

THE INTERPRETATION BIBLE STUDIES LEADER HELPS

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The IBS Leader Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of interactive methods, which have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process.

Each participant in the group should have a copy of IBS study book and should make a commitment to do advance preparation for each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those that are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

Read Acts in its entirety before beginning to teach. It is important to familiarize yourself with the book's overall content, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.

Skim through the whole study book to discern its flow. This is especially helpful if there are multiple teachers, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next unit.

Prepare the room ahead of time. For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semi-circular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as "the authority."

Secure necessary teaching aids. A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to display the sheets for future reference. A map showing Paul's missionary journeys is very helpful. Check the teaching suggestions for other necessary materials, such as hymnals, paper, pencils, art materials, and so on.

Prepare necessary handouts. A folder for each participant's handouts is helpful, but not essential.

Keep the key idea firmly in mind. Make sure all activities point participants towards this goal.

Pray for God's guidance. Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Unit 1: New Beginnings (Acts 1:1–26)

Key Idea: With the ascension of Jesus, disciples then and now became the corporate body of believers, the body of Christ in the world.

Advance Preparation

You will need hymnals for each participant. On newsprint, print the following and post it where it can be easily read:

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

The purpose of Acts is to persuade, to challenge, and to proclaim good news by recounting the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the New Testament church.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use this prayer, or one of your own:

Loving God, who sent Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the New Covenant, we give thanks that you have promised that where two or three are gathered together in your name, there you will be also. As we begin this study of the book of Acts, keep us ever mindful that the story of those acts goes on and that we are a part of it. For we ask it in the name of the risen and ascended Christ. Amen.

2. Singing a Hymn

Sing “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name!” or “Crown Him with Many Crowns.”

3. Getting Acquainted

Ask participants to take turns responding to this open-ended sentence: “My name is _____ and I’m waiting for” If persons are new to the group, allow enough time for them to get acquainted with the others.

Presentation (15 minutes)

4. Introducing Acts

Ask someone to find and read aloud Luke 1:1–4. Then ask a second volunteer to find and read aloud Acts 1:1–2. Ask: To whom are both books addressed? Point out that opening verses of the books, and other clues such as similarity in style and structure, has caused biblical scholars to conclude that both books are by the same author.

5. *The Purpose of Acts*

Call the attention of participants to the newsprint you posted in advance. Ask: Why does the author suggest that the book might better be called *The Acts of the Holy Spirit* than *The Acts of the Apostles*? Why does the author believe that Acts should not be categorized as history?

Exploration (25 minutes)

6. *Forty Days*

Ask someone to read aloud Acts 1:1–5. Discuss the examples of the time period “forty days” included in the study book.

Discuss question 1 in the Questions for Reflection at the end of the unit. Then ask: What kind of kingdom were the disciples expecting? What did Jesus have in mind?

7. *The Ascension*

Ask participants to read silently vs. 6–11. Then discuss the disciples’ primitive worldview of a three-story universe. Ask: How do you visualize this scene?

Call the attention of participants to the sidebar on p. 10 of the study book and the quotation from Teresa of Avila on p. 11. Discuss question 2 at the end of the unit.

8. *The Choosing of Matthias*

Ask participants to read silently vs. 12–26. Ask: How would you characterize waiting in our culture? How did the disciples wait?

Ask someone to read aloud the sidebar about casting lots (found on p. 13 of the study book). Ask: How do we choose persons to fill offices in the church? Do we give the task prayerful consideration? Do we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to act? Or do we approach it as if it were a popularity contest or a reward for diligent service to the church?

Response (5 minutes)

9. *Affirming Our Faith*

Remind participants that belief in the ascension is one of the crucial tenets of the Christian faith. Invite them to affirm their faith by repeating the Apostle’s Creed.

Closing (5 minutes)

10. *Prayer*

Close with the following prayer:

O King of glory and Lord of hosts,
who ascended triumphantly above the heavens,
do not abandon us,
but send us the promised one,
the Spirit of truth.
Blessed be the holy and undivided Trinity,
now and forever.

(From *Book of Common Worship*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 334.)

11. Assignment

Call the attention of participants to the questions on p. 5 of the study book that the author used in his study group. Suggest that they keep these questions in mind as they study Unit 2 and the passage of scripture for next session. Also ask participants to reflect on the stories of Price Gwynn and Corrie Ten Boom, and think about events in their own lives when they either felt or did not feel the Holy Spirit acting in them.

Unit 2: Pentecost (Acts 2:1–42)

Key Idea: The Holy Spirit that empowered those first Christians at Pentecost still yearns to be at work within us today.

Advance Preparation

Read over the guided meditation in step 3. In this session, you will need newsprint, markers, and tape. Participants will need hymnals, paper, and pens or pencils.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Read Acts 1:8. Then use this prayer, or one of your own:

Almighty God,
 at the Feast of Pentecost
 you sent your Holy Spirit to the disciples,
 filling them with joy and boldness
 to preach the gospel;
 empower us with that same Spirit
 to witness to your redeeming love
 and draw all people to you;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and forever. Amen.

(From *Book of Common Worship*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 339.)

Presentation (20 minutes)

2. *The Holy Spirit*

Have participants look up Genesis 1:2 and Exodus 19:16–18. Ask volunteers to read the passages aloud. Note that fire and wind were signs of God’s presence in Old Testament times. Ask the following: What does the author say was different about the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as opposed to the way the Spirit appeared in Old Testament times?

3. *Guided Meditation*

The Pentecost story is full of strong images that seek to communicate the power of the experience. Ask participants to close their eyes and listen as you guide them through a meditative experience of the story. Then read the following, slowly and with meaning:

It is the day of Pentecost, and you are in the house of one of Jesus' followers along with the other disciples. You are praying together, as you have been doing constantly for the last ten days. In the silence of the room, you suddenly become aware of a distant sound. And then, all at once and seemingly out of nowhere, the room is filled with a violent wind. It whips through your hair, whistling in your ears and disturbing your clothing. All around you, others are wrapping cloaks around them and reaching to secure household items that are blowing around the room. You are aware that it is like a great wind, but somehow not like that at all.

Then you look at a disciple sitting near you. At first what you see looks like fire, possibly started when a candle was blown over. But then you notice that divided tongues, flame-like and yet not, have appeared all over the room among the disciples. Each person appears to have a tongue of flame resting on him or her. Somehow you sense that you, too, are touched by a tongue of flame. You experience a strong sensation of being filled with the presence of Holy Spirit, and you begin to speak in a language not your own. Others around you are speaking, too, and everyone understands; though no one is speaking the same language.

You are set afire with a sense of God's Spirit and deeply moved, as restlessly and powerfully as the strong wind you sensed in the room.

Once you are done, allow participants a few moments of silence, then ask them to open their eyes.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. Peter's Sermon

Ask for volunteers to read aloud Peter's sermon (Acts 2:14–36). Then ask: Why does the author (quoting William Willimon) say that this sermon is itself evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit to transform?

Continue the oral reading with vs. 37–42. Ask: According to the author, what two things did the Holy Spirit empower the disciples to do?

5. The Power of the Holy Spirit Today

Ask two volunteers to briefly retell the stories of Price Gwynn and Corrie Ten Boom (see pp. 14–15 in the study book). Then ask anyone who is willing to do so to share a similar personal story of the power of the Holy Spirit. End this step by discussing question 3 at the end of the unit.

Response (10 minutes)

6. "Every Nation under Heaven"

Ask a volunteer to read aloud the words of Thomas G. Long, quoted by the author of the study book on p. 17, and also the paragraph of commentary following the quote.

Then ask: What diverse groups of people, nationalities, or differing perspectives in our time might Luke have included in the account in v. 9?

Invite participants to make their own list of “every nation under heaven” today. They might include not only different nationalities and racial groups, but those of opposing perspectives or lifestyles as well. Allow about five minutes, then make a list on newsprint. If two or three people have listed the same group, only print it once in your newsprint list. Then read Acts 2:1–12, substituting your list for the nationalities named in vs. 9–11.

Ask the group to reflect on following questions :

- Was it the tongues of the speakers that were affected or the ears of the hearers? (See p. 17 of the study book.)
- What would happen in the controversies of today within the church if the Holy Spirit affected the ears of the hearers?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Singing a Hymn

Sing “Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow” or another Pentecost hymn.

8. Litany

Use the following litany. Tell participants that their response each time is “Come, Holy Spirit!”

Holy Spirit, Creator,
in the beginning you moved over the waters.
From your breath all creation drew life.
Without you, life turns to dust.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Holy Spirit, Counselor,
by your inspiration, the prophets spoke and acted in faith.
You clothed them in power to be bearers of your word.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Holy Spirit, Power,
you came as fire to Jesus’ disciples;
you gave them voice before the rulers of this world.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Holy Spirit, Sanctifier,
 you created us children of God;
 you make us the living temple of your presence;
 you intercede within us with sighs too deep for words.

Come, Holy Spirit!

Holy Spirit, Giver of life,
 you guide and make holy the church you create;
 you give gifts—
 the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the spirit of counsel and fortitude,
 the spirit of knowledge and piety,
 the spirit of the fear of the Lord,
 that the whole creation may become what you want it to be.

Come, Holy Spirit!

(From *Book of Common Worship*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 340.)

9. Prayer

Use the following prayer or another of your choice:

Lord God, we know that the promise is for us, and for our children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom you call. We give thanks for your empowering, troubling, energizing Spirit. Open our hearts to the movement of that Spirit, wherever and in whatever ways it may come. Amen.

10. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 4 and Acts 4:32—5:11. Ask them, if possible, to look up the word *heart* in a good Bible dictionary and answer question 4 at the end of the unit.

Unit 3: Life (and Death) in the Early Christian Community (Acts 4:32—5:11)

Key Idea: Like the first Christians, our belief in the resurrection of Jesus implies a different understanding of what it means to live in community together.

Advance Preparation

If your church has a charter containing a mission statement, obtain a copy. If possible, also get a copy of your congregation's history, or invite someone familiar with that history to come and meet with the group.

You will need large drawing paper, pencils or pens, and small post-it notes for each participant. Obtain at least two concordances for the group. Check with your pastor's or church's library for these resources.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

Amazing and gracious God, we see the proof of your love in the marks of the nails and the spear in the body of the risen Christ. As the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ marked the disciples, so we too are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Forgive us when we forget what it means to live in you and in the community of faith. Amen.

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. The "Good Old Days"

Explore your congregation's history, either by hearing from a guest or by sharing high and low points from a printed history. If you have obtained a mission or purpose statement, read it over with the group. Ask: What were some of the issues involved in getting this congregation started? Has our congregation lived up to its mission statement? Does it still apply? Then discuss Thomas G. Long's description of church histories, as quoted by the author of the study book on p. 24.

3. Listening to Scripture

Ask someone to read aloud Acts 4:32–35. Then point out that the author of the study book (on p. 25) says of v. 32: "For twentieth century Western Christians, this sentence grates like fingers on a chalkboard. It irritates, even angers. It sounds like communism! Indeed, it is communism—communism in its purest form." Ask: Is this response true for you? How do you respond to this viewpoint?

Following that discussion, note that Robert Bellah says that individualism lies at the very core of American culture. Ask: How can we reconcile this core value with an understanding of what it means to live together in the covenant community?

Exploration (25 minutes)

4. Small Group Work: Character Examination

Divide into two groups. Assign the first group Acts 4:36–37 and the section of the study book about Barnabus (pp. 26–28), as well as the additional scriptures about Barnabus cited in the study book. Assign the other group Acts 5:1–11 and the section of the study book about Ananias and Sapphira (pp. 28–29). Allow each group ten minutes to work, then let each group introduce their assigned characters to the other group. Discuss question 3 at the end of the unit.

5. Exploring the Meaning of “Heart”

Ask participants who were able to look up the word *heart* in a Bible dictionary (the assignment from the previous session) to give a definition of the term. Add the following information:

The Hebrew word for “heart” . . . does not refer to the seat of emotions as in English (in Hebrew that would be “kidneys” or “bowels”). Rather, “heart” refers to the mind and will, that is, the center of the self from which action and loyalty spring.

(From Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, revised and expanded edition, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), p. 97.)

Again have the participants work in the same two small groups. Give each group a concordance, and have one group check the use of *heart* in Luke while the other checks the use in Acts. Allow time for the groups to share their results. Then discuss question 4 at the end of the unit.

Response (10 minutes)

6. What Do You Value?

Recall for participants the comparison of Christianity to a store window (p. 22 of the study book). Give each participant a large sheet of drawing paper and a pen or pencil. Ask them to print randomly around the paper words that represent things they think our culture values, including material goods, such as a house or car or stocks, and intangibles like prestige, power, or fame. Next to each, let them draw a price tag and assign a value using a numbering system (#1 for most valuable, etc). Now give each person some post-it notes. How would each item be revalued in the light of our Christian calling? Let them assign new values and attach post-it notes over their original numbers.

Then invite the participants to reflect on the following questions:

- Does our Christian faith change assumptions of our culture about what is valuable?
- How are we able to be faithful to such reordered valuing? What makes this difficult?

Closing (5 minutes)*7. Singing a Hymn*

Sing “Lord I Want to Be a Christian” or another hymn of personal dedication.

8. Sentence Prayers

Close by inviting participants to offer sentence prayers in the following style: “Lord, I want to be more _____ in my heart.”

9. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 4 and Acts 9:1–19. Ask for volunteers to research the Samaritans and their relationship to the Jews in a Bible dictionary or other reference book. Ask the remaining participants to read the story of Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26–40.

Unit 4: The Conversion of Saul (Acts 9:1–19)

Key Idea: Like Paul, our conversion is a gift from God that enables us to see the world with kingdom eyes—in a new, more faithful way.

Advance Preparation

Prepare a sheet of newsprint by drawing three large concentric circles for the scripture map in step 1. On another sheet of newsprint, draw two large intersecting circles for the compare/contrast exercise in step 5. Label one circle “Call of Moses” and the other “Encounter on the Road.”

Read the directions for the spiritual reading exercise in step 8. Practice reading aloud the adapted scripture passage, found below.

Spiritual Reading: Acts 9:3–9; 15–17

Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

The Lord said to [Ananias], “Go, for Saul is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use this prayer, or one of your own:

Lord, sometimes when we are on our way to some place—our work place, our place of worship, any place—we hear your voice calling. We don’t want to acknowledge your words, because we prefer to continue on our way, doing things just as we have always done them. Remind us that we are the People of the Way. Blind us to complacency, and give us eyes to see things in a new way. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. Insiders and Outsiders

Direct participants' attention to the three concentric circles on the prepared newsprint. Label the center circle "Judea: Our Kind of People," as suggested by the author of the study book. Label the second circle "Samaria." Ask those who researched Samaria to share what they found out about the roots of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. Label the outer circle "To the Ends of the Earth" Ask those who read Acts 8 to briefly summarize the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Remind participants that the author of the study book tells us that in Acts 8—10 there are three pairs of "insiders" and "outsiders," and that in each case we are surprised to find out which one of the pair is an insider and which an outsider. Ask: What did you find in this story?

3. Discussing "Conversion"

Review what the author of the study book has to say about conversion. Ask: Is the author's definition of *conversion* the same as yours? In what ways is it the same, or different? Then discuss question 2 at the end of the unit.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. The Conversion of Saul

Remind the participants that this may be a very familiar story. Invite them to listen carefully to the reading of this scripture. Then ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 9:1–9. After he or she is done, ask the group: Were any details of the story surprising to you?

Now ask someone to read Philippians 3:4b–6. Point out that Saul was an upstanding, respected, religious man with all the credentials of a righteous Jew.

5. Comparing and Contrasting Call Stories

Ask someone else to read Exodus 3:1–12. Then ask participants to contrast the call of Moses and Saul's encounter on the road to Damascus. Print aspects unique to Moses' call in the outside portion of the circle labeled "Call of Moses." Print aspects unique to Saul's encounter in the outside portion of the circle labeled "Encounter on the Road." Then ask for ways in which the stories are similar or alike, and print these details in the overlapping area of the circle diagram.

6. The Conversion of Ananias

Ask another volunteer to read Acts 9:9–19. Discuss Ananias's initial reluctance to go to Saul. Then, using the author's questions in the study book, discuss how we are sometimes like Ananias. Next, compare the responses of Ananias and Saul by using question 3 at the end of the unit. Finally, note that the author calls Ananias's words to Saul "one of the most daring statements of faith in the Bible." Ask: Why?

Response (10 minutes)

7. *Making an Insider/Outsider Map*

Give each participant a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. Using question 1 at the end of the unit as a guide, have them draw a series of concentric circles, labeling each with the names of people or groups of people. Then ask them to look at the names or categories of people they have put in their outermost circle as you read the following quote from p. 38 of the study book: “This story from Acts invites you to look at the people you meet through your kingdom eyes.” Ask: How would looking through your kingdom eyes influence the way you see these people? How would it affect your interactions with them? (Note: Keep in mind the author’s observations on p. 33 about the early days of the American mission movement.)

Closing (10 minutes)

8. *Spiritual Reading of Acts 9*

Remind participants of how familiar this story is to many of us. By listening devotionally to this passage, we have the opportunity to open ourselves so that the Holy Spirit may speak to us through the scriptural text. Tell participants that you will read a portion of the passage through four times. Then follow these steps:

- Read the passage aloud.
- Then read it a second time, reading more slowly. Ask participants to be alert for any word or phrase that draws their attention in a special way. It might jump out at them, seem to address them personally, or startle or disturb them. They should repeat this word or phrase to themselves.
- Read the passage through a third time. Invite participants to let the passage invoke an answering response (for example: an emotion, an image, or a memory).
- Read the passage aloud a fourth time. This time invite participants to hold the word or phrase and the answering response together and reflect on their meaning. Is there a connection to something going on in their personal life? What might God be saying to them?
- Allow for a time of silent prayer. Then conclude by saying, “In the name of Jesus, Amen.”

9. *Assignment*

Ask participants to read Unit 5 and Acts 10:1—11:18. Ask them also to read the following scripture passages about Peter:

- Luke 5:1–11
- Luke 9:18–20
- Luke 9:28–36
- Luke 22:54–62

Unit 5: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1—11:18)

Key Idea: How the early church responded to this first test of its inclusivity was a pivotal issue for the book of Acts and continues to stretch the church’s understanding of who we are and who we will be.

Advance Preparation

Make storyboard sheets for the drama in step 4 by printing one of the following captions on each of five sheets of newsprint or poster board:

- Scene 1: Cornelius Has a Vision (10:1–8)
- Scene 2: Peter Has a Vision (10:9–16)
- Scene 3: Cornelius’ Men Seek Peter (10:17–23a)
- Scene 4: Peter and Cornelius Meet in Caesarea (10:23b–33)
- Scene 6: Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit (10:44–48)

Note that Scenes 5 and 7 will be presented by having Peter’s words read aloud.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Singing a Hymn*

Sing “In Christ There Is No East or West” or another hymn about the inclusivity of Christ’s church.

2. *Prayer*

Use this prayer, or one of your own:

How great is your love, Lord God,
 how wide is your mercy!
 Never let us board up the narrow gate that leads to life
 with rules or doctrines that you dismiss;
 but give us a Spirit to welcome all people with affection,
 so that your church may never exclude secret friends of yours,
 who are included in the love of Jesus Christ,
 who came to save us all. Amen.

(From *Book of Common Worship*, Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 804.)

Presentation (5 minutes)

3. Character Study: Peter

Ask participants what insights they gained into Peter's character from the passages assigned as reading at the end of the previous session. Note that the author of the study book says on p. 41 that Peter, the rock on which Jesus said he would build his church, lived a life of faith that seemed "to lurch and swerve; it's a rocky ride." Then ask the participants to compose a brief biography of Peter.

Exploration (30 minutes)

4. Storyboarding the Drama

Divide into five small groups and give one of the prepared storyboard sheets to each group. (Note: If your group is small, assign scenes to individuals. If your group has fewer than five members, combine scenes for them to work on.)

Direct the small groups to read the assigned scripture passage and to review the portion of the study book that relates to that passage. Then they should decide how to present their scene to the total group by making a sketch or drawing symbols or phrases on the storyboard sheet, by dramatizing the scene themselves, or by using some other method.

After allowing fifteen minutes for the groups to work, have them present their scenes in order. For Scene 5: Gentiles Hear the Good News (10:34–43) and Scene 7: Peter's Report to the Church at Jerusalem (11:1–18), ask for volunteers to read the passages aloud.

Response (15 minutes)

5. Discussing the Lessons

Discuss the three lessons the author presents in the study book. Then ask some or all of the following questions:

- Is the Holy Spirit pushing us to think about people in new ways? Have we been guilty of allowing bias and prejudice to cloud our thinking? Could it be that the same Spirit who opened Peter's eyes to a clearer way of seeing is also doing the same for us?
- Who are the Gentiles of today? Who are the ones excluded from the church?
- Who are the Corneliuses in your community?
- What is your response to the following comment from p. 46 in the study book: "[T]he Spirit does not call us to be comfortable. The Spirit calls us to be faithful"?
- On p. 46, the author quotes an African American friend as saying: "Too many people think that integration means 'you become like us.' But real integration means that both of us change into something brand new." How do you respond?

Closing (5 minutes)*6. Closing Words of Scripture*

Read these words from 1 Cor.12:12–13:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

7. Prayer

Invite participants to offer sentence prayers for the church and the world. After each individual prayer, have the group respond: “Give us your Holy Spirit.”

8. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 6 and Acts 15. Also ask for volunteers to research the rite of circumcision in a Bible dictionary or other reference.

Unit 6: The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

Key Idea: As the young Christian church struggled to establish rules for living together in the covenant community, they sought faithfully to find what was essential—as do we today.

Advance Preparation

Make copies of Craig Dykstra’s list of “Christian Practices,” found below:

Christian Practices

1. worshipping God together—praising God, giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world, hearing God’s word preached, and receiving the sacraments given us in Christ;
2. telling the Christian story to one another—reading and hearing the Scriptures and also the stories of the church’s experience throughout its history;
3. interpreting together the Scriptures and the history of the church’s experience, particularly in relation to their meaning for our own lives in the world;
4. praying—together and by ourselves, not only informal services of worship but in all times and places;
5. confessing our sin to one another, and forgiving and becoming reconciled with one another;
6. tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging one another in the work each must do and the vocation each must live;
7. carrying out specific faithful acts of service and witness together;
8. giving generously of one’s means and receiving gratefully gifts others have to give;
9. suffering with and for one another and all whom Jesus showed us to be our neighbors;
10. providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but to strangers and even enemies;
11. listening and talking attentively to one another about our particular experiences in life;
12. struggling together to become conscious of and to understand the nature of the context in which we live;
13. criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) that destroy human beings, corrode human community, and injure God’s creation;
14. working together to maintain and create social structures and institutions that will sustain life in the world in ways that accord with God’s will.

(From Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*; Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999, pp. 42–43.)

Ask your pastor or a church officer with some experience in attending a church judicatory meeting to come and speak with the group about how these meetings work. Also ask for a copy of a docket or minutes from one of these meetings, and obtain a copy of your denomination's rules of governance and guide for worship.

If possible, obtain a map of Paul's first missionary journey. Participants will also need paper and pens or pencils.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Eternal God: you called us to be a special people, to preach the gospel and show mercy. Keep your Spirit with us as we meet together, so that in everything we may do your will. Guide us lest we stumble or be misguided by our own desires. May all we do be done for the reconciling of the world, for the upbuilding of the church, and for the greater glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(From *The Worshipbook*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972, p. 197.)

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. Map Study

On a map of the ancient Mediterranean world in the time of the early church, trace Paul's first missionary journey. Use p. 49 in the study book, as well as Acts 13—14, to check the route.

3. The Conflict

Ask participants to summarize the conflict that faced the early church. Ask those who researched circumcision to share with the group the significance of the rite to the Jews.

Exploration (25 minutes)

4. Listening to Scripture

Ask the group to read silently Acts 15:1–21. Then ask someone to read Peter's testimony aloud (vs. 7b–11). Ask another volunteer to read aloud the testimony of James (vs. 13b–21).

5. Discussing James's Essentials

Ask participants:

- What do you think of James's list of essentials? (See top of p. 52 in the study book.)
- What two different ways of looking at James's list does the author suggest? Which one makes the most sense to you?

6. Hearing about Contemporary Church Councils

Ask your pastor or the church officer you invited to briefly tell about a church council of any size (for example, a presbytery, synod, or General Assembly meeting) and how it works. If you have a copy of a docket or minutes from one of these meetings, give participants a chance to examine these documents and ask questions. Ask someone to read the sidebar on p. 51 about church meetings. Ask: Do you believe the Holy Spirit is at work in church councils today? Why or why not?

7. Essential Beliefs

Look together at the list of essential tenets in your denomination's official rules of governance and guide for worship. Also review Craig Dykstra's list of "Christian Practices." Discuss question 1 at the end of the unit. Then ask: What do you think about these lists? What would you add? subtract?

8. The Council's Letter

Ask someone to read aloud Acts 15:22–35. Then discuss question 3 at the end of the unit.

Response (10 minutes)

9. Writing a Pastoral Letter

Ask participants to choose an issue they think is divisive for the church and write a pastoral letter to congregations in your denomination about the issue. When participants have had sufficient time to write, ask for volunteers to read their letters.

Closing (5 minutes)

10. Closing Litany

Use this litany. Tell participants that the response is "Come, Holy Spirit."

God, you know the human heart. We give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit cleansing our hearts by faith.

Come, Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Send down your energizing, cleansing power on our church councils. Give them the gift of discernment and wisdom.

Come, Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Fill the hearts and minds of our pastors and lay leaders. Give them the gift of love in service.

Come, Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Stir us up. Move us to action. Engage our gifts, the gifts that come from you.

Come Holy Spirit.

In the name of Jesus Christ, through whose grace we are saved. Amen.

11. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 7 and Acts 17: 16–34. Ask them to reflect on question 1 at the end of the unit and make a list of contemporary philosophies, such as existentialism, that deal with life, death, the afterlife, and so forth. Also ask volunteers to research the following in reference books or on the Internet, and to prepare a brief report:

- Epicureanism
- Stoicism
- Athens in the time of Paul
- The Greek pantheon of gods

Finally, ask for a volunteer to be prepared to present Paul's sermon (Acts 17:22b–31) as a sermon.

Unit 7: Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16–34)

Key Idea: Like Paul, we face the challenge of telling the good news of Jesus Christ in a culturally diverse world.

Advance Preparation

If possible, read “Who’s in Charge Here? The Doctrine of the Resurrection,” pp. 270–287 in *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* by Shirley C. Guthrie (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

Write the opening sentences of scripture for step 1 on newsprint, and post the newsprint where it can be easily seen.

Obtain a map of Paul’s second missionary journey.

If you do activity 7, you will need hymnals and perhaps a pianist to play some of the more unfamiliar hymn tunes.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Opening Sentences of Scripture*

Use this traditional Easter greeting, which you have posted on newsprint:

Leader: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

People: The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

2. *Prayer*

Use this prayer, or one of your own:

Lord of life, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ you have given us a living hope. We give thanks for the gift of life eternal, and for the assurance that in life and in death we belong to you. For we ask it in the name of the risen Christ, Amen.

Presentation (20 minutes)

3. *Map Study*

Look at the map of Paul’s second missionary journey. Locate Athens. Ask the person who volunteered to research Athens in the time of Paul to make a brief report.

4. *Reports on Gods and Philosophies*

Ask those who researched Epicureanism, Stoicism, and the Greek pantheon of gods to briefly report on what they found. Then discuss question 1 at the end of the unit. Also ask:

- What contemporary philosophies can you name?
- How do these philosophies differ from the Christian perspective?

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. *Hearing and Critiquing Paul's Sermon*

Read Acts 17:32–34 aloud. Divide the group into three small groups: the scoffers, the hesitators, and the believers. Ask that they listen to Paul's sermon from that perspective. Then have the volunteer who prepared to present Paul's sermon read aloud vs. 22b–31. Have participants role play a critique of Paul's sermon from the perspective of their respective small groups.

6. *Discussing the Doctrine of the Resurrection*

Using question 3 at the end of the unit, discuss the resurrection. Make use of the information from Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* where useful.

Response (10 minutes)

7. *Discussing Evangelism and Mission*

Using question 2 at the end of the unit and drawing on the section of the study book on pp. 59–60 (“Following Paul's Model”), let participants discuss in pairs how they might make connections with people to share the Good News.

8. *Experiencing Different Cultural Perspectives through Hymns*

Use the index of your hymnal to find hymns from the following traditions. Sing some of them to get a sense of the Christian message in a different cultural context:

- African hymns
- African-American spirituals
- Chinese hymns
- Hispanic hymns
- Native American sources
- Taiwanese hymns
- Japanese hymns
- Korean hymns

Closing (5 minutes)*9. Opening Ourselves to God's Presence*

Recall for participants that the author of the study book remarks on p. 63 that this story challenges us “to open our eyes to the unexpected ways that we have experienced God’s presence in our lives.” Remind them that God is always present with us, working for good, but we are often oblivious to the activity of God in our lives. One way to cultivate an awareness of God’s presence is to develop the regular practice of prayer. One form of prayer is a time of directed silence in which we seek to be aware of God’s presence.

Invite participants to sit comfortably in silence, seeking to simply be present to God. They might repeat the following phrase: “In you I live and breathe and have my being.”

After a time of silence, pray:

We give thanks for this time in which we can be still and know that you are God. We pray that we may open our eyes in the coming week to the unexpected ways you make yourself known to us. For we ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.

10. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 8, Acts 16:11–15, and Acts 18:1–4, 18–28.

Unit 8: Women in the New Testament Church (Acts 16:11–15; 18:1–4, 18–28)

Key Idea: In an imperfect world where many voices are still silenced, we are called to bear witness to the unity that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Advance Preparation

Print the opening words from Galatians on newsprint or poster board, and post them where they can be easily read.

On poster board or newsprint, draw a diagram of the courts of the Temple. Use the diagram on p. 64 as a guide, with one caveat. The Court of the Israelites is not identified on this diagram:

All around the Court of the Priests lay, as of old, the Great Court, now double. It was enclosed by a wall, whose top was 25 cubits higher than the pavement. Against the inner side of this wall storage cabinets were built and in front of these, that is, on the temple side, ran a covered colonnade. This court was divided into two parts by a wall. The west portion, that encompassing the Court of the Priests, was the Court of Israel. Only the men of Israel were allowed within it. The Court of Women was the east and lower portion. It was reached from the Court of Israel through a great gate in the center of the partition wall and by a descent of 15 steps. Only Israelites might enter this court, and women might not advance further.

(From John D. Davis, *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1944.)

Also provide hymnals for the participants.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. *Opening Words of Scripture*

Invite the participants to read in unison the following words from Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

2. *Prayer*

Use this prayer, or pray one of your own:

God of love, you chose the woman Mary to bring your Son into the world, and on Easter Day sent women from his empty tomb with news of resurrection. Show us the special work you have for us. Give us a desire to follow worthy women who, in every age, brought life to earth, spread your word, and witnessed to the risen power of Jesus Christ, a woman's child, who is now the Lord of all. Amen.

(From *The Worshipbook*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972, p. 201.)

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. The World of the Early Church

Briefly review the material in the study book about the world of first-century Palestine (pp. 64–65). Point out the diagram of the Temple, adding the Court of Israel. Read aloud the traditional saying about women on p. 65. Ask:

- Can you think of sayings or epigrams about women today that are similar (for example, about women as gossips or nags)?
- The author states that the first-century was definitely a man’s world. What about today? What changes can you name in the status of women? Are there aspects of society that have not changed?

Read aloud again Galatians 3:28. Point out that the new Christian church challenged the established cultural mores about women, but that changes took place gradually over time. The fact that women were mentioned by name in the New Testament is an indication of a radical new approach already underway.

Exploration (30 minutes)

4. Hearing Women’s Stories

Divide the group into two groups. Assign one of today’s passages to each group. Ask that they read the passage and the portion of the study book that comments on that passage. Then have each group prepare a monologue from the perspective of the central woman character in the study book and choose one person to present it to the total group. Women would be the obvious choice to present these monologues, but they can be presented by men. If your study group is very large, divide into four groups and assign the same passages to two groups, but ask one group to add a monologue from Paul’s perspective and one from Aquila’s perspective.

After fifteen minutes, let each group present its monologue to the total group. The members of the other group can ask questions of “Lydia” or “Priscilla.”

Response (10 minutes)

5. Blazing New Ground Today

Discuss question 2 at the end of the unit. In addition to the question posed by the study book, ask: What are the obstacles you think the church might encounter on this particular issue? How might they be overcome?

Closing (5 minutes)*6. Singing a Hymn*

The author mentions the river as a recurring theme in the Bible. Sing “Shall We Gather at the River” or another hymn that uses river imagery as a metaphor.

7. Prayer

Use this prayer or one of your own:

Amazing and gracious God, we give thanks for the witness of the church in the past. We confess that we know all too well how imperfectly we point to the perfect life in the kingdom. Grant that we may be challenged to use our gifts to bring an end to the divisions that separate us from one another. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

8. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 9 and Acts 19:11–41.

Unit 9: A Riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:11–41)

Key Idea: Two worldviews of Paul’s time, one that values generosity and personal sacrifice, and one that values self-interest and wealth, are paralleled in our Christian experience today.

Advance Preparation

On poster board, prepare two travel posters (one for the magicians and one for the temple of Artemis) by printing what the study book has to say about each (see p. 72).

Print the responsive reading in step 1 on newsprint, and post where it can be easily read. Also provide hymnals for the participants.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Opening Words of Scripture

Use the following responsive reading from Matthew 5:19–21, 24:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either the hate one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and wealth.

2. Prayer

Use this prayer, or pray one of your own:

Loving God, we confess that our affluent society is seductive, and that we covet all its luxurious trappings. We have forgotten that living an abundant life is not the same as abundant material wealth. It is easy to rationalize the way we live, and we rationalize very well. Remind us of the vision of the early church, where no one went without and everyone shared possessions. For we ask it in Christ’s name, Amen.

Presentation (15 minutes)*3. Two Reactions to the Christian Message*

Refer participants to p. 73 of the study book, and ask someone to read paragraph 2 and the first sentence of paragraph 3 aloud. Then ask participants to respond to this statement from p. 76: “Kingdom glasses certainly led the early Christians to see things in a new way.”

Ask: Do we still view the world with kingdom glasses? Then ask the participants to cite examples of times and situations when seeing the world through kingdom glasses made a difference in their life or church.

Exploration (25 minutes)*4. The Reaction of the Magicians*

Call the attention of participants to the first travel poster you prepared. Then invite a volunteer to read aloud the account of the magicians in Acts 19:11–20. Compare this comic account with a more serious account about the use of magic in Acts 8:18–23.

5. The Reaction of the Silversmiths

Call the attention of the participants to the travel poster about the Temple of Artemis. Have them read silently the account of the riot in Acts 19:21–41. Retell the story by having one person tell the first thing that happened, then another person adding the next event, and continuing until the entire story is complete.

Response (10 minutes)*6. Adding Graffiti to the Posters*

Place the two travel posters at different places in the room, along with colored markers. Ask participants to add words, phrases, or Bible verses around the edges of the posters that express their responses to the two different reactions represented by the accounts. When everyone has had a chance to add to the posters, discuss question 1 at the end of the unit.

Closing (5 minutes)*7. Singing a Hymn*

Sing “O For a World” or another hymn about dedication to the Christian life.

8. *Prayer*

Close with this prayer, or one of your own:

Gracious God, we long for a you have promised us—but perhaps not badly enough. We long for respect, love lived out, justice, and praise for all, but not enough to have our own safe and secure worlds turned upside down. Forgive us when we are unwilling to truly live as People of the Way. Remind us of the power of that life in community. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

9. *Assignment*

Ask participants to read Unit 10, Acts 25:13—26:32, and Acts 28:30–31. Also ask that they read Luke 22:66—23:25 and be prepared to compare the trials of Jesus and Paul.

Unit 10: Paul’s Trial Before Agrippa (Acts 25:13—26:32; 28:30–31)

Key Idea: The Holy Spirit was at work in Paul’s ministry with all boldness even to the end, and continues to move and work to this very day.

Advance Preparation

Prepare a sheet of newsprint by printing this title at the top: “King Agrippa’s Family Tree.” If you like, add a lightly sketched outline of a tree. Prepare another sheet of newsprint with two large intersecting circles for the compare/contrast activity in step 4.

Have available a copy of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible or another Bible with section headings.

Participants will need paper and fine-line markers or crayons for step 7.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use this prayer, or one of your own:

Dear Lord, we want to serve and love you with our whole hearts—almost, but not quite. We want to take up our cross and follow you—almost, but not quite. We sing, “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold,” and we mean it—almost, but not quite. Forgive us when we are almost persuaded, for that is not persuaded at all. Give us hearts on which your covenant promise is firmly written; backs and wills strong enough to take up your cross, and hands that offer our possessions generously. Amen.

Presentation (15 minutes)

2. Reviewing Headings

To understand how Paul came to be before King Agrippa, review the headings in the New Revised Version of the Bible beginning with Acts 21:27 and going to 25:13. Also ask someone to summarize paragraph 2 on p. 79 of the study book.

3. King Agrippa’s Family Tree

Print “Herod Agrippa II” under the title on the prepared newsprint. Invite participants to name other members of Agrippa’s family tree. Put the names on the appropriate places on the tree, indicating their relationship to the king.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. Compare the Trials of Jesus and Paul

Ask participants to tell what similarities they found in the two trials when working on the assignment from the last session. Ask: What differences and similarities did you find? Put their responses on the prepared newsprint, printing the *differences* in the portions of the circles that do not overlap and the *similarities* in the overlapping portion.

5. Paul's Defense

Have participants read silently Acts 26:2–23. Then point out that the author comments that Paul's account has a ring of authenticity. Ask: Do you agree? Why or why not? What aspects make it seem more authentic than some of the formulaic testimonials?

Then ask: What additional detail does Paul add to the account of his conversion? What is the significance of that addition?

6. "Almost Persuaded"

Call the attention of participants to the sidebar on p. 84 of the study book. Ask: Do you think Agrippa's question was serious or sarcastic? Why?

Then discuss question 2 at the end of the unit.

Response (15 minutes)

7. Personal Faith Timeline

Give each participant a sheet of paper and fine-line markers or crayons. Invite them to make a personal timeline, following the directions found in the study book on pp. 81–82 and in question 1 at the end of the unit.

Also tell participants that they can keep this time line and use it as a tangible way to note times when they are aware of experiencing God's presence.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Litany

Use the following litany. Tell participants that their response is, "Holy Spirit, make us bold."

First read the following quote from p. 86 in the study book:

The promise of Acts is that even in what seemed to be the most “hindered” of circumstances, the Holy Spirit continues to work, and the good news continues to spread, and the church continues to grow. Even now we join the clouds of witnesses who have gone before us. Let us also join them in “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you poured out your Spirit upon gathered disciples, creating bold tongues, open ears, and a new community of faith

Holy Spirit, make us bold.

Pour out your Spirit on our church, that we may be restless in the face of injustice and indifference and energized to act;

Holy Spirit, make us bold.

Pour out your Spirit on our church, that we may unleash its power as we speak the good news of your love;

Holy Spirit, make us bold.

Pour out your Spirit on our church, that we may be transformed and filled with a flaming desire to be your faithful people.

Holy Spirit, make us bold.

May we be emboldened to do your will. For we ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.

(Adapted from *Book of Common Worship*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 343.)