

Acts:  
From Maintenance  
to Mission

A Small Group Study



The Rev. Canon C. K. Robertson, Ph.D.

and

The Rev. Susan B. Snook

# **“Acts: From Maintenance to Mission”**

## A Small Group Study

### **INTRODUCTION**

We are God’s agents on earth, ambassadors who act on God’s behalf in the world about us, taking great care of the divine gifts of creation, money, resources, and people. Throughout this study, it is important to remember that the goal is *focused discussion*. This can be accomplished in many ways. What follows is a suggested format for an eight-week group study.

Each week, members should...

### **PREPARE**

Read the selected passage from Acts. You may wish to read it over several times prayerfully.

In addition, each week’s study provides optional homework, i.e. a personal written project, for participants to complete during the week and bring with them to the next session.

## **BEGIN**

It is appropriate to begin each gathering with a “collect” or focusing prayer, such as the following (Collect 28 from the Book of Common Prayer):

O Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them—read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them—that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in your Son our Savior, Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## **SHARE**

Those group members who have completed the optional homework and wish to share their insights with the rest of the group may do so at this time.

## **DISCUSS**

For continuity’s sake, three “first impression” questions are offered here to help group members initiate discussion. These questions include:

1. What part of the assigned reading particularly caught your attention? Why?
2. Was there a verse or statement that inspired you? Or confused you? Or perhaps even angered you?
3. Can you see in the world today any parallels to the situation you read about in the passage?

Each session then offers several additional “focus” questions, using background information about the passage in question to lead the group into deeper reflection and conversation.

## **CLOSE**

Time should be allotted at the end of the group’s time together for the sharing of prayer requests and thanksgivings, culminating perhaps with the Lord’s Prayer or the devotion “At the End of the Day” (a modified version is found on the last page of this study).

## Session 1: Call (1:1–11)

4. Why did Luke even write this book? What does he say to “Theophilus” about his reasons for recording the stories that follow (also read Luke 1:1–4)?
5. The “call” passage in vs. 6–8 deals with the issue of *power*. What kind of power are the disciples seeking from Jesus ... and what kind of power does he promise to give them instead? Put another way: What is their vision? What is Jesus’ vision for them?
6. The Greek word for “witness” is *marturus*, from which we get “martyr.” What might this have meant to those disciples who just asked Jesus to reinstate a golden age? What does it mean now to be a witness and a martyr in a world in which we are not risking our lives?
7. Jesus offers the disciples a progressive mission to accomplish, beginning “in Jerusalem,” then moving through “all Judea and Samaria,” and finally “to the ends of the earth.” Look at the map in the back of the Bible and consider what each step would mean for these disciples. What would Jerusalem be for our congregation today? What would be our Judea? Our Samaria (and how is this step different from the first two)? And what are

“the ends of the earth” for us? How do we feel as we hear Jesus say this to us?

8. Jesus offers this grand call and then disappears (ascends on high!). What does it mean for us to stand and stare up at the clouds ... and what should we consider doing instead?
9. This call story will underlie everything else that follows in Acts. In essence, the rest of the book is a narrative about the disciples' responses as stewards of the call of Christ. How do we hear God's call today ... in our personal lives and in our congregation? Have you ever felt called? How do we discern between our own desires and a call from God?

**HOMEWORK:** Write a brief letter to a friend (like Luke's "letter" to Theophilus) and in it explain what Jesus means to you. Who is he in your life? Too often, people only think of a "call" in relation to ordained clergy, instead of something that is for each and all of us. Have you ever felt God's "call" on you and, if so, what effect has that had on you? If not, what does that mean to you? Consider sharing your letter next week.

## **Session 2: Leadership (1:12–26)**

4. This passage is unique in its recounting of an apostolic decision made in the time between the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter argues that a twelfth apostle is needed to replace the traitor, Judas. Lots are cast and Matthias is selected ... only to disappear from the stage forever, never again mentioned in the book of Acts. Why might Luke have spent so much time on this incident?
  
5. The Twelve were now complete in number. However, Luke later makes a point of speaking of Paul as an apostle chosen directly by Christ himself. Why might Luke speak of Paul this way? Could this later selection in some way be a criticism, and even correction, of the selection of Matthias?
  
6. In asserting the need for another leader to be added to the present team, Peter recounts Israel's history. In fact, the vast majority of the speeches and sermons in Acts are prefaced by a summary of the past and its patterns and key events. How does the apostles' view of history influence the action they take? Why would they feel that twelve leaders were necessary? How does our heritage impact on the decision-making and stewardship of resources,

money, and people in the congregation today? How important is it for us to understand the patterns of the past?

7. It is not easy to be the new leader in a group that existed and been recognized as a team for some time. How might Matthias have felt? How do we seek, and even more, *nurture* new leadership in our congregation? Do we have 20/80 vision when it comes to congregational leadership (20% of the people are always doing 80% of the work)? How could our congregation better nurture leaders so that those who bring fresh ideas, vision, or energy are not faced with obstacles?

8. As stewards of Christ, the way in which we conduct business in the Church may be as crucial the content of the business itself. Was casting lots the best way to decide between apostolic candidates? How might we better discern God's direction and leading in our own decision-making, both individually and as a Church?

**HOMEWORK:** Make a list of at least five persons who have been key spiritual leaders, either personally in your own life or in your study of the Church's history. What kind of individuals were they? Did others recognize their leadership? What obstacles and opportunities did they face? Share this next week.

### **Session 3: Spirit (2:1–41)**

4. Jesus celebrated the Jewish feast of Passover with his friends the night before he died, and gave it a new meaning in the Last Supper. In a similar way, Luke shows us a new meaning of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, when Christians now celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. For Jews, the feast of Pentecost, held fifty days after the “day following the Passover Sabbath,” has a two-fold significance. First, just as Passover celebrated the first-fruits of the harvest, Pentecost celebrates the full harvest. Considering this, what might Luke be saying about the connection between the Resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit?
5. Second, the Jewish feast also recalls the Giving of the Law to Moses, fifty days after the exodus from Egypt. This event gave form to a new community as the tribal peoples that Moses was leading began to live as a common people with a common law. How does this context affect your understanding of Acts 2?
6. The opening of the Pentecost story contains an air of expectation to it: the small company of disciples are “there together in one place.” Luke’s writing makes it clear that something is about to happen ... and this band of believers is waiting for it! When have

you experienced a true sense of expectation in our congregation? Do you feel it at this time? What can we do to be prepared for fresh outpourings of the Spirit?

7. The first miracle following the Spirit's descent on the disciples is a creative reversal of the events of Babel in Genesis 11. The various people gathered in Jerusalem in Acts 2 all hear and understand in their own native languages the gospel proclamation of the disciples. Luke emphasizes the miraculous nature of this event by listing all the different groups (i.e. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, etc.). Through the Spirit, out of chaos comes clarity. The result: the addition of 3000 converts that very day. What signs of the Spirit do we see in our own congregation? What kinds of different groups are around our congregation (i.e. youth, retirees, Baby Boomers, Gen X-ers, etc.)? In light of all these people, is the Spirit calling us to new ways of speaking ... acting ... giving?

8. Stewardship and evangelism go together. Stewards of Christ at the same time are called to be Ambassadors for Christ, with a clear message of why outsiders should join the community of believers and an equally clear and visible ritual of recognition for when they do join. Both the message and the recognition of

joining are evident in the Acts 2 passage. Regarding our own congregation, how clear is the message we wish to present and how clearly do we mark the decision of an individual to join us (apart from Confirmation/Reception or a Letter of Transfer)?

9. Pentecost is clearly a turning point in the lives of the early disciples, both individually and as a group. What have been the key spiritual turning points in your life? In the life of our congregation?

**HOMEWORK:** Create a personal timeline and mark the key spiritual and life turning points. In each case, were you aware at the time that it was a watershed moment for you? What short and long-term effects did each turning point have for you and for those around you. Remember to go back to the beginning and start from there. Share your timeline next week.

## **Session 4: Success (2:42–4:31)**

4. Acts 2:42-47 has long been lifted up by readers as evidence of the Spirit-filled life of the earliest believers. Many modern-day churches seek to operate as “Acts 2 communities.” Our own baptismal covenant includes as one of the five “action” questions, “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” We tend to think that keeping this promise means worshipping regularly in our church community. But for the apostles, acting in this way meant living as Luke describes in 2:43–47. What does this passage say to you about Christian community?
  
5. One fact that often has been ignored by readers of Acts is the ever-present shadow of the Jewish temple that looms over everything the apostles and their followers say and do. What does this say to you about their beliefs about Jesus, or about the makeup of the group? How does continued daily worship at the temple tie in with their question to the ascending Jesus at the start of Acts?
  
6. The post-Pentecost healing of the lame man at the temple gate occurs in the context of what was called “almsgiving.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, almsgiving is a tangible form of compassion,

as seen in both Psalms (“Happy are those who consider the poor,” 41:1) and Proverbs (“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor God,” 14:31). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to “sell your possessions and give alms” (Lk. 12:33). YET, here Peter says he has neither silver nor gold to give the beggar, but something even better. The beggar is healed ... but this means that he will now have to stop begging and start working. The “gift” that Peter gives him comes at a cost. How do you balance compassion for others with personal responsibility? What do you do and feel when approached by someone on the street asking for money? What does “outreach” mean to you?

7. The temple leaders were amazed because they realized that Peter and John were “uneducated and ordinary men” (4:13). Despite their lack of qualifications for ministry, Peter and John were able to do great work in Christ’s name. Have you ever felt unqualified to do meaningful work for Christ, perhaps because you didn’t know enough about the Bible? Is there anything that the Spirit might be calling you, or your congregation, to do despite lack of qualifications?

8. The disciples are promptly locked up and told not to preach anymore about Jesus; they respond by saying that they cannot keep silent. We face different kinds of pressure to keep quiet about Jesus. What are they? How difficult is it to echo the apostles' response? What do we fear?

**HOMEWORK:** Write a personal statement of almsgiving that begins, "Because of God's call and with a heart of compassion, I commit myself to giving of my time and money in the following ways..." Then list the different projects, organizations, or persons to whom you give money or time. How does this list fit with your beliefs about almsgiving and personal responsibility? Is there anything you might want to do differently?

## Session 5: Community (4:32–5:42)

4. The communalism of the Jerusalem believers has long unsettled readers, resulting in some elaborate re-interpretations of the passage to argue that whatever financial sharing was done then, it is *not* required of the Church's members now. How does the situation described strike you? How would you have felt if you were one of the believers who did have resources and were now asked to share them liberally with the rest of the group? What if you were the one needing help? What is our responsibility now to share or to accept help?
5. An Old Testament precedent for Acts 4:32ff. is Deuteronomy 15: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.” (15:7). In similar words, Leviticus 25:35 states: “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them.” The most powerful and visible argument for the truths the apostles proclaimed was not the deeds of power that accompanied their message, but rather what Luke described in the phrase: “There was not a needy person among them” (Ac. 4:34). Miracles astound and amaze,

but a community that truly takes care of its own is itself a miracle. If outsiders observed your own congregation, what would they be able to report? In what ways does your church reflect—or fail to reflect—the passage in Acts 4? And noting passages like Matthew 5:42, what about our commitment to the world around us?

6. Luke mentions more than once that those who sold their land or property laid the proceeds “at the feet of the apostles,” who in turn made certain that proper distribution was made (4:35, 37; 5:2). The Greek word for “feet” appears far more often in Luke-Acts than in any other New Testament book. As might be expected, there is a sense of respect and even reverence attached to the phrase “at the *feet* of \_\_\_\_\_.” Cornelius the Roman centurion falls down at the feet of Peter (10:25), and Paul describes his one-time apprenticeship in terms of studying “at the feet of Gamiliel” (22:3). Returning to the passage at hand, Luke reports that members of the Christian community in Jerusalem sold their lands and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles, denoting a deep reverence and trust on the part of the believers toward their leaders. How do you perceive your leaders, both on the local and the larger diocesan or national levels? How do they promote trust and respect through their leadership?

7. Acts 4:32ff. introduces the character of Barnabas, the third most oft-mentioned figure in Acts besides Peter and Paul, and the bridge between the two. Barnabas's story, begins, not ends, with financial giving, and thus explains the secret of the remarkable stewardship in the early Church. It is not communism, at least not in the sense of government-imposed systems of our own era. Nor is it simply a one-time "save the poor" campaign. What Barnabas and the other early believers exhibit in their giving is nothing less than a deep and abiding sense of their mutual interdependence. Like them, we are not simply stewards of money; we are stewards of one another. Read Paul's words about the "body" in 1 Corinthians 12 and discuss how that imagery fits with Luke's story here ... and how it fits with your own sense of Christian community now.

8. The story of Ananias and Saphira is, without doubt, one of the most fascinating and disturbing accounts in Acts. It is indeed a grim, even macabre, story, and it is easy to become captivated with the unusual deaths and Peter's part in them. What feelings does the story bring out in you? More specifically, how do you feel about Peter in this story? Don't stop here, however! It is important to note the obvious contrast between Barnabas's

generosity in Acts 4 and the couple's deceitful holding-back in Acts 5. The lines between private and public financial stewardship are blurred here. How important is secrecy for you in terms of your personal finances? How would you feel if others in the Church knew about your exact giving patterns? What if your pastor knows?

**HOMEWORK:** Thinking back to childhood, draw a picture of what your parents and family taught you about finances and money? Consider what images you put in this drawing. On the other side of the paper, write down key words or phrases that you associate with money (for example, "fear," "not enough," "reward," etc.). Share these in the next session.

## **Session 6: Outsiders (6:1–8:1a)**

4. From the very start of Acts 6, a noticeable change begins to take place in the life of both the community and its leadership. Problems have arisen between the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews.” The Golden Age of “one heart and mind” is gone. The Hellenist widows become neglected in the daily distribution of food or fund (it matters little which it is). Hellenists were not Gentiles, but fellow Jews who believed in Jesus. They were, however, Jews of the Diaspora (from outside Palestine) who read the Scriptures in Greek and not Hebrew, who did not hold the Jerusalem Temple with the same respect as those who lived in its shadow. In short, they are newcomers, outsiders who have entered the community of believers, yet do not share the same religious language or concerns of the “insiders.” Who are the “Hellenists” in the congregation today? Are there people who are being neglected in our allocation of resources ... budget, staffing, space, time? Reflect on your own experience of coming into the congregation: Was it easy or hard to be adopted into the church family? What attracted you and convinced you stay? What can we do to make sure that all newcomers’ voices are heard and their needs are met?

5. The Twelve solve the conflict brought to them by advising the outsiders (the Hellenists who were feeling neglected by the insiders, the Hebrews) to choose from among themselves seven men who would become their leaders. The Apostles would not get involved in the distribution dispute personally but “devote themselves to prayer and the preaching of the word.” Everyone seemed pleased with the decision at first. How about you? How do you feel about the Apostles’ decision? Who has the responsibility in your congregation of praying and preaching the word? Who has the responsibility of “waiting on tables,” and what does this mean in your congregation? Are there times when people who are *not* authorized to speak or lead in your congregation should do so?
6. Stephen’s speech is the longest in Acts, and marks a watershed moment for the community of believers. It is, despite its length, a simple one-point message: The temple is unnecessary. For those who treasured that sacred space, that tangible site of worship and communion with God, Stephen’s words were blasphemy. Those words got him killed. How is your church building, your physical facility, valued by church members? In terms of the congregation’s budget and decision-making, which has higher priority: The building(s) or the people?

7. Do you have a favorite pew in which you sit each Sunday? What do you feel if you find someone else, a newcomer, sitting in your pew, your place?

**HOMEWORK:** On one side of a piece of paper, outline all the things your congregation does well in recruiting and retaining newcomers. On the other side, write down your congregation's weak spots when it comes to newcomer inclusion: How could you improve? Before you meet next week as a group, take a "Field Trip" through your church as if you were a newcomer. Start with the church website, the Yellow Pages ad, and your church answering machine recording: Do these give you as a newcomer the information you need to find the church and to want to find it? Then, drive to church and look out for things like clearly marked signs, First Time Visitor parking spots, directional markers. Then, visit the nursery: Would new parents feel good about bringing their toddlers there? What about programs for teens? Finally, look at your worship service through the eyes of a newcomer. Next week, share all your insights.

## Session 7: Challenge (8:1b–40)

**FOLLOW UP TO HOMEWORK:** Last week’s homework assignment deserves extra time this week for follow-up as a group. Share the different insights you all gained from doing your individual “Field Trips.” If we are truly stewards of one another, then how is our stewardship of newcomers? Together, come up with a list of things you think are positive about your current ways,

4. The story of Stephen marks a turning point for the earliest followers of Christ. Although they certainly endured external opposition from the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin, they were able to remain “of one heart and mind” as fairly homogeneous members of a small Jewish sect that believed Jesus to be the Jewish messiah. Their life, their ministry, their success all were within the shadow of the Jewish temple. Jesus charged the apostles to be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but *throughout all Judea and Samaria*, and then on to the ends of the earth. Yet the apostles and their followers remained firmly bound to Jerusalem and to the temple. With his “temple sermon,” Stephen challenged all this, and as a result his newborn ministry was cut short. However, following his death, we see that the challenge put forth by Jesus begins to be fulfilled through indirect means,

as the beleaguered believers are scattered *throughout Judea and Samaria* ... proclaiming the gospel message (8:4). Where are the apostles to be found in this forced missionary movement? The word *apostle* means “sent one.” How do characters like Philip (8:5) represent a new generation of apostles, and what is the role of the “official” apostles in this time of transition? Who are the “Ethiopian eunuchs” in our communities today, people so foreign to us that we cannot imagine worshipping alongside them? How are we called to interact with them?

5. The account of Simon Magus, as he is often called, is full of unusual details and unanswered questions. Foremost among the questions is the issue relationship between “baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus” and “the receiving of the Holy Spirit” at the laying on of hands by Peter and John. Christians throughout the ages have disagreed on the meaning of this distinction. What do you think is the most likely? Philip preaches, Philip baptizes, but something apparently is still lacking. How does this intriguing situation connect the work of Philip and that of the Twelve?

6. Another unique issue in the story of Simon Magus concerns finances: “He offered them money saying, ‘Give me also this power...’” (8:19). Peter’s response, as in the tale of Ananias and

Sapphira, is harsh. Do you feel it is too harsh? What was potentially at stake in Simon Magus's seemingly benign request? Do you see any modern parallels to the situation in the story?

7. In Acts 6:5, the apostles appointed Philip as one of the Hellenists who would “wait on tables” along with Stephen, freeing the apostles to pray and preach the word. In 8:27 ff. we see Philip not waiting on tables, but acting as a spiritual guide, teaching scripture and tradition, and preaching the good news of Christ. In fact, Philip, like Stephen, is doing all the things the apostles thought they alone were called to do. Have you seen people in your congregation called into surprising ministries? Have you ever been called into surprising ministries? What does this tell you about how the Spirit guides us? What is the appropriate role of leadership and hierarchical authority, such as that exercised by the apostles, in a church that is guided by the Holy Spirit?
8. An Ethiopian eunuch would have been a true outsider to the Jews, yet Philip tells the good news to this eunuch and baptizes him. Who in our neighborhoods might we see as “Ethiopian eunuchs,” people so foreign to us that we can't imagine worshipping alongside them? How does God call us to interact with them?

**HOMEWORK:** Simon Magus was an enthusiastic convert, but his focus on money aptly illustrated the inconsistencies in his spiritual life. This week, begin a daily spiritual journal. What brought you closer to God that day...and what pushed you further away? What did you rejoice about that day, and what caused you worry? More specifically, how did money or time concerns affect your relationship with God that day?

## **Session 8: Conversion (9:1–31)**

4. Paul has never been very popular with modern believers, and usually for dubious reasons. Most people today, if asked about their opinion of Paul, would respond that he was an angry loner who disliked women, disapproved of anything pleasurable, and turned the simple religion of Jesus into some complex set of rules and regulations. What is fascinating is that nothing could be further from the truth. An honest reading of the undisputed letters of Paul (I will not get into the arguments about the so-called Pastoral Epistles, which the majority of scholars believe were written by Christians in Paul's name after his death) reveals a man who never wrote or traveled by himself but craved the companionship of friends, who listed more women than men among his fellow ministers, who spoke of the total equality "in Christ" of men & women, slaves & free, Jews & Gentiles, who extolled love as the greatest of gifts and had at the heart of every letter a plea for unity among such disparate peoples. One could say that Paul indeed was so radical that early followers posthumously had to alter his reputation—domesticate him to look and sound more like other first-century leaders—in order to maintain the status quo in Church and Society that Paul himself challenged so strenuously. Together as a group, re-read aloud the

landmark account of his conversion and ask yourselves just why he was so afraid of the gospel of Christ that he was willing to persecute believers. Did he see something that the Apostles themselves—Jewish men who continued their daily temple worship and refused to associate with Gentiles—missed?

5. Paul was not the only one who needed a change of heart. Consider the story of his baptism and the conversion that had to be experienced by the otherwise faithful believer who baptized him. At what points in your own journey can you relate to each of the characters in this story?
6. The Apostles would not even see Paul when he came to them in Jerusalem, for they were afraid of him. It took Barnabas, that model of steward, to vouch personally for Paul and be a bridge-builder between the former persecutor and the Twelve. In what ways was Paul perhaps more dangerous than ever now that he was converted? Why was Barnabas's role in this story so important? Are there any "Paul's" that might intimidate or threaten the status quo of the leadership of your own congregation? Why? Barnabas, when later charged by the Twelve with going to Antioch to see the new work of the Spirit in that community, found Paul to be his partner in ministry. How

is that a clear indication that Barnabas was a model steward? What would it mean for you to “Be a Barnabas” in your own congregation?

7. Read ahead to Acts 11 and find the verse that reads, “And it was in Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.” Why was this not possible back in Jerusalem? How had people like Stephen and Philip, Barnabas and Paul, taken things to a new level? What might the new level be for you, both personally and together as a Church?

**HOMEWORK:** What next steps do all of you need to take in order to continue the work begun in this study? The ideas raised here can become the foundation of new possibilities for you individually and together as a congregation. Consider forming an ad hoc group, a *Horizons Commission*, that could start with the ideas and projects generated by the study groups, then take three or four months to explore the needs and gifts of the congregation. Possible projects during this time could include an Every Member Canvas of the church, not to receive income, but rather answers to a few key open-ended questions (such as “What do you think are the biggest obstacles to future growth that we face?” or “What is our most attractive point as a church, and how can we better promote that to the surrounding community?). May this study be the start of moving from a *maintenance* to a *mission* mindset!

## Devotion at the Close of the Day

*Psalm 134 (in unison or responsively by half-verse)*

Behold now, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, \*  
you that stand by night in the house of the LORD.

Lift up your hands in the holy place and bless the LORD; \*  
the LORD who made heaven and earth bless you out of Zion.

*A Reading (either from the Acts passage or the following)*

Lord, you are in the midst of us and we are called by your Name: Do  
not forsake us, O Lord our God.      *Jeremiah 14:9, 22*

*Nunc Dimittis (in unison or responsively by half-verse)*

Lord, you now have set your servant free \*  
to go in peace as you have promised;

For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, \*  
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:

A light to enlighten the nations, \*  
and the glory of your people Israel.

*Prayers for ourselves and others may follow.*

*[An appropriate formula for this time of prayer may be the acronym ACTS, which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (intercession on behalf of others in need).]*

*The Lord's Prayer*

*Closing Prayers*

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace. Amen.

The almighty and merciful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us. Amen.



