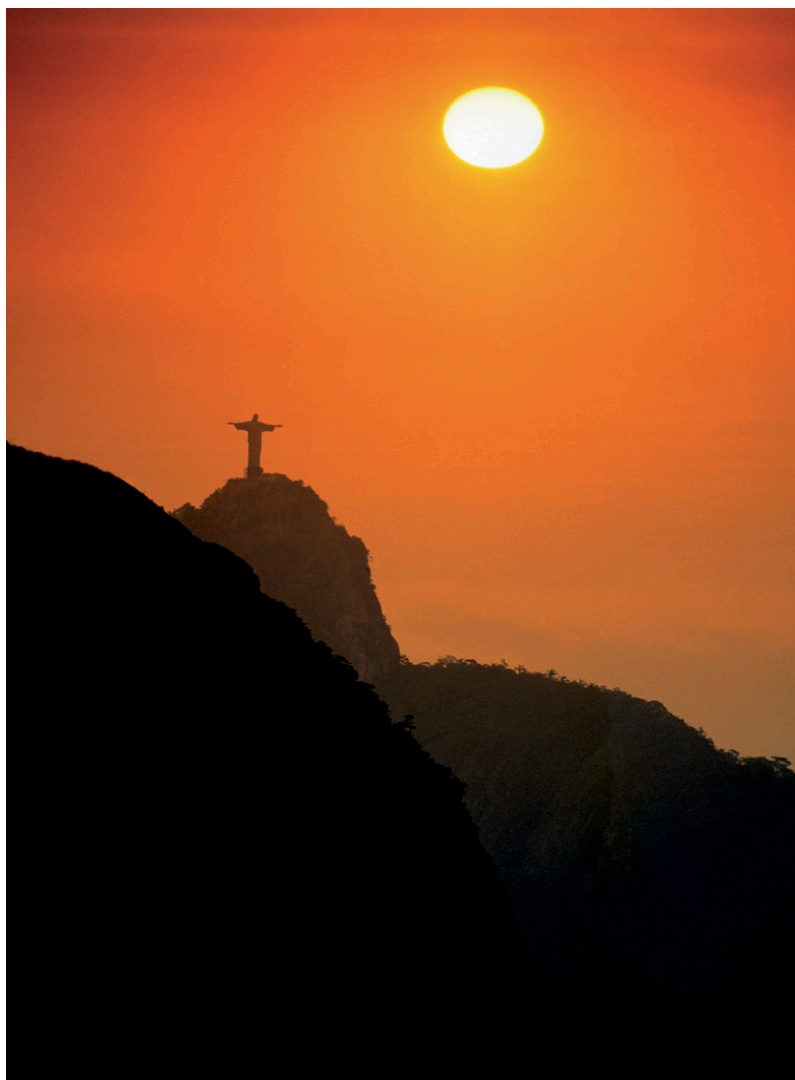




WILLIAM
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Open Learning

School for In Service Training and Development



Introducing the New Testament

A11A

Part A: The Gospels and Acts



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Welcome to Open Learning! We hope you enjoy exploring the New Testament and that your study enriches your understanding of the Bible and your Christian life and service.

About this course

This is the first of a two part course giving an introductory overview of the New Testament story.



Aim: This course aims to introduce you to the story of God's people as recorded in the New Testament and to inspire and equip you for further study of it. The assignments also prompt reflection on Christian life and the development of resources for practical ministry.

Learning Outcomes: At the end of this the course you should be able to

- Identify key events and characters in this part of the New Testament story.
- Identify significant theological themes in the books studied.
- Explain the relevance of the New Testament story to Christian life today.

Indicative Content: Six lessons following the New Testament story

Lesson 1: Introducing the Gospels: A new kind of writing.

Lesson 2: Introducing the Gospel of Mark: '...the good news of Jesus Christ...':

Lesson 3: Introducing the Gospel of Luke: '...so that you may know the truth...':

Lesson 4: Introducing the Gospel of Matthew: '...God is with us...':

Lesson 5: Introducing the Gospel of John '...And the Word became flesh..':

Lesson 6: Introducing the book of the Acts of the Apostles: '...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit..'

Level: You should be prepared to undertake the indicative or key reading as well as find and use other appropriate study resources. Assignments include essays of 800 words, using appropriate academic conventions including referencing and bibliographies.

Lesson 6: Introducing the Acts of the apostles: ‘..and you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit..’.

Learning outcomes: At the end of this lesson you should be able to

- Give a broad outline of the contents and characteristics of the book of Acts
- Explain what guidelines it gives for the church’s mission in the twenty first century

Essential Reading:

Foundational reading for this lesson (it is important to supplement this basic reading with further research):

Acts

Pages 224 – 251 in Drane, John 2010 *Introducing the New Testament, Third Edition.*

Assignments: The assignments for this lesson are contained in the boxes below and on the following page.

You can choose to do short pieces of work on two different topics, or cover one topic in greater depth.

Choose **one** box. Complete **only** the assignment(s) given in your chosen box.

Box 1.

1.

- a) Explain the issues at stake in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, making close reference to the text and your reading (500 words). **(Grading Descriptors: 1, 5 and 7)**
- b) In your opinion, what does this story teach about effective outreach that could be applied (or is being applied) by your own church? Explain with reference to the text and your reading, giving reasons for your answer (300 words). **(Grading Descriptors: 1, 2, 5 and 7)**

2.

- a) Describe Paul’s approach to preaching in Athens (Acts 17: 22 – 31), showing how he communicated the gospel to people with no knowledge of the Old Testament or of Jesus (500 words). **(Grading Descriptors: 1, 5 and 7)**
- b) What two aspects of Paul’s approach do you think are particularly helpful examples for twenty-first century evangelists? Explain with reference to the text and to your reading, giving reasons for your answer (300 words). **(Grading Descriptors: 1, 2, 5 and 7)**

Box 2.

- a) Explain the issues at stake in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, making close reference to the Biblical text and your reading (1000 words). (**Grading Descriptors: 1, 5 and 7**)
- b) In your opinion, what does this story teach about effective outreach that could be applied (or is being applied) by your own church? Explain with reference to the Biblical text and your reading, giving reasons for your answer (600 words). (**Grading Descriptors: 1, 2, 5 and 7**)

Box 3.

- a) Describe Paul's approach to preaching in Athens (Acts 17: 22 – 31), showing how he communicated the gospel to people with no knowledge of the Old Testament or of Jesus (1000 words). (**Grading Descriptors: 1, 5 and 7**)
- b) What two aspects of Paul's approach to sharing the gospel with the Athenians do you think are particularly helpful examples for twenty-first century evangelists? Explain with reference to the text and to your reading, giving reasons for your answer (600 words). (**Grading Descriptors: 1, 2, 5 and 7**)



Introducing the book of Acts. At the end of Luke's gospel, the risen Jesus promised his disciples: **'..you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'** Acts (1: 8). And so the gospel closes with the disciples obediently awaiting the

promised gift. In the book of Acts Luke describes what happened next.

In Acts 1: 1 – 2 Luke refers to his 'first book', his gospel. The book of Acts is the sequel. Drane discusses the issue of its date (2010: 245 – 247) which he acknowledges is complex. However, the aim of the work is clear. Luke's purpose is to show how the good news about Jesus was taken out from Jerusalem and Judea and on into the world until it finally reached the centre of the Roman Empire, fulfilling the prophecy of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Luke has selected and shaped his material to serve this purpose, and his account of the spread of the Gospel follows the sequence in the words of Jesus in Acts 1: 8.

'As the church developed into a significant community within the Roman world it was important for its members to know their origin and history, and Luke was perhaps the first person to set some of it out in a systematic form' (Drane, 2011: 250).

Characteristics of Acts. Naturally, Acts shares many of the characteristics of Luke's gospel, including the language and writing style as well as the same skill in story telling. As in his gospel, Luke has been careful to record accurate details of people and places in his account. Luke also continues to emphasise how the events in the book of Acts fulfil Old Testament prophecy and God's plan for the world first described in his gospel.



A significant proportion of Luke's gospel described Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem. Acts continues this theme as it describes the journey of the good news out from Jerusalem (chapters 1 – 7) through Judea and Samaria (chapters 8 – 12) and out from Asia Minor and through Europe to Rome (chapters 13 – 28).

Acts shares Luke's characteristic stress on the role of the Holy Spirit. He is poured out on believers (2: 1 - 4; 8: 15 – 17; 19: 6). It is the Holy Spirit who enables the believers to witness and to follow the example of Jesus in the face of suffering and persecution - the apostles flogged for their witness refused to be silent and 'rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name' (5: 40 – 41). Stephen dies with the prayers of the crucified Jesus on his lips (7: 59 – 60. Compare Stephen's words with Luke 23: 34 and 46). It is the Holy Spirit who initiates, guides and drives mission, especially the significant decisions made at turning points in the life of the early Christian community. For instance, the Spirit prompts Philip's conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (8: 29) and the crucial encounter with the Gentile Cornelius in chapter 10. This led the church to the discovery that God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile when giving the Spirit to those who responded to the gospel (15: 9).

Consistent throughout Luke's writing is the conviction that the gospel is not only for Israel but for all whom God calls to belong to him, and that includes Gentiles. In Acts 13: 46 – 48 Luke emphasises the commission of Jesus to be 'a light to the Gentiles'. God wants to restore Israel to himself, along with all human beings (15: 11) and Acts is designed to show how God was working towards this goal expressed long ago by the Old Testament prophets (15: 14 - 18).

As in his gospel, Luke shows how all types of people from all levels of society were told the good news. He also records the friendliness of Roman officials and the Gentile mission soon dominates Luke's account. In the movement out from Jerusalem the good news is taken to the Samaritans (8: 4 – 13), to an Ethiopian (8: 27– 39) and to the poor (9: 32 – 41). Although it was often the Jews who resisted the gospel as Paul and others continued to spread the good news, Luke does not say that *all* Jews rejected Jesus. Their leaders were hostile (Acts chapters 4, 5, 6, 9), but there were ordinary Jews who did respond and were converted (for example, 2: 41; 4: 1 - 4; 5: 14; 6: 7). Paul preaches in the synagogues first in his missionary journeys, and to the Jewish leaders in Rome (28: 23). The good news of Jesus is still 'the hope of Israel' (28: 20).

This was important, because Luke shows Paul turning to the Gentiles with the gospel because of the Jews' rejection of it (13: 46 - 7; 28: 25 - 7). In addition, the much more conservative Jewish Christians in the church in Jerusalem had to deal with the fact that God led the way to Gentiles being admitted into the church without first having to become Jews committed to observing all the Jewish Law (15: 28 - 29; 21: 25). Drane explains that the conservative Jewish Christians had retained their Jewish faith and practice whilst acknowledging Jesus as the promised Messiah (2010: 240), and had great difficulty welcoming into the church Gentiles with no knowledge of Judaism (Drane, 2010: 274; 280 - 281).

The book of Acts shows that Christianity is rooted in Judaism and developed out of it in fulfilment of prophecy that included Gentiles as part of God's creation of 'a people for his name' (15: 14). God had not rejected the Jews and broken his covenant relationship with them. In Jesus he had fulfilled his promise to Abraham that from his obedience and from his lineage would come blessing for *all* nations (Genesis 12: 1 - 3). God was now extending the new covenant relationship with himself to the Gentiles too, as he had intended from the beginning. The coming of the Holy Spirit had shown that Gentiles had no need of the Law to bring them into (and keep them in) a right relationship with God. Paul's letters also reflect the struggle with this issue of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the early days of the church (Acts 15: 1 - 5).



Life in the early church. In Acts Luke also shows us the life of the early church. The first description of their way of life in 2: 42 - 7 is reflected in later references. Praying and worshipping together, fasting and meeting to 'break bread' are all mentioned (see for example 6: 4; 12: 5; 13: 2 - 3; 20: 7). Luke also describes how the apostles appointed local leaders to care for the Christian communities that were developing (6: 1 - 7 and 11: 19 - 26) as well showing the church's process of talking together, consulting the Scriptures and listening to the Spirit when making key decisions (for example, in Acts 10 - 15).

Overview of the story of Acts. There are a number of significant turning points in the story in Acts. Chapters 1: 1 - 6: 7 tells the story of the beginning of the church in Jerusalem, the centre of Judaism, sparked by the coming of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised. The early Christian witness to the world is reflected in Peter's sermon in 2: 5 - 41. God had made Jesus, whom his listeners crucified, both Lord and Messiah (2: 36). This message was supported by reference to prophecy, to Jesus' life and ministry and, crucially, to the resurrection.

Chapters 6 - 12 show how the gospel reached Palestine and Syria. It was the death of Stephen at the hands of the Jewish leaders that sent Christians out from Jerusalem with the message about Jesus. Although the apostles stayed in Jerusalem others fled from the persecution and shared their faith with their new neighbours. Samaritans were among those who came to faith as a result (8: 1 - 40). Drane points out that Luke shows just how important a role the death of Stephen played in the spread of the gospel.

‘The story of Stephen’s martyrdom occupies a pivotal position in the book of Acts as one of the most crucial events for the development of the life of the church, with consequences for its future course that were to drive it well away from Jerusalem, or even Palestine, and lead to its rapid expansion throughout the Roman Empire’ (2010: 239).

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus (9:1 – 31), a zealous Pharisee who wanted to stamp out the Christian faith, is another important development in the story. Drane describes the experience as changing Paul from a ‘Pharisee who opposed all that he thought the Christians represented’ into ‘a Pharisee who followed Jesus’ (2010: 270). Paul never abandoned his Jewish faith, seeing Jesus as the promised Messiah, and Luke shows that this was the man whom God has chosen to share the gospel with the Gentiles and kings as well as with the people of Israel (9: 15).

Meanwhile, under the direction of the Spirit, Peter was the means by which the Spirit was given to a Gentile believer, Cornelius (10: 1 – 11: 18). Although the Jewish Christian leaders felt strongly that Gentiles should keep all of the Law in order to be part of the church, Peter responded to their criticism with the statement that this encounter with Cornelius was clearly God’s doing and he could not stand in God’s way (11: 17). By giving the Spirit to a Gentile, God had shown that their inclusion in the Christian community should be on the basis of faith, not on the basis of their willingness to become Jews first.



The believers preached in (Syrian) Antioch (11: 19 - 12: 25) and the response was so great that Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to lead the growing community there. Barnabas invited Saul, now named Paul, from Tarsus, to be his co-worker at Antioch. From this point on, Paul becomes central to the story in Acts. Luke shows how God continued to open doors to the gospel being shared with the Gentiles during Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey (13: 1 – 14: 28).

Paul’s sermons about Jesus as the promised Saviour of Israel provoked the anger of the Jews who viewed his teaching as undermining their faith. When their opposition to his message began to intensify Paul went outside of the synagogue. His message that people were put right with God by faith, not by keeping the Law, met with a ready response from Gentiles. And so the gospel spread to Cyprus and Asia Minor.

It was the response to the gospel by Gentiles that led to the Council at Jerusalem (15: 1 – 35). Here the vital decision was made to admit Gentiles to full membership of the church, asking only that they accept basic moral standards and respect enough of the Jewish food laws to enable Jews and Gentiles to share meals together in the church community. The Holy Spirit revealed that no other burden should be imposed on these converts (15: 28 – 29). The Spirit continued to guide the church’s mission and in this way the gospel reached Europe (16: 6 – 7; 15: 36 – 20: 38).

Acts shows how Paul’s third missionary journey (19 – 21: 6) culminated in his arrival in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire (21: 1 – 28: 31). Paul left Ephesus and set

off on the long journey back to Jerusalem (19: 1, 21). He preached as he travelled. Chapters 17 and 18 show how the hostility of the Jews had followed him and caused trouble for him, and this continued to happen (19: 33; 20: 3). Breaking his journey in Caesarea, Paul is warned of the danger that awaited him in Jerusalem (21: 10 – 14), and Luke shows how the ‘Jews from Asia’ almost succeeded in getting him killed in a riot they had incited (chapters 21 – 23). Paul was taken into custody, and the Jews’ charge against him was that he had taught the Gentile converts to disregard the Law (21: 28). The result was that Paul was able to testify before Felix the Governor, then Festus, his successor, as well as before King Agrippa. As a Roman citizen brought to trial Paul also had the right to appeal to Caesar, and when he did so, he was sent under escort to Rome although the Roman authorities could find no fault with him (26: 30 - 32).



So, arriving there as a prisoner, and after a hazardous journey, God ensured that Paul achieved his aim of preaching in Rome. There Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Jewish community, meeting with a mixed reaction (28: 23 – 25). Paul’s final statement in Acts refers to the fulfilment of prophecy and the affirmation that ‘this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen’ (28: 28 - 29). Luke closes his book with Paul preaching freely about Jesus to all who came to hear what he had to say. The gospel first proclaimed in Jerusalem had travelled through Judea, Samaria, Antioch, Asia Minor, then mainland Europe, until it finally reached the very centre of the Roman Empire. From there it would be carried out into the wider world. The words of Jesus at the beginning of the book of Acts had been fulfilled.

Now turn to the recommended reading, then complete the assignment(s) for this lesson