The Lord commanded, and every creature was produced. You see, then, how effective is the Word of Christ. The Word of the Lord Jesus is so powerful that it can create something out of nothing.

—St. Ambrose of Milan
known as the honey-tongued Doctor of the Church

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

- To learn the three criteria the Church teaches for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see paragraphs 112-114 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.
- CCC 642 explains how Peter and the Twelve are the primary witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection—but not the only ones.
- To learn about how the Church was foreshadowed from the beginning of the world, see CCC 760.
- It was Jesus' task to accomplish the Father's plan of salvation in the fullness of time. For more information about how the Church is the kingdom of heaven on earth, see CCC 763.

ROME TO HOME

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this Revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

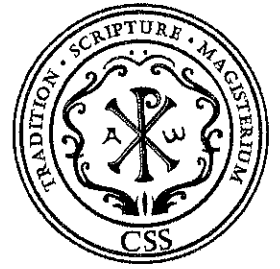
—speaking to the 2004 assembly
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

No portion of these materials may be reproduced in any form without written permission from Catholic Scripture Study International, copyright 2007.

Lesson 1

The Acts of the Apostles

Witnesses to the End of the Earth



WITNESSES TO THE END OF THE EARTH

In the first chapter of the book of Acts, Luke explains that he's continuing what he started in his first book, writing about all that Jesus Christ began to do and teach. While Luke's Gospel focuses on the earthly life of Jesus, the book of Acts is about the life of Jesus' mystical body, the Church, and about what Jesus continues to do and teach in the world through the actions of the Holy Spirit within the Church. Luke writes that Jesus spent the 40 days following his Resurrection speaking to the disciples about the kingdom of God. Immediately prior to his Ascension, Jesus tells his followers that he wants them to be his witnesses, spreading the kingdom of God to the end of the earth. The English word "martyr" is derived from the Greek word for witness. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a 1st-century martyr who was acquainted with both Peter and Paul, explains how Christians can know where to look for the kingdom of God: "Where the bishop is, there is the Church." Christians are to respect their bishops as they would Jesus Christ, and to respect Jesus' priests as they would his apostles.

ACTS 1:1-26

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. ⁴And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, ⁵for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses

ACTS 1:1-26

in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”⁹ And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away;¹³ and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.¹⁴ All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the brethren (the company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty), and said,¹⁶ “Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus.¹⁷ For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry.¹⁸ (Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.¹⁹ And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)²⁰ For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his habitation become desolate,
and let there be no one to live in it’;

and

‘His office let another take.’

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.²⁴ And they prayed and said, “Lord, you know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two you have chosen²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside, to go to his own place.”²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was enrolled with the eleven apostles.

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MEDITATE ON GOD'S WORD IS THROUGH MEMORIZATION. A SUGGESTED MEMORY VERSE IS PRINTED IN BOLD IN THE BIBLICAL TEXT, OR YOU MAY CHOOSE A VERSE OF YOUR OWN.

The Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1965, 1966 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

STUDY QUESTIONS

It's best to read Acts 1:1-26 and the entire lesson before responding to the study questions.

THE PROMISE OF THE FATHER

ACTS 1:1-5

1. Luke addresses both his Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus. Compare the dedication of the Gospel of Luke to the beginning of the book of Acts (see *Lk* 1:1-4). What is Luke's purpose in writing each of these New Testament books?
2. Luke recounts that during the 40 days following the Resurrection, Jesus presented himself alive "by many proofs." What are some of these many proofs recorded elsewhere in Scripture (see *Lk* 24:13-31, *Lk* 24:36-43, *Jn* 20:11-17, *Jn* 20:19-23, *Jn* 20:26-29, *Jn* 21:1-23, and *1 Cor* 15:5-7)? What does the Church teach concerning the interpretation of biblical testimony about the miracle of Jesus' Resurrection (see CCC 643 and CCC 644)?
3. In Acts 1:4, the risen Jesus instructs the disciples to wait for the promise of the Father, which, Jesus tells them, "you heard from me." What is the "promise of the Father" (see *Lk* 24:49 and *Jn* 14:16-18)?

JESUS' ASCENSION
ACTS 1:6-11

4. In Acts 1:6, the disciples ask Jesus: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" What does this question indicate about the kind of kingdom Jesus' followers are expecting? What does the Church teach regarding the establishment of the kingdom of God and when it will occur (see CCC 672 and CCC 673)?

5. **But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.** In Acts 1:8 (our suggested memory verse), the risen Jesus instructs his disciples to bear witness to his death and Resurrection. How is this idea of witness related to Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah (see *Isa* 43:10-12 and *Isa* 44:8)? What additional information does Matthew provide in his Gospel specifying how Jesus' disciples are to bear witness (see *Mt* 28:18-20)? According to Church teaching, what does it mean to be a witness to Jesus Christ (see CCC 995)?

6. Acts 1:9 describes the way that Jesus ascended in a cloud. How is this cloud related to the Old Testament prophecies of Daniel, and what does this indicate about where Jesus went and what he's doing there (see *Dan* 7:13-14)? How does a cloud figure into the vision of heaven described by the apostle John in the book of Revelation (see *Rev* 14:14 and CCC 697)?

7. In Acts 1:11, two men dressed in white tell the disciples that Jesus will return "in the same way" that he departed. What does Paul teach regarding Jesus' return (see *1 Thess* 4:13-18)? In the Nicene Creed, Christians profess: "[Jesus Christ] ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." What does the Church teach will be brought to light on the last day (see CCC 678)?

MATTHIAS CHOSEN TO REPLACE JUDAS
ACTS 1:12-26

8. In Acts 1:12, the disciples return to Jerusalem to wait in an upper room for “the promise of the Father.” What other important event already has occurred in this same upper room (see *Lk 22:7-20*)? How many people are present in the upper room, and what is the significance of this number? What is the Blessed Virgin Mary’s role in connection with this gathering (see *CCC 726* and *CCC 2617*)?
9. Acts 1:15 records that Peter stands up among the brethren and begins to speak, establishing that he’s the head of the Church. What does Peter urge the disciples to do, and how is this related to the Scripture that he cites in Acts 1:20 (see *Ps 69:25* and *Ps 109:8*)?
10. How do the disciples choose Judas’ replacement? How does this method of selection reflect Old Testament religious practice (see *Lev 16:7-10*, *Prov 16:33*, and *Prov 18:18*)? Why is it significant that there be a total of 12 apostles (see *Rev 21:12*, *Rev 21:14*, and *CCC 765*)?

VOICES OF THE SAINTS

Why did the cloud take Jesus out of the apostles’ sight? The cloud was a sure sign that Jesus already had entered heaven. It was not a whirlwind or a chariot of fire as in the case of the prophet Elijah, but a cloud which is a symbol of heaven itself. A cloud features in the theophanies and manifestations of God in both the Old and New Testaments.

—St. John Chrysostom
Doctor of the Church and called “golden-mouthed”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Acts 1:1-26 might apply to your own life:

1. Jesus' disciples spend their time in prayer while they're waiting in the upper room to receive "the promise of the Father." Paragraph 1310 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "More intense prayer should prepare one to receive the strength and graces of the Holy Spirit with docility and readiness to act." What areas of your life might benefit if you devoted yourself to more intense prayer? How do you think that people close to you would react if you became more docile? In what specific area related to your faith would you like to demonstrate an increased readiness to act?
2. What role does the Blessed Virgin Mary play in your prayer life? Describe a time when you or someone close to you relied on the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Think of someone you're concerned about, and say a Marian prayer for that person.

WITNESSES TO THE END OF THE EARTH

ACTS 1:1-26

JESUS CONTINUES TO ACT IN THE WORLD

Luke addresses The Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus, whose Greek name means "lover of God," with these words: "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (*Acts* 1:1-2). The "first book" that Luke is referring to is his Gospel, which also is addressed to Theophilus: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed" (*Lk* 1:1-4). Luke's Gospel focuses on all that Jesus began to do and teach prior to his Ascension, and the book of Acts focuses on all that Jesus continues to do and teach through his mystical body, the Church. The Church is the vehicle through which Jesus Christ continues his ongoing work in the world.

In Acts 1:4, Jesus instructs his disciples not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for "the promise of the Father," explaining that before many days they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. When the Church acts and teaches today, it's Jesus acting and speaking through the Holy Spirit, making judicial and legislative decisions in the lives of Christians.

RESTORATION OF THE KINGDOM

The disciples don't understand the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God. In Acts 1:6, they ask Jesus: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" They're expecting Jesus to restore a physical kingdom similar to that ruled by the Davidic kings. The descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel haven't been united since 930 B.C., when the Davidic kingdom split in two. Ten and a half of the tribes formed the northern kingdom of Israel, and the remaining tribe of Judah and half-tribe of Benjamin became the southern kingdom of Judah. In 722 B.C., the northern kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians and the people forced into exile. The southern kingdom came to an end with the Babylonian Captivity, which was completed in 586 B.C. A relatively short time later, in 550 B.C., the Persian king Cyrus the Great allowed exiles from the southern kingdom of Judah to return to Jerusalem, where they rebuilt the Temple. It's at this time that renewed study of Mosaic Law leads to the development of Judaism, and the people begin to be called Jews. Prior to that, descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel are called Hebrews or Israelites. "Judaism" and "Jew" are words that derive from Judah, the name of the last remaining full tribe.

During the period of exile, prophets arose who promised a Messiah who would liberate the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel and would restore the kingdom of David. Despite all that Jesus has taught his disciples, they're still ready to grab swords to go after the Roman soldiers occupying Judea—but Jesus hasn't been talking about restoring an earthly kingdom. In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus says: "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Behold, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." In Acts 1:8, Jesus explains to his disciples exactly how the kingdom of God will come about: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

The angel Gabriel uses similar words when speaking to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Annunciation: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (*Lk* 1:35). The angel also explains to the Blessed Virgin Mary that her Son, Jesus, is the long-awaited Messiah who's been prophesied to restore the Davidic kingdom: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (*Lk* 1:32-33). When Jesus doesn't show any sign of occupying an earthly throne, his disciples are confused and disappointed.

THE ROYAL STEWARD AND THE QUEEN MOTHER

The Davidic kings always appointed people to help them rule. The most powerful appointed office was that of royal steward, a prime minister who was second in command to the king and who was given the keys to the kingdom. These keys let people in and out of the city and opened the royal treasury. If the steward died, his office didn't die with him—another person would be appointed to take his place. Isaiah 22:15-22 describes the replacement of a steward, and how the key of the house of David is passed on. In Matthew 16:19, Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. When Peter dies in 67 A.D., Linus is appointed to hold his office, becoming the second pope. Pope Benedict XVI is the 265th successor to Peter. As royal steward of the kingdom of God, every pope exercises the same authority that Peter was given by Jesus Christ.

One other person also held a position of esteem and power in the Davidic kingdoms—the queen mother. The Old Testament describes Solomon showing great respect for his mother, Bathsheba: “So Bathsheba went to King Solomon, to speak to him on behalf of Adonijah. And the king rose to meet her, and bowed down to her; then he sat on his throne, and had a seat brought for the king’s mother; and she sat on his right” (*1 Kings 2:19*). *Lumen Gentium* (the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) teaches that the Blessed Virgin Mary is the Queen of Heaven: “Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.”

The Blessed Virgin Mary represents the Church, and her Assumption provides a foretaste of what Jesus Christ has indicated that he’s going to do for all of his followers. Through the Blessed Virgin Mary and the dogmatic teachings of the Church, Jesus Christ explains something about heaven and shows men and women that he’s going to return for them—just as he promised: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (*Jn 14:2*).

A CLOUD TOOK JESUS OUT OF SIGHT

Acts 1:9 records that Jesus is lifted up and a cloud takes him from the disciples’ sight. In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel experiences a vision that pulls back the curtain of heaven to reveal what’s going on beyond this cloud. One prophetic passage in particular provides background for much of the New Testament: “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (*Dan 7:13-14*).

The Ascension involves more than Jesus taking leave of his disciples. It’s at his Ascension that Jesus, the “son of man” referred to in Daniel’s prophecy, is presented to God in heaven and given an eternal kingdom. In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the “Son of man,” clearly identifying himself as the prophesied and long-awaited Messiah. This upsets the Jewish religious leaders who recognize that Jesus is claiming dominion over all peoples, nations, and languages. The very idea of Jesus establishing a kingdom of the nations is almost blasphemy to the Jews, who believe it’s necessary to avoid all contact with the Gentiles in order to remain ritually pure. They don’t understand how Jesus can rule over a kingdom that includes non-Jews. In the book of Acts, Luke describes the action of the Holy Spirit at work building the worldwide kingdom of God, the Church.

THE REST OF THE OFFSPRING

In Acts 1:13, Luke writes that after the disciples witness Jesus’ Ascension they return to the upper room in Jerusalem to pray. Peter is listed first, indicating his primacy. Most of the other disciples are not mentioned again in the book of Acts—only John, who’s something of a silent partner to Peter, and James, who’s martyred. The followers of Jesus who gather in the upper

room are frightened. They're wanted men, and they're in hiding. Their leader has just been crucified, and they're praying to save their own skins. Jesus doesn't tell them how long they'll have to wait, he just says that "before many days" they'll be baptized by the Holy Spirit. These nine days of prayer in the upper room become the Church's first novena.

It's significant that the Blessed Virgin Mary is in the upper room praying with the disciples. The book of Revelation records the apostle John's apocalyptic vision of heaven, and in it he describes the very first Marian apparition: "And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another sign appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon. . . . And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne" (*Rev 12:1-5*). "The woman" in this passage is the Blessed Virgin Mary, and her child is Jesus Christ, who's already seated on a throne in heaven.

The first book of the Old Testament describes the fall of Adam and Eve and introduces "the woman" who will play such a crucial role in salvation history: "The Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel'" (*Gen 3:14-15*). The dragon, also referred to as the serpent, represents Satan. The final book of the New Testament describes Satan's rage at the woman's victory: "Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (*Rev 12:17*).

Paragraph 963 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "[The Blessed Virgin Mary] is 'clearly the mother of the members of Christ' . . . since she has by her charity joined in bringing about the birth of believers in the Church, who are members of its head." Because she's always involved in the formation of the body of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary is in labor twice. She gives birth to the infant Jesus at the Incarnation, and at Pentecost she labors in prayer for the birth of the Church. As the rest of the Blessed Virgin Mary's offspring, Christians form the kingdom of God and are engaged in the ongoing battle against Satan.

120 NAMES

Acts 1:15 records that the company of persons gathered in the upper room was in all about 120. The number 120 is significant in early Jewish tradition because that's the minimum number of people required to establish a new community. By mentioning this detail, Luke is calling attention to the fact that the Church is a new community with its own religious council. When writing about how many people are present, Luke uses the Greek word for "names," implying that there were enough names to meet the requirements of Jewish law.

The Sanhedrin developed from the "great synagogue" established about 400 B.C. as an offshoot of the religious reforms instituted by Nehemiah after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon (*Neh 13:4-30*). This synagogue was called "great" because of its work in restoring Mosaic Law to its original greatness. At the time of Jesus, the Sanhedrin served as the moral and spiritual

authority for Jews. The 120 persons praying in the upper room before Pentecost represent a new Sanhedrin. Every Sanhedrin had a chief officer, someone appointed to be in charge. In Acts 1:15, when Peter stands up and speaks, this indicates that he's been chosen to be chief of the new Sanhedrin, that he's been placed in charge of the Church.

Who speaks for God is an important issue. After the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the apostles are empowered to speak for God. Prior to that, the Jewish nation had the oracles of God that had been given to Moses. Every synagogue had its own seat of Moses, a stone chair. *Ex cathedra*, a Latin phrase that means "from the chair," is used by the Church today to describe authoritative statements about faith and morals made by the pope, the successor of Peter. This idea of authoritative papal decree isn't something new; it developed from Jewish religious practice predating the time of Jesus. The Old Testament describes Moses sitting in judgment: "The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from morning to evening" (*Ex 18:13*). The book of Exodus goes on to recount how Moses takes the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, and delegates authority to able men of Israel (*Ex 18:14-26*). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus indicates that this idea had developed into a chair of authority: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you. . . ." (*Mt 23:2-3*).

The chair of Moses figures prominently in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 5:1 describes how Jesus goes up on a mountain and sits down before beginning the Sermon on the Mount in which he teaches the Beatitudes. The mountaintop location and Jesus' posture call attention to his role as the new Moses giving his people a new law, and in Matthew 5:17, Jesus specifically says that he's come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In Matthew 23:2-3, after Jesus urges his followers to practice and observe whatever the Pharisees tell them, he denounces the Pharisees for distorting Mosaic Law: ". . . for they preach, but do not practice."

Mosaic Law consists of a set of negative commands, the Ten Commandments (*Ex 20:1-17*)—don't commit adultery, don't kill anyone, etc. Jesus introduces the second side of the same coin with his new law, which turns every negative command around and presents it in a positive light as something that must be done (love your wife, love your enemy, etc.): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (*Jn 13:34*). In the book of Acts, the Church is depicted as the new moral and spiritual authority. Luke draws attention to the fact that it's a legitimate community whose leaders have been appointed by Jesus himself.

Men and women can't begin to obey Jesus' new law of love without divine assistance. In the prologue to his Gospel, John writes: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (*Jn 1:17*). It's necessary for Christians to know Jesus Christ and to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit poured out through the sacraments of the Church in order to restore the divine law to its former greatness—a greatness that exceeds even the greatness of the Law of Moses. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christians are able to obey God in love, restoring the divine law to its greatness that God intended at the time of creation.

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

- The Church teaches that Jesus enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal. For more information, see CCC 474.
- To learn more about the articles of faith in the Church's creeds and how they relate to the life of Jesus, see CCC 512.
- CCC 857 describes the three ways in which the Church is founded on the apostles.
- For more information about the ways that the Holy Spirit formed the Church in prayer, see CCC 2623.

ROME TO HOME

Pope Benedict XVI asked young people throughout the world to reflect on Psalm 119:105—“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”—as the first of a series of meditations on the Holy Spirit to culminate in 2008 with a reflection on Acts 1:8 (the suggested memory verse for this lesson).

This year our attention will focus on the Holy Spirit, Spirit of Truth, who reveals Christ to us, the Word made flesh, opening the heart of each one to the Word of salvation that leads to the fullness of Truth. Next year, 2007, we will meditate on a verse from the Gospel of John: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (*Jn* 13:34). We will discover more about the Holy Spirit, Spirit of Love, who infuses divine charity within us and makes us aware of the material and spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters. We will finally reach the world meeting of 2008 and its theme will be: “But you shall 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” (*Acts* 1:8).

From this moment onwards, my dear young friends, in a climate of constant listening to the word of God, call on the Holy Spirit, Spirit of fortitude and witness, that you may be able to proclaim the Gospel without fear even to the end of the earth.

—message for World Youth Day, April 9, 2006

WITNESSES TO THE END OF THE EARTH

ACTS 1:1-26

1. Luke is writing about the continuing deeds and teaching of Jesus Christ at work in the world through the action of the Holy Spirit in his Church.
2. The risen Jesus has spent the 40 days after his Resurrection with his disciples, teaching them about the kingdom of God.
3. The disciples are concerned about when Jesus will restore the kingdom, and Jesus tells them that this isn't for them to know.
4. Jesus explains to his disciples that they'll receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses to the end of the earth.
5. The disciples return to Jerusalem to wait for "the promise of the Father," as Jesus instructed.
6. About 120 people gather in the upper room to pray.
7. Peter is the chief spokesman of the group, indicating his primacy.
8. Peter announces that a twelfth man is needed to take the place of Judas, who died after betraying Jesus.
9. The names of two men who accompanied Jesus during his ministry are put forward—Matthias and Barsabbas.
10. The disciples cast lots, and Matthias is enrolled as one of the 12 apostles.

No portion of these materials may be reproduced in any form without written permission from Catholic Scripture Study International, copyright 2007.