

# ***The Book of Acts***

## ***Life in the Early Church***

Lesson #3 for July 21, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-46; 3:1-26; 4:1-18,34-35; 5:1-11,34-39.

1. This lesson will cover a few of the events that transpired during approximately the first year after the Pentecost. The church was growing at lightning speed. They continued to consider themselves faithful Jews and regularly attended and worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem. But, they also found it necessary to meet in private homes for their more-Christian times of discussion. Of course, they continued to evangelize whenever and wherever appropriate.
2. Read Acts 2:46-47. What does it mean to say they were “enjoying the favor of all the people”? Surely, that did not include the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Or, did it? (Acts 6:7; 15:5) The rest of Acts 2:47 says: “And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (second edition, Acts 2:47). New York: American Bible Society.
3. After Pentecost when the disciples met together, what was their plan for their group? Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would come down on them. That had already taken place. The angels at His ascension promised that He would come back. (Acts 1:11) Did the followers of Jesus think that His return was imminent?
4. As a result of the experience of speaking in tongues to people from many different countries, no doubt, they thought that they would not need to go out to the world; the world had come to them! (Acts 2:5-11)
5. With that in mind, almost everyone among the Christian community who had property was willing to sell it and contribute to the common good. Will the time ever come when Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will share their material goods with one another?
6. Following the experience at Pentecost, Luke shifted his focus to four things: (1) The teachings of the apostles, (2) Fellowship, (3) The breaking of bread or sharing of their meals, and (4) Prayers. (Acts 2:42) Would you like to have been a part of that early church experience? Could it happen again? What circumstances could possibly bring that about?
7. As we know, there was a large courtyard surrounding Herod’s Temple in the days of Jesus. That courtyard had sometimes served as a marketplace for selling of animals, the exchanging of currencies, etc. But, surrounding that courtyard were areas referred to as Solomon’s Porches where groups could meet under partial protection from the sun and fellowship together. It seems that those areas were favorite gathering places for the new Christian groups.
8. What do you suppose the disciples were teaching the people at the temple in Solomon’s Porches? Were they primarily focusing on reviewing what they had learned from the life of Jesus? Or, were they focusing on passages from the Old Testament that pointed toward Jesus as the Messiah? Or, would it have been both?
9. We are also told that they shared meals in common. They also celebrated the Lord’s Supper frequently together. They prayed together. They rapidly developed the notion that they were a single “family.” While they could gather in the courtyard of the temple, they were probably not welcome in any of the 200 local synagogues in and around Jerusalem. So, they met in private homes. However, they did continue to attend many of the Jewish ceremonies held in the temple. No doubt, they did attend synagogues on Sabbath; but, when it came time to talk about their specific Christian ideas, that would have taken place in private homes.

10. How similar were the events surrounding the advent believers leading up to October of 1844? Read Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35. We have no way of knowing how many of those Christians were relatively wealthy and how many were quite poor. Many of them might even have been slaves or former slaves. But, among the Christians there was a sharing so that no one lacked anything. Thus, they developed an even deeper sense of unity.
11. Read Acts 3:1-26. If you read about this story in *The Desire of Ages*, you will discover that this man was brought to Jerusalem by friends, hoping to be healed by Jesus. When they found out that Jesus had been crucified and was gone, they decided to take him to the Gate Beautiful of the temple to beg. On one occasion as chronicled in Acts 3:1-10, Peter and John passed by that man who asked for some kind of donation. Peter responded by saying that he had no money; but, what he had he would share. He told the man to rise to his feet in the name of Jesus Christ, and Peter helped him up.
12. Up to that point, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were hoping that the Christian movement would gradually die. But, then, suddenly, before hundreds or maybe thousands of people, the disciples were performing miracles just as Jesus had done.
13. Peter and John were immediately asked how they had accomplished that great miracle. And Peter launched into one of his incredible sermons. Read Acts 3:12-26; focus especially on verses 13-16. Can you believe that those words came out of the mouth of Peter who a few weeks or months earlier had denied his Lord with cursing and swearing?
14. But, Peter did not stop with that. He launched into the evangelistic sermon summarized in Acts 3:17-26. In that sermon he pointed out five main characteristics that were emphasized in early Christian preaching: (1) Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah for whom they had been waiting so long (Acts 3:18); (2) God resurrected Him from the grave (Acts 3:15); (3) Jesus was given His place in heaven (Acts 3:13); (4) But, He had promised to come again (Acts 3:20); (5) If you want to be one of His followers, you must repent and ask for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 3:19).
15. Would Peter's sermon be appropriate in our day? Of course, in Peter's day he was talking to people who were very well versed in Old Testament Scripture. They did not have to change many of their beliefs; but, they had to "migrate" into Christianity. In our day, people's basic understanding is very different. How should we modify our message to make it appropriate to our audience?

Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world. The proclamation of the third angel's message calls for the presentation of the Sabbath truth. This truth, with others included in the message, is to be proclaimed; but the great center of attraction, Christ Jesus, must not be left out. It is at the cross of Christ that mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other. The sinner must be led to look to Calvary; with the simple faith of a little child he must trust in the merits of the Saviour, accepting His righteousness, believing in His mercy.—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*\* 156.2-157.0; *Ev*\* 187.5; *LHU*\* 161.2.

16. As we know, the Sadducees did not accept most of the Old Testament as being inspired. They chose to believe only the five books of Moses. Furthermore, they believed there could be no life after this life and that it was impossible for someone to rise from the dead. So, how do you suppose they would have responded to Peter's sermon? Their most cherished teachings were being directly attacked and refuted. So, they had Peter and John arrested and put in prison. They were hoping they could intimidate Peter and John and convince them

to keep quiet about Jesus. But, what they got was a solid, resounding testimony about Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Read Acts 4:8-13.

17. Imagine Peter giving that sermon with the man who had been healed from his paralysis standing beside him full of life and energy. Then, Peter and John were sent out of the room while the Sanhedrin debated the issue. When they were called back, they were threatened and told absolutely that they must not say anything more about Jesus.

**Acts 4:19-20:** <sup>19</sup>But Peter and John answered them, “You yourselves judge which is right in God’s sight—to obey you or to obey God. <sup>20</sup>For we cannot stop speaking of what we ourselves have seen and heard.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

18. Before releasing Peter and John, the Sanhedrin tried to raise the question of authority. They had repeatedly tried to challenge Jesus on that same issue. They were trying to make the point that they were in charge of the country and only those who had their authorization should be allowed to preach and teach. So, how could those unschooled Galilean fisherman be taking the country by storm without having had their Pharisaical education or authorization? Jesus had always frustrated their attempts to control Him as well.
19. When Peter and John returned to the group of Christian believers, there was great rejoicing. When they had finished rejoicing and praying, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled, once again, with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim God’s message with boldness.
20. It certainly seemed that since the number of Christians had already reached 5000, (Acts 4:4) the message was spreading like wildfire. It must have seemed to them that it could not possibly be long before the message would be carried to the world and Jesus would come back. Christians were happy to sell anything they owned and to bring the proceeds to the group to be shared with all those in need. Joseph, a Levite Christian born in Cyprus, known to the disciples as Barnabas—“one who encourages”—sold a field and took the money and handed it over to the apostles. (Acts 4:36-37)
21. Read Acts 5:1-11. Every time God seeks to do something and moves upon a group of His faithful followers to spread the gospel, Satan will do something to try to block progress. Ananias and Sapphira were hoping to gain credibility among the Christians by donating the money they got from selling a piece of property they owned. They actually got more for it than they expected; so, they decided to keep a portion of the money for themselves. Then, they lied about it to Peter and to the Holy Spirit. That was not a good idea. There are Christians who have tried to explain every miraculous occurrence in the Bible by some natural cause. Do you think Ananias and Sapphira died of heart attacks at just the right moment when they approached Peter? (See Deuteronomy 32:39.) Such a theory is too preposterous even to consider.
22. But, God is always loving, kind, and forgiving. Why didn’t He just overlook Ananias and Sapphira’s actions? Sooner or later, others would have found out about their deceitfulness, and the church would have been placed in great jeopardy by their examples. Why do you think Ananias and Sapphira came separately to appear before Peter? Why didn’t they come together? Did they bring their money at the time they appeared? Did they really think that God would not know what they had done? Sin is a very serious matter in the eyes of God. (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23) Would you dare to lie to God? Lying to God is not only the wrong thing to do, but also it turned out to be deadly!
23. Read Acts 5:12-16. How do you suppose the Jewish leaders would have responded to the fact that miracles were being done all around Jerusalem! It is quite possible that there were then at least twelve people performing miracles instead of just One!

24. Read Acts 5:15. Do you think anyone was actually healed by Peter's shadow? There were, no doubt, hundreds, maybe thousands, of sick people brought into Jerusalem in hopes of being healed. That was incredibly frustrating for the Jewish leaders. So, once again, they attempted to stop the work of the disciples. They arrested Peter and John and put them in jail. But, sometime during the night, an angel of the Lord appeared, opened the prison gates, led the apostles out, and told them to go and stand in the temple and tell the people all about this new life. And there they were at dawn. Once again, the apostles were preaching and teaching in the temple!
25. When the high priest and the council met together, they called for the disciples to be brought from prison only to discover that they were gone, and, in fact, that they were teaching in the temple courtyard! Notice the words of the high priest:
- Acts 5:28:** "We gave you strict orders not to teach in the name of this man," he said; "but see what you have done! You have spread your teaching all over Jerusalem, and you want to make us responsible for his death!"—*Good News Bible*.\*
26. Instead of withering and fading under these accusing words, notice that Peter and the other apostles said: "We must obey God rather than men." (See Acts 5:29-32.) Of course, that made the members of the council furious.
27. But, fortunately, at least one cooler head suggested they take a break. They sent the apostles out. Gamaliel, recognized for his wisdom and as one of the teachers of the law being highly respected by all the people, said that there had been people in the past leading groups trying to make various kinds of claims; when the leaders of those groups were killed, the groups dissipated. Jesus was dead. Gamaliel suggested giving time to see whether Jesus's followers would fade away. If they do not, "We might find ourselves fighting against God!"
28. As an interesting side note, we need to remember that Paul was a disciple of Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3) Unfortunately, we do not know at what point in history Paul arrived in Jerusalem. It seems that if he had been there during the days of Jesus, he must have known about Him. But, we do not have any evidence of that, and we have some evidence against that.
29. So, what we have of those early days of the Christian church are various accounts of the most outstanding events. What are we supposed to learn from them?

We are stewards, entrusted by our absent Lord with the care of His household and His interests, which He came to this world to serve. He has returned to heaven, leaving us in charge, and He expects us to watch and wait for His appearing. Let us be faithful to our trust, lest coming suddenly He find us sleeping.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 8, 37.2; *TMK*\* 351.6; *RH*,\* July 7, 1910, par. 4.

The people need to be impressed with the sacredness of their vows and pledges to the cause of God. Such pledges are not generally held to be as obligatory as a promissory note from man to man. But is a promise less sacred and binding because it is made to God? Because it lacks some technical terms, and cannot be enforced by law, will the Christian disregard the obligation to which he has given his word? No legal note or bond is more obligatory than a pledge made to the cause of God.—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*,\* vol. 6, 1056; *RH*,\* May 23, 1893, par. 10.

30. It should be clear from these few stories that Jesus left His disciples with the blessing of the Holy Spirit and with the commission to carry the message to the world. Does that challenge still apply to us?
31. Someone has been quoted as saying: "We should be ready as if Jesus would come today but continue working [in the mission of the church] as if He would take another hundred years to come."—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Friday, July 20. [Brackets and content in brackets are in the source.]
32. So, do we make the life, death, resurrection, and soon return of Jesus central to our thinking and our speaking to those around us? Do our lives really reflect the fact that we believe that Jesus is coming back very soon? Or, are we not too sure? Think about the main characters in these stories. Do you know anyone today who might be a Peter? Or, a John? What about a Barnabas? What about an Ananias or Sapphira? Are there any Gamaliels among us?
33. Who were all those people who were baptized very soon after Pentecost? There were thousands of them. What convinced them to become Christians in face of the opposition of the Jewish leaders? What did the disciples and the other leaders of the groups do to make them feel welcome and to nurture them? Was there constant teaching going on? Did the disciples try to make them as welcome as possible into the Christian family?
34. Modern research has demonstrated that there are three factors which determine whether a new Christian will decide to stay in the church fellowship or leave: (1) Has s/he come to really believe in what the church teaches? (2) Has s/he become a part of a small group in the church with which s/he feels an intimate fellowship? (3) Has s/he taken up some responsibilities within the church to which s/he feels committed? Those who stay faithful to the church they have joined must have at least two of those three factors. Otherwise, it is very likely that after a while, s/he will leave the church.
35. Our world today, of course, is much, much more populated than it was in the days of the disciples. We are dealing with 7 billion people on this earth now. Whereas the apostles had only personal evangelism as a way of reaching people, to make our work easier, we have: The Internet, radio, television, "snail mail," all kinds of different means of transportation even over long distances, etc. So, what do you think? Are SDAs in our day expected to make house-to-house visits? Or, is it too dangerous in our day? What might happen if the church actually fanned out to do that?

Under the training of Christ the disciples had been led to feel their need of the Spirit. Under the Spirit's teaching they received the final qualification, and went forth to their lifework.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles\** 45.2.

36. So, what does it mean to talk about *under the training of Christ* versus *under the Spirit's teaching*? It was not until Christ was no longer available to keep alive their hopes for an earthly kingdom that they were forced to change their paradigm to think about a different kind of kingdom existing beyond this earth and beyond the experience even of death. Then, the disciples began to get together, confess their faults to one another, and welcome the Holy Spirit to guide them to a wider work.
37. So, when someone mentions *the church*, of what do you think? Is it a building? Is it some kind of club with a group of like-minded people getting together? Is it a meeting house where people just meet together for worship, study, and prayer each Sabbath? Is it a charitable society something like the Salvation Army?
38. The only "church" that matters is the one formed in the hearts of a group of Christians that are bound together in their determination to spread the gospel.

Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard. It is the theater of His grace, in which He delights to reveal His power to transform hearts.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 12.1; AG\* 338.4.

39. So, if we review what we have studied this week, would you say that the church is a fellowship of the saved? Is it a body of believers focused on Jesus Christ? Was it a group of believers who in those days experienced miracles, no doubt, on a daily basis, encouraging unity but also faced the worst kind of opposition possible from the Devil and the Jewish leaders?

40. Will the day come when Seventh-day Adventists will be persecuted by our respective governments? Are we prepared for that?

41. The New Testament word for *church* comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* which means those who been “called out.” Those who are truly called out to be God’s faithful followers recognize Him as their Savior and Lord. They come together to study His Word and to worship Him; but, they also are willing to share what they believe with others when opportunity presents itself. (1 Peter 3:15)

Those who at Pentecost were endued with power from on high, were not thereby freed from further temptation and trial.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 49.3.

42. The Devil will never leave the church alone. But, we know that a living church is a growing church. From that group of about 120 people that met together shortly after the resurrection, suddenly, there were 3000 people, and then, 5000 from at least 15 linguistic regions around the Mediterranean world. (Acts 2:9-11,41) Those people had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior and were filled with the Holy Spirit.

43. The cross became the dividing point between those who were Christians and those who were not. Those who rejected the cross were choosing eternal death; those who accepted the cross were choosing eternal life.

The ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ’s character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 48.1.

44. In our lesson for this week, we have learned of the generosity of Barnabas and the greed of Ananias and Sapphira. Is it possible that we have both groups in our church today? Is it possible to differentiate between them? Are we asked to do that?

45. As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we are more blessed with the truth, and in more detail, than any other group in history. Are we taking advantage of that?

Follow the light you have. Set your heart to obey what you do know of the word of God. His power, His very life, dwells in His word.... You are building on God’s word, and your character will be builded after the similitude of the character of Christ.—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*\* 150.1; LHU\* 195.5.

46. Are we prepared to be the kind of Christians who can finish the gospel in our day? If we are not, what will be the result? Are we training our younger generation to be a part of that final end-time message?

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Last Modified: June 6, 2018

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