

Goals

Young people often consider history an irrelevant and boring subject. Why learn about people long dead and events long past? We need to realize that God is the God of history. Abraham was chosen at a specific point in human history. The nation of Israel really did exist in ancient times. Jesus came into the world to become a part of world history forever. Within history humans did what was right before God, or offended God through sinful acts. It is therefore imperative that we should learn from the mistakes of our spiritual forebears. The first section of this text maps out the path that the first Christians took in establishing the church. We see how they gradually moved away from the will of God, and substituted their own will and ideas. But through prayer, the Holy Spirit will work in every heart that is willing to receive the Lord's guidance in utmost humility. Let us open our hearts and minds to discover the working of God in human history.

Teacher Devotional

Deuteronomy 12:32 tells us: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." The Lord established the apostolic church, as He established our church. The early church was not careful in observing the Lord's commandments, and they added human teachings into the doctrines of the church. They bent to social pressures to conform to the world around them.

We are in a changing world. We face social pressures, just as during the times of the early church. We should be ready to learn from their errors and pray that the Holy Spirit will give us courage to stand firm in our beliefs. As we discover the history of the early church and trace the origins of its downfall, let us ask God to preserve our faith and keep us in His ways.

Keeping the Truth

*"The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever."
(Is 40:8)*

The Establishment of a United Church**Listed Scriptures**

Acts 2, 13, 14, 15:39–18:22, 18:23–21:17

Lesson Aims

- 1) To learn about the development of the early Church.
- 2) To understand that the Holy Spirit is able to unite God's people when they call upon Him.

Memory Verse

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Jn 14–15, Acts 1–2, 2 Tim 1

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D

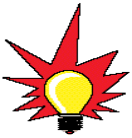
Around the first century AD, a charismatic Jewish leader named Jesus began a movement that changed the course of history. The beginning of this movement is recorded in the four gospels of the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles records the founding of the church, which was the meeting place for the adherents of this movement. Followers of this movement eventually became known as Christians.

Writings of various apostles record the internal growth and problems within the Christian community. One of the key factors affecting the early Christians was the persecutions that began with the execution of Stephen (Acts 6 and 7) and grew in intensity over the first two centuries. As their lives were threatened, many stuck to their faith, willing to die for Christ—sometimes through the most painful or tortuous death. Others, however, renounced their faith or modified the original teachings of the apostles in order to accommodate this difficult situation.

The Christian Bible is not the only source of this historical information. Historians of the time also recorded many of these events that match accounts mentioned in the New Testament. For example, Cornelius Tacitus (c.55–117) provided important confirmation of events recorded in the New Testament. He outlined the rise of Christianity, mentioned the execution of Christ, and wrote accounts of the persecution of Christians by Nero. Another writer who wrote about the Christian movement was Josephus. A Jew, Josephus wrote the *Archaeology* (or *Antiquities*) of the Jews, an immense work in twenty volumes, which appeared in AD 93–94. There is a passage about Jesus in book 18, while other passages deal with John the Baptist and James the Just.

As we read the Bible, we should be aware that we are also reading a part of mankind's history. However, we should remember that history is in God's hands. Psalm 22:28 reminds us that the "kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations." As we learn about the development of Christianity, we are also learning about the works of God and how humans respond to Him.

W A R M U P



Ask students to think of an experience or event they remember very well and enjoyed. For example, it could be traveling abroad, a school trip, a surprise birthday party, a visit to Disneyland, a hiking trip, etc. It has to be something they would love to do or experience again. Ask them to share their experiences. Be sensitive to the fact that some students may not be comfortable sharing personal experiences, so not everyone needs to share.

Once everyone who wishes to share their stories has done so, ask them why they would wish to go through the experience again (i.e., go on that trip again, or visit Disneyland again, etc). How do they know they will enjoy the experience? [They have done this once before, and it was very enjoyable, so they know they will enjoy it again because of past experience.]

Next, ask one or two volunteers to try and persuade others in the class that they would also enjoy such an experience. It could be any relevant or appropriate experience. Use your judgment based on what you hear.

Afterwards, ask the other students if they have been persuaded to go. That is, if they had a choice, and were able to, would they go and

experience what their classmates described? If the answer is yes, ask them why. If they say no, ask them why also. How did they base their judgment of whether they would enjoy a described experience? [Based on what others have experienced; they trust their classmates to have given them an honest and true assessment of what they have enjoyed; they feel confident that they can use the experience of others to make a decision.]

Use the discussion as a springboard into history. Many students find history boring and irrelevant. Yet, all our decisions are based on history. Every moment that passes becomes the past, and therefore a part of our history. When we make important decisions, we need to base our decisions on past experiences. Do we enjoy thrill rides? If we have been on one before and have enjoyed the experience, then we would enjoy Disneyland. Do we love Disney characters? If we have always loved watching Disney cartoons, chances are that we would enjoy going to Disney World and seeing all these characters around us. On the other hand, even if we have never climbed the Rockies, and a good friend has had that experience and enthusiastically recommends it, we might decide to go and try it one day. All these decisions are really based on our or someone else's past experiences—in other words, historical perspectives. The Bible gives us many historical perspectives vital to our spiritual lives. The historical information found in the Bible spans from the creation of the world to sometime around the end of the first century AD. Our decisions about what we should believe, how we should worship God, or how we should conduct ourselves as true Christians must be based on this very important historical guide. The history contains spiritual guidelines critical to our salvation. We need to study history because God is the God of history. From the past, we learn about the mistakes of our spiritual ancestors and learn to avoid them. We learn from them what pleases God and try to emulate them. We read about the warnings of our spiritual forefathers, listen to their advice, learn from the revelations God gave them, and heed these things.

Let us therefore ask God to guide us as we take a trip through the history of the church, so that we may learn from the mistakes of the past, and make wise choices in matters of our faith.



The Book of the Acts of the Apostles

The Book of Acts is crucial to our understanding of events leading to the inception of the earliest church. The church was not established gradually. It came with a very loud sound, in tongues of fire, on one of the busiest days in Jerusalem.

a. Read Acts 2:1–4.

1. Write in point-form a summary of the sequence of events happening here.
 - (1. disciples united together in one place on the Day of Pentecost;
 2. a sound of rushing wind from heaven filled the place;
 3. tongues of fire appeared to the disciples;
 4. each disciple had a tongue of fire upon them;
 5. once this happened, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues.)
2. Which two elements are portrayed in this passage? (wind and fire.)
3. God's presence is often linked to powerful elements and forces of nature. Can you think of stories or incidents in the Bible when God appeared with in these powerful forces? (e.g. Exodus 3:2ff–Moses and the burning bush, 19:18—at Mt. Sinai; Num 16:28–35—punishment of God through earthquake and fire; 1 Kings 19:11–12—Elijah at Mt. Horeb; Ps 18:7–15—many images of forces of nature linked to God's presence/actions; Isa 66:15–16—the Lord will come with whirlwind and fire; other relevant examples also acceptable)

b. Read Acts 2:5–13 carefully. Why were people confused about the situation?

(Devout Jews from many different countries were gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost. Needless to say, many spoke the languages of their homelands. If you were there, you would hear a cacophony of voices and noises, many speaking in different languages. When this crowd heard a loud sound coming from a group of men and women, they came to see what was happening. They saw a group of people speaking aloud. Astonishingly, the multitude that was there heard their own language spoken by these people. Each heard their own

language spoken by a group of simple men and women whose main language was Galilean. How could such simple people suddenly become multilingualists?)

c. Peter stood up and spoke a powerful sermon that converted three thousand people instantly (Acts 2:14–41). This was the same Peter who denied Jesus three times when the Lord was arrested. That was the effect of the Holy Spirit on him. The New Testament is full of explanations or descriptions about the effect of the Holy Spirit on believers. Read the following verses to discover some of the effects the Holy Spirit could have on us. Think of other verses if you can.

1. 2 Tim 1:7
(gives us power and a sound mind, teaches us love)
2. Gal 5:22–23
(fruit of the spirit)
3. Eph 3:16–19
(gives us strength within, enables us to understand the completeness and entirety of God's love, allows us to be filled with the fullness of God)
4. Jn 14:15–18
(reassurance that Jesus is in us even though He's not here)
5. Jn 15:26–27
(helps us and gives us strength to bear witness to Him)

d. As the young church gained a foothold in the world, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles and believers in preaching the truth and spreading the gospel of Christ. The church at the beginning was a unified entity. All the members shared the same beliefs and practices, as well as their possessions. This was the effect of the Holy Spirit on the church. Acts 2:42 describes a vital, growing church. Three things were key in the verse. List them, and explain what they mean in practice:

1. Continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship
(Meaning: Continue to learn the words of God and follow His teachings.)
2. Breaking of bread
(Meaning: This refers to the Holy Communion, but is also an encouragement to participate fully in the church community.)

3. Prayer
(Meaning: Support one another through prayer, pray for the church, etc)

- e. **Having read the above verses on the effects of the Holy Spirit on a believer and the church, can you explain why the church described in Acts 2:42–27 was so unified?**
(students' response)

C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



1. Draw a timeline to illustrate the key events recorded in Acts 1 and 2. (From Jesus ascended to heaven to disciples prayed in a room)
2. Explain, in your own words, what we can learn about unity from the early church.

L I F E A P P L I C A T I O N

Teaching Tips

This is an ongoing, weekly activity for the next 5 weeks. All teachers of the class need to be involved, as the students will need guidance. This is a good leadership and collaborative project for the class. The date for the fellowship can be flexible, depending on your church's schedule or situation. However, the activity is timetabled as part of lesson 6, so there is as little disruption or extra work as possible for teachers. It is best if all teachers for the class can be present for this fellowship.



Fellowship

It is essential for a healthy church to hold true to the teachings of Christ, for all members to take part fully in the community that forms the church, and find strength in prayer. Work together to plan one fellowship for your class, which takes into account these important needs of the community of Christ. You may invite other classes to join your fellowship if this is appropriate. Try

to involve everyone in your class in the planning. Decide what activities you would like, and delegate different people to be responsible for each activity. Remember Acts 2:42 as your guideline. Your agenda should focus on:

- prayer
- community and faith-building activities that will help to draw people closer together.

Your fellowship will take place during the week of Lesson 6, after the lesson has been covered, so you have time to plan carefully. As you plan, think of the needs of your group and your church community. Take into account anyone who needs help or support, physically or spiritually. You could plan group games to give everyone an opportunity to get to know each other better. You could ask various counselors, pastors or deacons to help with discussions, and you could plan a question and answer session too. The possibilities are endless. Some considerations are:

- a. Have an aim or a theme for the fellowship.
- b. Decide on how much time you wish to plan for. E.g., a one-hour fellowship could include a discussion of a topic or issue, snacks, games, hymn singing. If it is less than an hour, you will have fewer items on your agenda.
- c. Always have a counselor, deacon or pastor present. People are more likely to ask questions about faith or other issues in a more relaxed atmosphere, and you want to have someone more mature who is able to help out if this happens.
- d. Delegate tasks. Everyone should be involved.
- e. You could invite students from another class if you wish, or even truth seekers, if you plan for this.
- f. Always allow time to pray together during fellowships, and try to make it a relaxing atmosphere so everyone feels comfortable.

This exercise gives you a chance to think about the success of the early church and how we can apply their strategies ourselves today. It also provides everyone with an opportunity to become involved in a collaborative project that is fun and beneficial in fostering closer ties within the household of God.



As we learn to take on more responsibility for our own faith, and the faith of our brothers and sisters around us, let us remember always the vitality of the early church described in Acts. It is something to strive for and maintain. We should depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us and keep us spiritually close to each other, so we may support one another in times of need, as the earliest church members did. They have provided us with a shining example to follow. Let us pray and ask the Lord to grant us the wisdom, courage and a loving heart to follow in their footsteps.

God Prepares the Way

Listed Scriptures

Joel 2:28–32; Micah 5:2–5; Mt 1:18–2; Acts 6

Lesson Aim

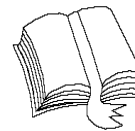
- 1) To understand that God prepared the groundwork for the spreading of His gospel.
- 2) To let the students know that God guides His apostles and followers as they strive to do His will.

Memory Verse

“For my eyes have seen Your salvation, Which you have prepared before the face of all peoples.” (Lk 2:30, 31)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Acts 3–5



We often worry about many aspects of our lives. We are concerned about making the right choices and sometimes filled with self-doubt. From the Bible and other historical accounts, we can see that God prepares everything for us. All we need to do is to ask for His guidance. This is clearly evident when we study the history of the Jewish people around the time of the birth of Christ and thereafter.

For example, the period around the first century AD was a turbulent time for the Jewish people. Although they had been granted the freedom to return to their homeland by King Cyrus, they did not regain their kingdom of Israel. In fact, they would later be controlled by the Greeks and then the Romans. Nor did all Jews return to the Promised Land. Many remained in the land of their captivity, becoming a part of the new culture while still maintaining their faith. Their worship centered around