



Little Rock Scripture Study



SAMPLER

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock in Arkansas, in partnership with Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Minnesota. Since 1974 we have been providing resources and a method of Bible study that are effective and easy to use in all kinds of parish or small group settings.

You hold in your hand a sample of our printed material, along with some basic information about the process of Bible study that we have developed. Within these pages you will find the materials used by all participants in a typical week of Bible study.

We have chosen the first lesson of *The Acts of the Apostles* because in this biblical book we are introduced to the life of the early church and the challenge to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. By using the study guide questions and the commentary for this week, you will discover just how easy it is to begin Bible study and the potential it holds for deepening adult faith.

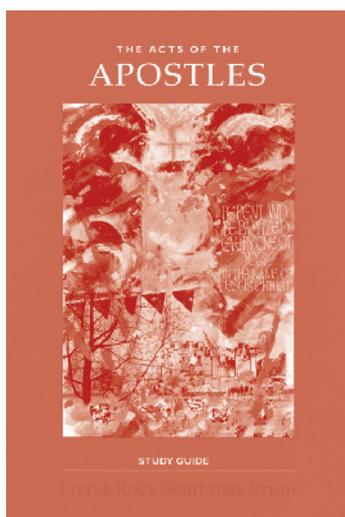
Use this Sampler:

- to introduce yourself to the materials
- to discern with others how Little Rock Scripture Study can be used in your parish or small faith community
- as a component of Leadership Training (see p. 26)

STUDY GUIDE

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Pages 3–23 of this Sampler are drawn from the actual Study Guide and Commentary (Study Set) used for *The Acts of the Apostles*. The full study contains materials for nine lessons. All Little Rock Scripture Study materials are copyrighted and published with a *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*.



LITTLE ROCK SCRIPTURE STUDY

*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

INSTRUCTIONS:

Materials needed to do Little Rock Scripture Study

Bible: The most recent edition of the *New American Bible* or the *New Jerusalem Bible* is recommended. Paraphrased editions are discouraged as they offer little if any help when facing difficult textual questions. Choose a Bible you feel free to write in or underline.

Study Set: A Study Set includes both a Study Guide and a Commentary.

Study Guide: contains assigned readings and daily questions to guide you through a particular Scripture study, for example, *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Commentary: Little Rock Scripture Study makes use of commentaries published by Liturgical Press. For example, this Sampler makes use of the New Testament series, *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles*, by Dennis Hamm.

Optional Materials might include a good Bible dictionary, such as *The Dictionary of the Bible* by John L. McKenzie (Simon & Schuster), and a personal notebook for taking lecture notes and recording your personal reflections.

In the complete Study Guide, *The Acts of the Apostles*, there are nine lessons, as outlined below. The first of these is found on pp. 8–11 of this Sampler. You will also find the associated readings from the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* on pp. 12–23.

WEEKLY LESSONS:

Lesson 1	Acts 1–2	Lesson 6	Acts 16–18
Lesson 2	Acts 3–5	Lesson 7	Acts 19–21
Lesson 3	Acts 6–8	Lesson 8	Acts 22–24
Lesson 4	Acts 9–12	Lesson 9	Acts 25–28
Lesson 5	Acts 13–15		

FOUR ELEMENTS OF LITTLE ROCK SCRIPTURE STUDY

I. Daily Personal Study

Ideally each person spends 15–20 minutes per day reading and reflecting on the Scripture being studied.

The first step is prayer. Open your heart and mind to God. Reading Scripture is an opportunity to listen to God who loves you. Pray that the same Holy Spirit who guided the formation of Scripture will inspire you to correctly understand what you read and empower you to make what you read a part of your life.

The next step is commitment. Daily spiritual food is as necessary as food for the body. This study is divided into daily units. Schedule a regular time and place for your study, as free from distractions as possible. Allow about twenty minutes a day. Make it a daily appointment with God.

As you begin each lesson read the chapters of Scripture as assigned at the beginning of each lesson. Read the footnotes in your Bible as well, and then the indicated pages of the commentary. This preparation will give you an overview of the entire lesson and help you to appreciate the context of individual passages.

The Questions Assigned for Each Day

The questions are designed to help you listen to God's Word and to prepare you for the weekly small-group discussion.

You will find that each question found in this study guide belongs to one of four basic types of questions that are key to effectively reading and understanding Scripture.

- ***What does the passage say?*** Some of the questions can be answered briefly and objectively by referring to the Bible references and the commentary.
- ***What does the passage mean?*** Some questions will lead you to a better understanding of the original meaning of a passage and how it is understood and applied in the Church.
- ***What does the passage mean to me?*** Some questions will invite you to consider how God's Word challenges or supports you in your relationships with God and others.
- ***What am I going to do about it?*** Finally, the questions will lead you to examine your actions in light of Scripture.

2. The Weekly Small Group Meeting

The weekly small-group sharing is the heart of Little Rock Scripture Study. Participants gather in small groups to share the results of praying, reading, and reflecting on Scripture and on the assigned questions. The goal of the discussion is for group members to be strengthened and nourished individually and as a community through sharing how God's Word speaks to them and affects their daily lives. The daily study questions will guide the discussion; it is not necessary to discuss all the questions.

All members share the responsibility of creating an atmosphere of loving support and trust in the group by respecting the opinions and experiences of others and by affirming and encouraging one another. The simple shared prayer that begins and ends each small group meeting also helps create the open and trusting environment in which group members can share their faith deeply and grow in the study of God's Word.

A distinctive feature of this program is its emphasis on and trust in God's presence working in and through each member. Sharing responses to God's presence in the Word and in others can bring about remarkable growth and transformation.

SAMPLE SCHEDULE FOR A WEEKLY MEETING

A typical meeting allows for 90–100 minutes.

- 7:20 Greet participants (10 minutes)
- 7:30 Opening Prayer/Song (5 minutes)
- 7:35 Small-group sharing of lesson with Conversational Prayer* (55 minutes)
- 8:30 Reconvene in lecture area (5 minutes)
- 8:35 Wrap-Up Lecture (20 minutes)
- 8:55 Announcements and Closing Prayer/Song (5 minutes)
- 9:00 Dismiss

Conversational Prayer should take a maximum of ten minutes during the small-group sharing. Facilitators may determine in advance which questions in the Study Guide are most important to cover during the weekly discussion. This will alleviate undue concern when there is not enough time to answer all the questions.

*Please read the material on Conversational Prayer on the following page.

3. The Wrap-up Lecture

The 15-20 minute lecture is designed to develop and clarify the themes of the lesson. It is not intended to form the basis for the group discussion. For this reason the lecture is always held at the *end of the meeting*. If several small groups meet at one time, the large group will gather together in a central location to listen to the lecture.

Lectures may be presented by a local speaker. They are also available on DVD, VHS, or CD. The lecture is not part of this sample Scripture study lesson.

The four steps of Conversational Prayer are found on the inside cover of every Study Guide. These steps assist the flow of shared prayer during small group meetings and also serve as an aid in personal prayer.

4. Conversational Prayer in Four Steps*

1. **Jesus is here.** Matt 18:19, 20
Visualize Christ. Welcome him.
Use creative imagination.
Be silent.
2. **Thank you, Lord.** Phil 4:4-7
Gratitude is a heart-opener.
Be audible, brief, to the point.
Use open-ended prayer; don't close it.
3. **Help me, Lord.** Jas 5:13-16
Forgive me, Lord.
Pray for yourself: then others can pray for you.
Be specific . . . be honest.
Say "I" when you mean yourself.
Say "we" when all present can be included.
4. **Help my brother/sister.** Mark 11:22-25
Pray for others by name.
Pray briefly, informally, with love.
You may agree or add to another's request.
Give thanks when someone prays for you.

Points to remember:

- Don't fear silence.
- Let the Holy Spirit lead you.
- Be simple, specific, and supportive.

* With gratitude to Rosalind Rinker, who developed this method of personal shared prayer. Rosalind Rinker, *Learning Conversational Prayer* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992).

The next few pages are for recording your responses to the Study Guide questions assigned to each day's reading from *The Acts of the Apostles*. See also the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* notes, which begin on p. 13.

Before beginning your study, review the instructions beginning on p. 4

LESSON I ACTS 1-2

Day 1

1. What do you hope to gain from this study of the Acts of the Apostles?
2. a) How does the opening of Acts reveal its relationship to the Gospel we know as Luke (Acts 1:1-2)? (See Luke 1:1-4.)
b) What is Luke's purpose in writing a sequel to his Gospel (1:1-2)?
3. The apostles ask Jesus about restoring the kingdom to Israel. How does his response prepare the reader for the major events of the book of Acts (1:6-8)?

Day 2

4. What categories does Luke use to identify the three different groups of people gathered in the upper room (1:13-14)?
5. Compare Luke's account of Judas Iscariot's death in Acts (1:16-19) with Matthew's. (See Matt 27:3-10.) In what do they agree or disagree?
6. a) What were the requirements for the replacement for Judas (1:21-22)? (See 3:15; 10:37-43.)
b) Why was it important to replace Judas (1:15-26)? (See Luke 22:29-30.)

Day 3

7. a) How was the coming of the Holy Spirit identified (2:2-4)?
b) How does the Christian Pentecost reverse the punishment at the Tower of Babel? (See Gen 11:1-9; Eph 4:3-13.)
8. What does it mean to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (2:4)? (See 1:5; 2:38; Luke 3:16; Rom 5:5; Eph 1:13.)
9. What do we know about the content of the message being proclaimed by those who were speaking in tongues (2:11)?

This page is for recording your answers and reflections.

Lesson I—Acts 1–2 Continued

Day 4

10. How does the speaking in tongues described here (2:4-13) differ from the “tongues” Paul writes about? (See 1 Cor 14:1-11.)
11. How does Peter explain the group’s strange behavior (2:15-21)? (See Joel 3:1-5.)
12. What are the essential details about Jesus that Peter chooses to proclaim to “you who are Israelites” (2:22-36)?

Day 5

13. a) What message about Jesus does Peter find in Psalm 16:8-11 (Acts 2:25-33)?
b) What is the message about Jesus in Psalm 110:1 (Acts 2:34-36)?
14. In what way does Peter’s speech to his fellow Israelites hint that the Gentiles might also come to share in the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:39)?
15. a) What does Peter say is required of those who would receive the Holy Spirit (2:37-38)? (See 10:48; Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 1:13.)
b) Is there any other way? (See 10:44-48.)

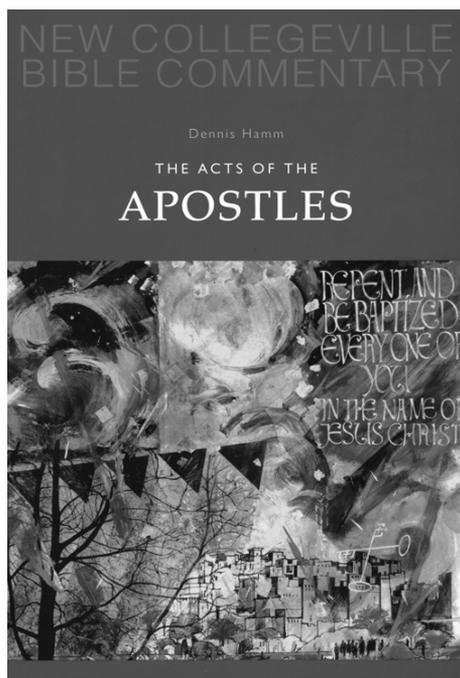
Day 6

16. a) How does Luke describe the way of life of the new believers (2:42-47)?
b) How might the Holy Spirit be leading modern believers to live more as these early believers did?
17. What did the apostles and the early believers in Christ do to preserve their identity as Jews (2:46)? (See 3:2-3.)
18. Have you experienced the excitement in the Holy Spirit described of the first Christians (2:11-13, 46-47)? (See Gal 5:22-23; Eph 3:16-19; Col 1:11-12.)

This page is for recording your answers and reflections.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Dennis Hamm



The *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* material found on the following pages is part of a Study Set used by each participant. The commentary is published separately from the Study Guide for *The Acts of the Apostles*. This material is reprinted with permission and is intended for your convenience in using the sample lesson. *New Collegeville Bible Commentaries* are available through Liturgical Press: www.litpress.org.



LITURGICAL PRESS

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The Acts of the Apostles

TEXT AND COMMENTARY

I: The Preparation for the Christian Mission

I The Promise of the Spirit. ¹In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught ²until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the holy Spirit to the apostles whom he

had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While meeting with them, he enjoined

THE RISEN CHRIST AND THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL IN JERUSALEM

Acts 1:1–8:3

Luke shows how Jesus' mission to initiate the end-time restoration of Israel finds expression in the emergent, Spirit-filled Christian community in Jerusalem.

1:1-5 Introduction: "As I was saying, Theophilus . . ."

Luke introduces this sequel to his Gospel by addressing Theophilus, as he did in the prologue to his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4), indicating that this is a continuation of the same project described there. Literally, the Greek of verse 1 says, "I dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach," implying that Acts will treat what Jesus *continues* to do and teach through the apostolic church. And the phrase "through the holy Spirit" more naturally modifies "chosen"—that is, "after giving instructions to the apostles whom he had chosen through the holy Spirit." For Luke, alone among the Synoptic writers, notes that Jesus chose the Twelve after spending the night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13), which for Luke often precedes a special empowerment by the Spirit (see Luke 3:21, leading to 4:18; Acts 1:14, leading to 2:1-4; and Acts 4:23-31).

As in the Gospel, the centerpiece of Jesus' teaching remains the kingdom of God. Jesus' reference to "the promise of the Father" alludes to at least three passages in the Third Gospel: (1) Luke 11:13: "If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?"; (2) Luke 12:32: "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom"; (3) Luke 24:49: "And [behold] I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you

ACTS 1:5-8

them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; ⁵for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.”

The Ascension of Jesus. ⁶When they had gathered together they asked

him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you,

are clothed with power from on high.” The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost will also signal a further manifestation of the kingdom of God already inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus (see Luke 11:20 and 17:21).

Linking this blessing with John the Baptist’s prophecy about being “baptiz[ed in] the holy Spirit” (Luke 3:16) also ties this promise to Ezekiel’s promise of a cleansing restoration of the people of Israel that will accompany the gift of the divine Spirit (Ezek 36:24-27).

1:6-12 The ascension of Jesus

Since the disciples are Jews who have identified Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, it is reasonable for them to ask if Jesus will now restore the kingdom to Israel (v. 6). After all, he has been speaking to them for forty days about the kingdom of God, which, in the common expectation of the day, is supposed to be a restoration of the nation to what it was when David reigned a millennium before. Jesus does not deny the appropriateness of the question; he simply refuses to reveal to them the divinely decreed schedule (v. 7). Jesus also reinterprets their implied notion of the kingdom; it is not going to be a matter of nationalism but a new kind of unity empowered by the holy Spirit, as foreshadowed by the new “family” portrayed in Luke 8:1-21.

In this, Jesus echoes what he had said to them on Easter Sunday (Luke 24:49). When he tells them that the Spirit’s power will enable them to be his witnesses from Jerusalem “to the ends of the earth” (v. 8), he alludes to Isaiah 49:6, where the Lord tells his Servant that he will not only restore the tribes of Jacob but will also be a light to the nations, “that my salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.”

Although the traditional word for the withdrawal of Jesus’ physical presence from the apostles is “the ascension,” it might be more accurate to describe Luke’s description of this event as an “assumption,” since the author portrays it as an act of the Father. To describe this departure, Luke draws upon the biblical traditions about the assumptions of Enoch (Gen

ACTS 1:9-12

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁹When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.¹⁰While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in

white garments stood beside them.¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet,

5:23-24; Sir 49:14b) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:9-11; Sir 48:9). To interpret the event, he adds what have been called “apocalyptic stage props”—the movement upward into the heavens, a cloud as vehicle, and the interpreting angels.

This is Luke’s second account of the ascension. The first account, given at the end of Luke’s Gospel (24:50-51), sets the event on Easter Sunday and describes Jesus in details that recall the description of the high priest Simon II in Sirach 50:1-24. Like Simon, Jesus’ presence occasions worship (Sir 50:17, 22); he raises his hands and pronounces a blessing (Sir 50:20), and this is followed by references to the community’s blessing God and rejoicing in the temple (Sir 50:22-23). In so doing, Jesus is acting like the temple priest at the end of the daily Whole-Offering (also called the Tamid, or “regular,” service; Exod 29:38-42; Num 2:1-10). And within the Gospel narrative, Jesus is doing what the priest Zechariah was unable to do at the end of the Tamid service, whose incense ritual is the scenario briefly portrayed at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. By alluding in this manner to Sirach 50, Luke was celebrating Jesus the way Ben Sira celebrated Simon II as the climax of his Praise of the Ancestors (Sirach 44–50). For Luke, it is Jesus, not Simon II, who is the climax of Israel’s history; and so Luke chooses to end his first volume by portraying Jesus’ departure on Easter Sunday with those overtones.

Why, then, does Luke take the liberty to narrate this event so differently as he begins his second volume? Some scholars suggest that in Acts Luke has expanded the time frame of Luke 24 to the round (and biblically symbolic) number forty, in order to associate the ascension closely with the outpouring of the Spirit on the fiftieth day, Pentecost (the Jewish feast of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai). The apocalyptic stage props serve four purposes: (1) to recall the transfiguration (Luke 9:18-36, another mountain episode, when the disciples could not pray, as now they can); (2) to look forward to the outpouring of the Spirit and the mission that follows; (3) to recount the departure of Jesus in a way that recalls 2 Kings

ACTS 1:13-16

which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.

The First Community in Jerusalem.

¹³When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

¹⁴All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

The Choice of Judas' Successor. ¹⁵During those days Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons in the one place). He said, ¹⁶"My brothers, the scripture

2:9-12 (another narrative about the transmission of spirit for prophetic succession); and (4) to point toward the final coming (described already in Luke 21:27 as coming "in a cloud," alluding to the cloud imagery of Daniel 7:13, but in the singular, to prepare for Acts 1:9). Thus Luke is able to speak of one reality, the final departure of Jesus from his assembled followers, from two interpretive points of view. Luke 24 alludes to the ascension as a fitting ending of the story of Jesus; Acts 1 narrates the same event as the beginning of the story of the mission of the Church, initiated by the risen Lord and empowered by the gift of the Spirit.

1:13-26 The community gathers to restore "the Twelve" by electing Matthias

The apostles (minus Judas Iscariot) whom Luke had carefully called "the eleven" at Luke 24:33 gather with the "women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (v. 14). This group, numbered at 120 in verse 15 (notice the multiple of 12), comprises the nucleus of the church that will become the heart of restored Israel in chapter 2.

"The women" no doubt included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the many other women who had accompanied Jesus and the Twelve and had "provided for them out of their resources" (Luke 8:3). They are the ones "who had come from Galilee with him" (Luke 23:55) and, coming to anoint the body of Jesus in the tomb, discovered it empty and became the first witnesses to the resurrection (Luke 24:10, 22-23).

His "brothers" are the very ones who, together with Jesus' mother, were last seen in Luke 8:19-21, standing at the edge of a crowd around Jesus when he said, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (v. 21). Whatever the ambiguity of their status then, now they are at the center of the believing community. Like Jesus

ACTS 1:17-21

had to be fulfilled which the holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David, concerning Judas, who was the guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷He was numbered among us and was allotted a share in this ministry. ¹⁸He bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out. ¹⁹This became known to

everyone who lived in Jerusalem, so that the parcel of land was called in their language 'Akeldama,' that is, Field of Blood. ²⁰For it is written in the Book of Psalms:

'Let his encampment become desolate, and may no one dwell in it.'

And:

'May another take his office.'

²¹Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied

after the water immersion by John and before his special anointing by the Spirit (Luke 3:21), the community is immersed in prayer.

Jesus' prayer that Simon Peter, even after denying Jesus, will turn back and strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:32) begins to be fulfilled, as Peter now asserts his leadership (Acts 1:15).

The first agenda item to be addressed by the community is the replacement of Judas Iscariot, who had been "numbered" among the core group (v. 17). Because of the symbolic meaning of Jesus' choice of twelve, indicating the restoration of the twelve tribes of the people of God, "the eleven" (Luke 24:33) must again become the Twelve.

The importance of the number twelve becomes clear when one recalls the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: "And I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father has conferred one on me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30). Whatever Matthew's parallel saying may mean in the context of his Gospel (Matt 19:28), for Luke this is a reference to the leadership of the Twelve in the Jerusalem church after Pentecost. "Judging" here has the sense it has in the book of Judges, which features twelve charismatic leaders who led the tribes of Israel before the time of the monarchy. The reconstituted Twelve will similarly "judge" (that is, exert Spirit-filled leadership among) the reconstituted people of Israel after Pentecost.

The way the words of Peter (1:16-20) and the prayer of the community (1:24-25) speak of Judas's death is full of irony. Abandoning a community that will soon express its unity and detachment from material possessions by selling fields, with no one calling anything his own, Judas invested his blood money in a field ("turned away . . . to his own place," v. 25) and died there in a horrible, isolated death. Whereas Matthew's account

ACTS 1:22-26–2:4

us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us,²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection.”²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.²⁴Then they prayed, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen²⁵to take the place in this apostolic ministry from which Judas turned away to go to

his own place.”²⁶Then they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles.

2¹**The Coming of the Spirit.**¹When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together.²And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were.³Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them.⁴And they were all

of Judas’s death (Matt 27:5) parallels the suicide-by-hanging of David’s betrayer Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23), Luke’s version reflects the punitive death-by-falling that was Antiochus IV’s end (2 Macc 9:12-14).

The community makes sure that Judas’s replacement will be a qualified witness to the resurrection by choosing two candidates who were present with Jesus from the baptism of John through the ascension. Then, having done their human best, they put the final choice out of their hands, leaving it up to God through the device of casting lots. Thus Matthias is chosen to restore the Twelve.

2:1-13 The coming of the Spirit

Pentēcostēs (literally “fiftieth”) is the Greek name for the Israelite feast of Weeks (*Shavuot* in Hebrew). The second of the three classical pilgrim feasts of Israel—Unleavened Bread/Passover, Weeks, and Booths (see Exod 23:14-17; 34:22; Deut 16:16)—the feast of Weeks was called “Fiftieth” in Greek because it occurred seven weeks, or fifty days, after the feast of Unleavened Bread/Passover. Originally an agricultural feast celebrating the end of the grain harvest, Pentecost eventually came to be associated with the giving of the Law at Sinai.

Luke narrates the Pentecost events in words and images that evoke the revelation at Mount Sinai. The reconstituted Twelve (among the 120) are gathered like the twelve tribes at Sinai. The sounds from heaven, the filling of the *whole* house (like the shaking of the *whole* mountain in Exodus 19:18), and the fire recall the theophany (appearance of God) at Sinai. The tongues of fire symbolize the reality that the powerful presence of God (like fire) will find expression in human words, the prophetic ministry of the disciples. The appearance of fire also corresponds to John the Baptist’s

ACTS 2:5-13

filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. ⁶At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, “Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? ⁹We are Parthians,

Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, ¹¹both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.” ¹²They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others said, scoffing, “They have had too much new wine.”

prediction that Jesus would baptize “with the holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). In the fuller sweep of the narrative, the parallel between Jesus and Moses is evident in that Jesus ascends with a cloud (1:9) and then mediates the gift of the prophetic word of God to the people (2:4, 11, 18, 33). Thus Luke underscores the fact that on the feast of the giving of the Law (the privileged communication of God’s word) comes the end-time gift of the holy Spirit to empower a fresh expression of the divine word in the ministry of the apostles.

The list of nations from which the Jewish pilgrims and converts come symbolizes the future implications of what is happening here. By highlighting this inclusive gathering, Luke proclaims that this is in fact the fulfillment of the expected end-time ingathering of Israel. The Pentecostal gift is destined for Jews first, but then also for the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), “those far off” (2:39; see Isa 57:19).

When Luke says that they “were *confused* because each one heard them speaking in his own language” (v. 6, emphasis added), he appears to be alluding to the story of the tower of Babel (in its Septuagint version, that is, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). Whereas Genesis 11 tells of a sinful people who wish to make a name for themselves and are scattered in confusion and lose their ability to communicate (literally “to *hear* one another”), Acts 2 tells of a people of many languages who gather, are “confused” by a new ability to “hear,” and are empowered to become a new community as they repent of their sins and call upon the name of the Lord. The likelihood of the allusion becomes even stronger when one notes that the name Babel is rendered *Sygychysis* (“Confusion”) in the Septuagint.

ACTS 2:14-20

II: The Mission in Jerusalem

Peter's Speech at Pentecost. ¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them, "You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words. ¹⁵These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:
¹⁷'It will come to pass in the last days,' God says, 'that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh.

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your young men shall see visions,
your old men shall dream dreams.
¹⁸Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids
I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days,
and they shall prophesy.
¹⁹And I will work wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below:
blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke.
²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,

2:14-36 Peter explains: the Spirit of God is restoring end-time Israel, and the crucified Jesus is its risen Messiah and Lord!

In this speech of Peter to the festival crowd, Luke employs a kind of biblical interpretation that the Dead Sea Scrolls have taught us to call a *peshet*. The word *peshet* is simply Aramaic for "interpretation." But in the hands of the Essenes, an ascetical community that lived at Qumran, a *peshet* meant understanding a biblical passage as fulfilled in the present or recent history of their own community. Luke now has Peter explain the significance of the Pentecost events in a series of such *peshets*.

After a deft and humorous remark about the enthusiastic behavior of the community (they are not drunk; it's only nine in the morning, v. 15), Peter quotes Joel 3:1-5, joining it with a crucial phrase from the Greek version of Isaiah 2:2 ("in the last days"). He says, in effect, that what has been happening in Jerusalem is the fulfillment of these end-time prophecies. Whereas Israel had experienced a special infusion of God's spirit on an occasional king or prophet, now "in the last days" the gift of the prophetic spirit has been made available in a surprisingly inclusive way, transcending gender ("your sons and daughters," "my servants and my handmaids") and age ("young," "old," v. 17).

In true *peshet* fashion, Peter proceeds to apply specific phrases to recent and current events. He interprets the phrase "wonders . . . and signs" of verse 19 as the wondrous deeds God had done through Jesus. As his story continues to unfold, it will become clear that Joel's reference to those

ACTS 2:21-30

before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord,

²¹and it shall be that everyone shall be saved who calls on the name of the Lord.'

²²You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. ²³This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. ²⁴But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it. ²⁵For David says of him:

'I saw the Lord ever before me,

with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.

²⁶Therefore my heart has been glad and my tongue has exulted;

my flesh, too, will dwell in hope,

²⁷because you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld, nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption.

²⁸You have made known to me the paths of life;

you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

²⁹My brothers, one can confidently say to you about the patriarch David that he died and was buried, and his tomb is in our midst to this day. ³⁰But since he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn an oath to him that he would set

“who calls on the name of the Lord” will be applied to those who call upon the name of the Lord *Jesus* in Christian faith (see 9:14, 21; 22:16). And so the quotation from Joel 3, fortified by Isaiah 2:2, interprets *what time it is*: it is the inauguration of the long-awaited end-time, begun by God in Jesus and continued by God through the church.

But this outpouring of the Spirit on the community of believers is more than a sign of the end times; it is also a sign of the resurrection and enthronement of Jesus. To make this point, Luke (through Peter) enlists the last third of Psalm 16, which contains the clause “. . . you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, / nor will you suffer your holy one to undergo corruption” (1970 version). With the traditional understanding that all the psalms come from David, Peter argues that since David himself died and therefore *his* flesh obviously “saw corruption,” the words must apply to someone else. Add to this the prophecy of Psalm 132:11 that God would set one of David’s descendants on his throne, and these texts turn out to apply to the Messiah *in his resurrection*. It is in this sense, as risen king of restored Israel, that Jesus can be called “the Anointed One” (“Messiah” in Hebrew, “Christ” in Greek).

Then, to show how the risen Jesus is entitled also to the name “Lord” (used in the quotation from Joel 3 in Acts 2:21), Peter enlists the first verse of Psalm 110: “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand / till I

ACTS 2:31-42

one of his descendants upon his throne,³¹ he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that neither was he abandoned to the netherworld nor did his flesh see corruption.³² God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses.

³³Exalted at the right hand of God, he received the promise of the holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you (both) see and hear.

³⁴For David did not go up into heaven, but he himself said:

“The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at my right hand

³⁵until I make your enemies your footstool.”

³⁶Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?”

³⁸Peter (said) to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” ⁴⁰He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

Communal Life. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the teaching of the

make your enemies your footstool” (1970 version). The final verse of the speech (2:36) summarizes the whole speech succinctly.

2:37-41 The response to the proclamation

When the people ask Peter what they should do, he invites them to repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (which, in the light of the preceding speech, means belief in the resurrection of Jesus). And when Peter promises that they will receive the “gift of the holy Spirit,” we now understand that the events of Acts 2 are the fulfillment of John the Baptist’s promise that one mightier than he would baptize “in the holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16; see also Acts 1:5). Mission to the Gentiles is already glimpsed when Peter joins “you and . . . your children” with “and to all *those far off*” (Isaiah’s phrase for Gentiles in Isaiah 57:19, emphasis added). Jewish and Gentile Christians alike will qualify as those “. . . whom the LORD shall call” (Joel 3:5).

2:42-47 The first Christian community

Although the portrait of the *koinōnia*, or communal life, of the Jerusalem Christian community (vv. 42-47) has often been used to illustrate the ideals of vowed religious life, Luke clearly means it to portray the Christian community of Jerusalem as restored Israel. Each of the details is powerfully suggestive, describing who they are and what they are about.

ACTS 2:43-47

apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each

one's need.⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The “teaching of the apostles” to which they devote themselves no doubt refers to the teaching of Jesus and the kind of biblical interpretation regarding Jesus just displayed in Peter’s Pentecost speech. Since “the breaking of the bread” (v. 42) refers to the practice of the Lord’s Supper, “the prayers” are likely the traditional prayers of Jewish life, such as the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-9; note the reference to the Christians regularly gathering in the temple area in verse 46, presumably for prayer, as in 3:1). That the apostles are said to perform “wonders and signs” (v. 43) reinforces the continuity between their ministry and that of Jesus, just described as commended by God with “wonders and signs” in verse 22. Their sense of mutual service (see Luke 22:25-27) leads them spontaneously to share their possessions, even to sell property to meet one another’s needs (v. 45). That they continue to meet in the temple area is consistent with the description, at the end of Luke’s Gospel, that “they were continually [or regularly] in the temple praising God” (Luke 24:53). The Jewish Christians’ allegiance to Jesus as Lord and Messiah has not meant severance from the life of the temple.

Finally, notice that verse 47b describes this Christian communal life as “being saved”—an explication of a phrase from Joel quoted in verse 21 (“everyone *shall be saved* who calls on the name of the Lord”; emphasis added). The awe (*phobos*, literally “fear”) that comes upon everyone is reminiscent of the fear that God sent upon the nations as they witnessed the progress of the Exodus and Conquest (Exod 15:16; 23:27; Deut 2:25; 11:25; 32:25; Josh 2:9). This awe is a continuation of the people’s response to the new Exodus already begun in the story of Jesus (see Luke 1:12, 65; 2:9; 5:26; 7:16; 8:37; 21:26).

This cameo picture of the life of the Jerusalem Christian community reflects the fulfillment of the jubilee theme struck in the quotation of Isaiah 61:2 at Luke 4:19.

VATICAN II STATEMENTS

The following excerpts from the Second Vatican Council help guide our study of Sacred Scripture.

SACRED SCRIPTURE

“The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy. She has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so. For, inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life.”

Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, no. 21.

Interpretation of Sacred Scripture

“Since God speaks in sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

“Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for ‘literary forms.’ For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs men normally followed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.”

Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, no. 12.

DIVERSE APPROACHES TO IMPLEMENTING SCRIPTURE STUDY

The simple format of Little Rock Scripture Study makes it adaptable to a variety of parish needs. The structures and situations of parishes differ widely, but the centrality of the Scriptures for Catholic life remains constant. The following are different contexts and designs in which Scripture Study may be implemented.

Parish Education/Formation

The most common context for establishing Little Rock Scripture Study is in a parish-wide setting. The Bible is central for adult education and this involves a weekly meeting at the parish in which several small groups meet at the same time.

Meeting in Homes

Parishes may choose to have the small groups meet in homes rather than in parish facilities. While the four elements of the program remain the same, training and ongoing support for facilitators are even more imperative. The facilitators of each group should meet together as often as possible during a particular study for prayer, discussion of successes and challenges, and mutual encouragement.

Small Christian Communities

The growth of small-faith communities in the Church demonstrates the essential need for smaller supportive communities in which faith can be shared and strengthened. Prayerful reflection and discussion of Scripture is the root of these faith groups throughout the world. Little Rock Scripture Study adapts naturally to this context with the pastoral facilitator guiding the community through the prayer and discussion of the lesson.

Follow-up for Renewal Experiences

Retreats, missions and revivals, Why Catholic?, Disciples in Mission, Christian initiation, diocesan and parish anniversaries, and ministry training are all powerful experiences of person and communal renewal. To have a lasting impact on people's journeys of faith, however, these experiences are most successful when nurtured with ongoing faith formation within the parish. Much of the leadership and group structures formed through such experiences can be continued in Little Rock Scripture Study.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING —THE ESSENTIAL FIRST STEP

Trained small-group facilitators are essential for the success of this Scripture study. Leadership Training is designed to teach facilitators the methods and materials of Little Rock Scripture Study, help develop their gifts of spiritual leadership, and form them into a committed and supportive community of faith.

Leadership training involves four sessions that are conducted by adult leaders in your local community using the materials provided. The instructions are clear and easy to follow.

Each session consists of prayer, short audio or video instruction, group and individual exercises, and discussion. This training will develop a well informed, skilled, and enthusiastic leadership group, open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

To enable lay parishioners to plan and facilitate Scripture study with confidence, order the Leadership Training Packet, which includes:

- Coordinator's Manual on CD-Rom – A step-by-step guide for planning the program with practical tips for publicity, registration, and conducting training sessions
- The materials for one session of *The Acts of the Apostles*, also on the CD-Rom, and used as part of Leadership Training
- Leadership Training Lectures (CD, DVD, or VHS)

Parish Leadership

Involve the pastor, parish staff, and religious education board or adult faith formation team in the decisions, planning, and promotion of Little Rock Scripture Study. In this way the program will become an essential ingredient of the overall parish plan for the education and spiritual growth of its members. Enthusiastic support from the pastor, through promotion at Sunday Mass and other forms of visible encouragement, helps Bible study to flourish.

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Little Rock Scripture Study lights the way to understanding the message of the Bible, developing a more personal relationship with God and a deeper relationship with others in your faith community. Let your faith shine with help from the most widely used Catholic Bible study in the United States.

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