

STUDY QUESTIONS

by Sharon Ely Pearson

The Acts of the Apostles is one of the most exciting and action-packed books in the Christian Testament. Here we hear the evocative story of the Church's roots that traces its beginnings in the final days of the risen Jesus and the Pentecostal arrival of the Holy Spirit, to Paul's final missionary trip to Rome. Chuck Robertson takes us on a journey of how the good news of Jesus Christ spread from Jerusalem to the "ends of the earth" from the viewpoint that we too are called to be apostles. Meeting these first Christians and experiencing their passion and struggles among Jews and Gentiles gives us a glimpse of what it means to be a follower of Christ. As Robertson states, "Acts is an utterly incarnational book" that focuses on "flesh and blood heralds and heroes, the fragile, fallible, altogether human people." He explores this apostolic period descriptively and alliteratively: call, concord, challenge, change, compromise, colleagues, and champion. While this story ends in Rome, we are encouraged to continue to be witnesses in our own time. We may choose to see how these words with a "c" apply to our own lives and ministry.

Introduction

This study guide is meant to accompany each chapter as a means to go deeper and reflect upon the events, personalities, and ideas that the author unpacks through the chapters of Acts. The questions and reflections will invite you into a conversation about the role of an apostle—in the first century and in today's world. How we connect with Peter and Paul as well as all their compatriots can help us discern how we might be followers of "the Way" in the twenty-first century.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the deeds of the first Christians with a focus on two major figures: Peter (who is one of the twelve

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apostles, and appears at first with John) is prominent in ten chapters, while Paul (who is only twice called an apostle, and appears at first with Barnabas) is prominent in seventeen chapters. Written in approximately 85 CE to churches affected directly or indirectly (through others) by Paul's missionary journeys, Luke (through Robertson's understanding) takes us through a cast of characters, and their interactions with one another, as we are witnesses to a plot that any movie director would seize to re-enact. You are invited not only to become the audience, but also be co-participants in the mission.

As you begin this study of Acts, consider the following:

- Why are you engaging in this study of Acts of the Apostles?
- What have your previous understandings and opinions of Peter, Paul, and the other apostles been? Do you go into this study with any preconceived notions? If so, jot them down before reading.
- What do you hope to learn and discern for yourself in this study?
- What is the Greco-Roman world like at this period of our world's history? How is it different to today's world? Similar?

Before each chapter of this book, portions of Scripture will be suggested to read ahead of time. You may also wish to have at hand a map of the Roman world as well as one depicting Paul's journeys. These can be found in the appendix of most study bibles.

Chapter One: Apostolic Call

This first chapter sets the scene for our storyteller, Luke, and his probable patron, Theophilus. Robertson suggests that Theophilus may also have been a pupil of Luke's, a catechist who needed to "know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:14). So it is also with us, recipients of God's good news, beloved of God . . . only many generations removed. Is this a catechism by which new converts (then and now) might learn of God while participating in a religious movement following the risen Jesus?

Read Luke 24:1–53 and Acts 1:1–26

While we have four canonized versions of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we only have one account of what happened next. We

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don't know what was left out but we do get a sense of different viewpoints and opinions in the relationships we see between all the individuals involved in the early church. In Acts we have Luke's views, while later in Paul's letters, we can understand what these individuals faced in their perspective communities from his standpoint. Robertson suggests that Luke's story is for future generations, not just for the first century.

Some interpretive questions to ask while reading:

- How does Acts serve as a bridge between the four gospels and various epistles (letters by Paul and others) to tell the Christian story?
- What circumstances occasioned the writing of Acts?
- How did Luke compose the story of Acts? How is it different than the gospels?
- What does Acts teach us about God?
- What role does Acts continue to perform within the New Testament?
- What theological arguments are being raised?
- What are the essential points of faith for the earliest Christians? For us today?

Each chapter of this book focuses on an aspect of apostleship. Luke uses *apostolos* more than any other New Testament writer. Meaning "one who is sent (forth)" from the Greek verb "to send," Luke uses the term for those who are chosen by God to carry God's word to others (Luke 6:12–16).

- What are the attributes of an apostle?
- Who are these particular apostles sent forth to?
- How is an apostle trained for his (or her) mission?
- What would have been the main message of an apostle of Jesus Christ in the first century? Today?
- How were apostles chosen in the early church? Are any of these methods used today for the calling of leaders (lay or ordained)? What is your understanding of apostolic succession? Do you believe this has been a help or a hindrance for the Church?

Throughout the early chapters of Acts, Luke emphasizes that the new faith is grounded in Judaism . . . grounded in a call from God . . . and brought to life by the Holy Spirit.

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- How do these first apostles live this out?
- Where is your faith grounded? In past traditions, persons, or places? In the present? Future?
- What would it mean for you to be an apostle of Jesus Christ?
- How do you recognize the call of God? The power of the Spirit? The model of Jesus?
- What do you believe about the Holy Spirit? How have you experienced the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in your life?

Chapter Two: Apostolic Concord

Robertson prefaces the story of Pentecost with recollections of “idyllic” times in the Hebrew Scriptures: the Garden of Eden, laying claim to the Promised Land, the golden age of David, and reign of Solomon. While we claim the Day of Pentecost as a Christian celebration, we must remember its roots—the Jewish feast of offering the first fruits of the harvest as well as a commemoration of receiving the Mosaic Law (Ten Commandments) at Mount Sinai. With these insights, he places our Feast of Pentecost in an interesting light:

- What are your first fruits?
- What harvest could they lead to?
- What do we glean and what do we leave behind (give) for others?
- By offering ourselves to God, how are we present (or not) for the coming of the Spirit?

Read Acts 2:1–13, Genesis 1:2; 2:7, I Kings 19:9–12, and Psalm 135:7

- What connections does Luke (and Robertson) make with these passages?
- What images do you associate with the Holy Spirit?
- What other instances in Scripture do you find the Spirit at work? How are these similar to Pentecost? Different?

Read Acts 2:14–47

The Spirit’s dramatic arrival fulfills Jesus’ prophecy (1:4–5), enabling the entire community to communicate God’s word to the household of Israel. Suddenly Peter and the other apostles become “preaching dynamos.” Where days and hours before the apostles were sequestered and fearful, they now are ready for action. The Christian community forms with purpose and power.

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- What is needed when a new community is formed?
- What helps it to survive?
- What can threaten its survival?

The Episcopal Church's baptismal covenant (BCP, 304–5) continues this practice (2:43–47) today. Journal or discuss what these questions mean to you and how you live them out in your daily life (with God's help).

- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Read Acts 3:1—6:7

With the growth of any community, there come celebrations and challenges. This was no different in the early church. Robertson discusses several issues that served as essential—and unexpected—parts of their life together. Reflect on how these built up the community or caused anxiety in Luke's time. How do others view these values outside their community? Thinking of today, how is life in your church community (or any other community) addressing these same issues now? Give examples.

- Being of one heart and soul
- No private ownership of any possessions
- Interdependence among its members
- Generosity
- Fear
- Showing signs and wonders
- Offering the ministry of proclamation
- Failing to perform a commission
- Empowerment
- Increase in members
- Devotion to teaching and fellowship

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The rapid growth in church membership also strained the administration in serving those most vulnerable to which they felt called. This goes to the heart of the community's public identity and occasioned the twelve apostles to reconsider their prophetic vocation—not to wait on tables but to boldly proclaim the word of God. By selecting “seven men of good standing,” the community followed Jesus' pattern of sending out others. Robertson acknowledges the all-too-familiar limits of success. While the twelve remained in Jerusalem, Jesus' message is spreading . . .

- Was there a need for the Temple as the church grew? How tied are we to our institutional buildings in spreading the good news?
- What if the leaders had followed Gamaliel's principle of judging new developments instead of reacting in a hostile manner so quickly?
- What would have happened to the Jesus movement if it had remained a Jewish sectarian association?

Robertson tells a story of stewardship in discussing the role that money and possessions play in our life and church community. He says, “For Luke, the converted life is visibly represented by a radical new approach to one's treasures.”

- How do you determine who is trustworthy for the keeping of treasures?
- How does the sharing of possessions exercise both spiritual and social leadership in a communal system?
- How are you (and your church community) stewards of your finances as well as one another?
- How does your community take care of its own members in need?
- How does one's possessions (or lack thereof) reveal a true and deep response to the gospel of Jesus?

Chapter Three: Apostolic Challenge

By the end of the previous chapter, Robertson laid the groundwork for the challenges facing this new apostolic community. No longer a homogenous group, there is tension between the Hellenists and the Hebrews who each consider themselves Jewish Christians. He believes the introduction of newcomers who are perceived as “differ-

ent” to the community presents a problematic situation to the loving and sharing community of faith.

Read Acts 6:8—7:60

More questions of authority and the age-old problem of “those newcomers” continue to arise. Toleration dissolves, leading to persecution and then martyrdom. New leaders emerge from the original twelve—Stephen and Barnabas, in particular.

- Make a list of the difference between the Hellenists (Jews from the Diaspora who spoke Greek) and the Hebrews (Jews in and around Jerusalem who spoke Aramaic). What did they have in common? Why would one feel threatened by the other?
- How do you welcome the stranger?
- How do you view others “like” yourself? “Unlike” yourself?
- How can one preserve their heritage while also being inclusive of new ideas and influences?
- How is this seen in your own life or the church community today?
- What does this tell us of the possibility that the newcomer in our midst might have something to offer us?
- What happens when we open our doors to all?

With a growing community also comes the delegation of roles and tasks. Today we would call this one’s call to ministry.

- When is it necessary to delegate responsibility?
- What are the characteristics of being a leader? Any requirements?
- What is your understanding of the *diakonia*?
- Does your church have a deacon? Why or why not? What is their role in the life of the worshipping community? Of the greater community?
- What is the role of a deacon in your church?
- What is the difference between “serving tables” and “serving the word”? Is one more important than the other? Why or why not?
- Are you called to either of these roles?

Read Acts 8:1–40

Stephen, Deacon and Martyr is commemorated on December 26, and Philip, Deacon and Evangelist on October 11. *Holy Women, Holy*

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Men (Church Publishing, 2010) offers brief bibliographies of them as well as the appointed lessons for their day. As one of the “Seven,” Stephen was assigned to table service as a deacon, but immediately began apostolic work by preaching to the Sanhedrin, which led to his stoning and ultimately to the spread of the *kerygma* beyond Jerusalem. Philip took on the mantle of Stephen as we see the expansion of the Christian mission take hold.

- Review the various types of leadership, parties, and their roles in the worshipping Jewish community: Sadducees, Sanhedrin, Priests, Pharisees, and Scribes. What could their role be in this new movement of Christians?
- Who were the Freedmen? Do we have any parallels to this class of people in our country or churches today?
- Stephen considered Moses God’s prototypical prophet, who establishes the pattern of bringing God’s word to Israel. What elements in his sermon upset each of the above parties? How would you have responded to his blasphemy?
- Robertson notes a sense of *déjà vu* with Stephen’s sermon, accusations and stoning with the passion and death of Jesus. Make a list all of the similarities and differences. Why would Luke draw such parallels?
- Are there people in our recent history who have exemplified being a true witness of Christ? Do they share similar parallels?
- Have you ever been persecuted for your faith? What brought it on? How did you react? What does the absence of persecution indicate?

Robertson discusses the world *homothudón*, meaning “with one accord” and its frequent occurrence in Acts. This also appears in *A Prayer of St. Chrysostom* from Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. *Amen.*

- How does this prayer carry on a sense of the mission of Philip?
- How was the community “with one voice” detrimental to the apostolic mission? Does this ever happen today?

This chapter concludes with an examination of the commissioning and sending out of apostles. Robertson makes many comparisons from the occurrences in Acts with incidents in Jesus' ministry as well as parallels with Moses' prophetic ministry. Do you agree with him? What themes and connections do you find familiar in Acts that you have read in previous stories in the Bible?

Chapter Four: Apostolic Change

God's Spirit making bold witnesses out of ordinary people becomes the reason behind the phenomenal success of the first-generation church. Paul emerges as Acts' main character and leader in the ministry among the fastest growing segment of the church: non-Jews.

Read Acts 9:1—12:25

Peter now begins to fade in importance as Saul has a conversion on the road to Damascus. Robertson reviews a variety of stories that are familiar to many about Saul/Paul and Peter, exploring themes of change, call, inclusion, divine intervention, and prayer.

Learn more about the various characters in these chapters of Acts and how they understand their call to proclaim God's message. Visualize their remarkable experiences and the impact it has on their lives. In a small group, each take on one of the roles; how might these individuals converse with one another over an evening meal? What personalities do they bring to the table? What are their passions? What are their gifts for ministry? Which person do you relate to the most?

- Saul of Tarsus
- Gamaliel
- Ananias
- Peter
- Dorcas
- Cornelius
- Barnabas
- James, the brother of John
- James, the brother of Jesus

The call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3) comes to Robertson's mind when discussing Saul's conversion. He also states it is "as much about the conversions of other believers as it is about his." Both boy and man receive divine imperatives. How are their calls similar? Different? Blindness is also a theme in Scripture—in healings and conversions.

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- Allegorically, do these stories have relevance to recognizing our call to follow God today?
- How would you answer a call in the night or along the road?
- Have you ever been blinded or seen things anew after an experience?
- How has Jesus changed your life?
- What special assignment might he be calling you to now?

The term “Christian” didn’t surface until about a decade after Christ, perhaps as a demeaning term. The earliest Christians called themselves followers of “the Way,” short for “the way of God.” However, Peter and Paul had different views for who this new “way” was really for.

- How are we protective of our tradition and faith as Saul was? As Peter?
- Full inclusion meant breaking down barriers. What barriers need to be broken down today?
- Saul was considered a “dangerous one.” Who do we consider our “dangerous ones”?
- Are there people in your world who seem outside the reach of the gospel?
- What could you do to build a bridge between them and the Good News?
- How do you feel about sharing your faith with others?
- How might God be at work in the lives of your unbelieving friends?
- How could you have a part in what God is doing?

The theme of this chapter is change. Robertson shares that “change does not come easily” and the world of the first believers was “turned upside down in ways they could not have imagined.” How do you deal with change? Has change ever affected your faith?

Chapter Five: Apostolic Compromise

Saul begins traveling to new, growing congregations in Antioch (present-day Syria). With Barnabas, he begins a new phase of this missionary movement. Most of the new believers are non-Jews, bringing the first big controversy to the church. Observing the laws of Moses, especially those about circumcision and diet, were requirements in the “mother church” located in Jerusalem. Does one need to become a Jew to be a Christian?

Read Acts 13:1—15:41

Robertson recalls the opening chapter of Acts and how the apostles were commissioned. As Peter and the Twelve were apostles of Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul are now apostles of Antioch and beyond. With the power of the Holy Spirit, following a time of prayer and fasting there was a laying-on of hands and a sending off. This pattern of commissioning continues in the church today. Review the following liturgies—what portions of these services are reminiscent of Acts? How are they similar to one another? Different? What parts have meaning to you?

- The Ordination of a Bishop (BCP pp. 512–23)
- The Ordination of a Priest (BCP pp. 525–35)
- The Ordination of a Deacon (BCP pp. 537–47)
- Confirmation (BCP pp. 413–19)
- Celebration of a New Ministry (BCP pp. 559–65)
- The Reconciliation of a Penitent (BCP pp. 447–52)

Saul comes to be known by his Roman name, Paul, marking this new change in his life. Throughout Scripture the naming of a person or object is an important symbol of ownership and acceptance. Names often also describe a characteristic of a person or place. As Paul, he begins to take the good news of Jesus Christ to “the ends of the earth.”

- Why did Paul change his name?
- Have you ever changed your name or took on a new name? What did this mean to you?
- Have you ever named someone? How did you choose the name?
- What characteristics does Paul have for the work that lay ahead of him?
- What characteristics does Barnabas have for mission?
- What made people believe Paul?
- Why does Paul have to defend his apostleship in some places and not in others? Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation?
- How are Peter’s and Paul’s experiences of healing and preaching similar, despite the difference of their audiences?

The further Paul traveled from Jerusalem, the less his audience understood the Scriptures as a Jewish audience naturally would. Reaching a different kind of people who had not been brought up in

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the faith of Israel was a new challenge for Paul, as the concept of worshipping one God was foreign to them.

- As more and more people are not “churched” today, how might we model ourselves on Paul’s style?
- How do you speak of God and Jesus to those who do not believe or who have never heard of them?
- How do we share the gospel to people who have no religious training?
- How do we train others to share the gospel?

Examine the orders of ministry that begin to occur in the new churches. How are they forerunners of ordained ministry today?

- Presbyters / Elders
- Apostles
- Deacons
- Evangelists / Church Planters

When a disagreement became public within the new communities, the opponents didn’t revert to gossip or infighting. At the First Jerusalem Council, they came together, listened to all sides, remained sensitive to the Holy Spirit, and compromised. Robertson says, “There have always been some who have argued that something more is needed beyond God’s grace and our response of faith.”

- What were the issues faced by these communities?
- What were the roots of the importance of dietary laws and circumcision in Jewish communities?
- Why did Paul (and others) feel they were unnecessary to new converts?
- What issues has the church faced throughout history? How were they resolved (or not)?
- What arguments do we face in our communities today? How would Paul respond? Peter? (Think about their characteristics and passion as described by Robertson, not particular passages of Scripture that may be taken out of context.)

Barnabas and Paul depart company. According to Robertson it is because Barnabas became a liability.

- In what ways? Do you agree, or not?
- How does Paul’s mission change (or not) without Barnabas?
- Have you ever parted from a colleague or vocation due to a disagreement?

- What are the roles of companions on a journey or mission?

Chapter Six: Apostolic Colleagues

Paul continues his missionary efforts, partnering with new companions after his separation with Barnabas. He travels beyond Roman Asia to the Diaspora Jews and the Gentiles. For Paul, apostolic ministry is not a solo effort. To further your study, you may wish to read any of the epistles (letters) that Paul (or his fellow travelers) wrote to the churches they visited or established along the way.

Read Acts 16:1—18:21

Paul continues to find new apprentices along his second journey. Use a map from a study bible to locate all these new church plants. Robertson states that they often “hit a wall” as they attempt to move further east into Asia.

- Why does Paul wish to go into Asia?
- How did Paul determine which cities to go to? Do they have anything in common?
- What obstacles or “walls” do you think they encountered?
- What helps them proceed and not give up in their mission?
- How does the existence of the Roman Empire assist Paul in his journeys?
- Paul seems to be the right man, at the right time in world history. But how is his personality suited to the task? Do you agree with Robertson’s translation?
- How does God use our detours to get us where we need to be?

Learn more about each of these individuals who become his colleagues: What are the characteristics that Paul discovers in each of them? How are they included into the faith? Are there any obstacles that must be overcome? How do they add to building up the Body of Christ?

- Silas
- Timothy
- Lydia (Is she the female equivalent of Cornelius that we learned of in Chapter 10?)
- The Jailer at Philippi
- Aquila
- Priscilla

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- Jason
- Titius Justus
- Crispus
- Apollos

Paul and Silas are often confronted and jailed. Robertson names several of the charges brought against them.

- What would you name as the charges?
- Would Paul and his colleagues be considered dangerous in today's world? If so, how? If not, what is different today?
- What role does the synagogue play in Paul's various stops along the way?
- When riots occur in our time, what are some of the causes? Are there any parallels to the first-century issues?
- As a Christian, how would you respond? How do you decide which "side" to take?

Athens was a major hub of civilization in the world. It was a pagan city where Paul faced those who followed Epicurean and Stoic philosophy. Research these philosophies to see how they differed from Christianity as well as what they had in common. According to Robertson, these were considered very practical and life-affirming belief systems.

- What similar belief systems do we find in our world today?
- What are the gods of our world in the twenty-first century that Paul would have addressed?
- How is Paul able to key his message to the audience at hand? What can we learn from him?
- What is the new model of evangelism for Paul?
- What can we learn about developing religious education programs for today's church from his experience in Athens?

Robertson states that "Acts is not simply a random collection of unrelated tales but rather a strategic document that moves with purpose from start to finish addressing issues and situations that Luke and his readers were facing in their own time."

- Develop a strategic plan that Paul might have conceived before each of his missionary journeys.
- Develop a strategic plan for your church to proclaim the good news of Jesus. What contingency plans do you have for when you need to follow another path?

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- How do you react when faced with hatred and hostility about something you believe in? Can you learn anything from Paul's example?

This chapter concludes with Paul leaving Ephesus to prepare for his last journey. Robertson reminds us that the job of the apostles is left to the Ephesians—and us. What would Paul say to you as he left your home or community after a visit?

Chapter Seven: Apostolic Champion

Paul's journey to Jerusalem leads him to Rome, and Robertson associates this with Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem before the crucifixion. In the midst of seeming chaos, there are two things that kept Paul going—his single-minded focus on the mission God had given him and the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Several times along the way, God miraculously intervened in events that could easily have led to his death.

Read Acts 21:1—28:30

Robertson concludes the study of Acts of the Apostles with an echo of the passion of Jesus; this time with Paul on trial for his faith in the resurrection of the dead. But Paul is not finished yet.

- What is the difference between “Rabbi Saul” and “Paul of Tarsus, Roman citizen”? How has Paul used both of these persons to continue his mission for the gospel?
- By the time Paul is ready to journey to Rome, how has his understanding of his ministry changed? Robertson explores three tellings of his conversion. What do you discover about Paul by reading each one?
- What has happened for these changes to occur in Paul?
- What are the charges that Paul specifically faces in Jerusalem?
- What parallels do you see with Paul's “trial and defense” and that of Jesus?
- How do Paul's continuous appeals to high authorities continue to promote the gospel? Or do they hurt his cause?

What have been the featured elements of Paul's prophetic ministry?

- Healing
- Preaching
- Teaching
- Others?

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Luke invites the reader to faith in Jesus Christ despite the visible hardships that we have read throughout Acts.

- How would Luke's original audience have reacted to these stories?
- How can we make this message fresh to audiences today?

At the end of Acts, it seems that the result of Paul's ministry was inconclusive. We are left to wonder what happened next.

- If you had been Luke, would you have concluded Acts differently? If so, how?
- What mission has God given you?
- What would it mean for you to boldly trust him in a situation?
- What can you do to strengthen and encourage the Christians around you?
- How would you describe your mission for the rest of your life? What will it take for you to finish well?

Concluding Thoughts

- What are the most significant insights you have gleaned from reading Acts of the Apostles?
- How different are you for having engaged in this study?
- How do you claim the unique apostolic message for yourself and are able to live into the kingdom of God anew?
- Which of Robertson's "apostolic periods" challenges you the most?
 - Call
 - Concord
 - Challenge
 - Change
 - Compromise
 - Colleagues
 - Champion

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