



THE MULTI-ETHNIC PATTERN OF ACTS

A SMALL GROUP STUDY

*A study on the Holy Spirit's plan for God's
people & how we can live it out today*

THE HOLY SPIRIT BIRTHS THE CHURCH

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit birthed the church in dramatic fashion. Only ten days after Christ ascended into the sky, the Spirit of the living God hit the upper room with power and fire. As a result the church was birthed almost in a single day as crowds of people heard the gospel and believed.

WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY WAS THE HOLY SPIRIT BUILDING IN THESE FIRST YEARS? WHAT WAS THE CHARACTER AND NATURE OF THIS NEW PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCED GOD'S POWER AND PUT THEIR FAITH IN THE RESURRECTED MESSIAH

Tradition and internal evidence ascribe the authorship of the book of Acts to Luke. In this way Acts can be considered the sequel to Luke's gospel, continuing and expanding the themes of Jesus' work and ministry as now manifest through his people.

As we follow along with Luke's historical account, we can understand God's purposes in birthing this new community made up of unlikely people. By looking back at the earliest of Christian communities, we can learn much about how we are to live our lives as God's people today.

WEEK 1: THE SPIRIT DRAWS NEAR

Our starting point will be the opening chapter of the book of Acts. Throughout this study we are looking especially for the activity of the Holy Spirit as He builds a brand new church shaped in the image of Christ.

Read Acts 1:1-5

1) According to Luke's brief recap of his gospel, what events did the apostles witness?

2) Why did Jesus instruct the apostles to wait in Jerusalem? What were they waiting for and why were they waiting in Jerusalem? (Luke 24:47)

Read Acts 1:6-11

3) What did the apostles mean when they asked Jesus if he would now restore the kingdom to Israel?



4) What would each of these places have meant to the apostles?

Jerusalem:

All Judea:

Samaria:

The ends of the earth:

Read Acts 1:12-26

5) In selecting someone to replace Judas, what were the stated qualifications of being an apostle?

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPIRIT

We turn now to Acts chapter two and prepare for the day of the Spirit's arrival. What is about to happen will shape the course of human history forever.

Read Acts 2:1-4

6) How would you describe the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Read Acts 2:5-13

7) Why do you think the Holy Spirit allowed each person to hear the apostles declaring the mighty works of God in their own language?

8) This next question may require the use of the internet or a map of the ancient world. The gathered Jews in Jerusalem came from a variety of places. List the modern countries that correspond to where they were from:

Parthia:

Media:

Elam:

Mesopotamia:

Judea:

Cappadocia:

Pontus:

Roman province of Asia:

Phrygia:

Pamphylia:

Egypt:

Cyrene:

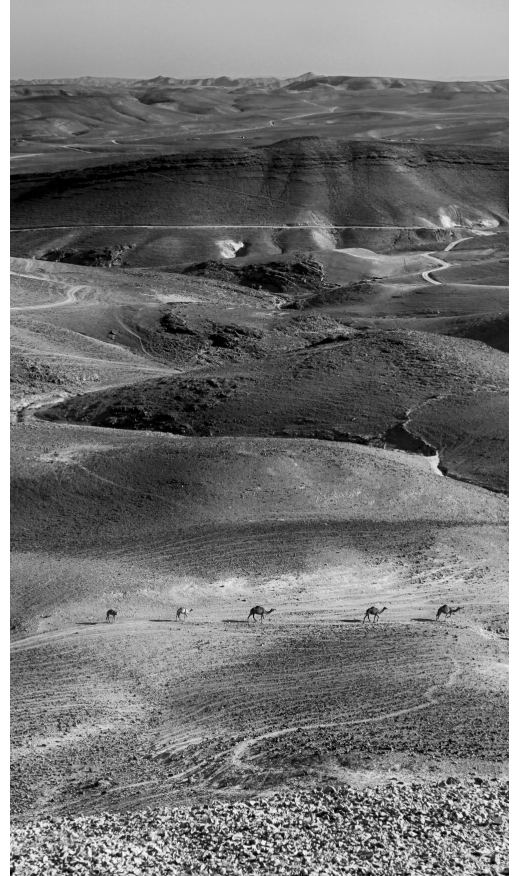
Rome:

Crete:

Arabia:

9) Were there any places listed that surprised you?

10) Jews from all of these different places were present when the Holy Spirit arrived. What does this tell us about the kind of church the Holy Spirit wanted to build?

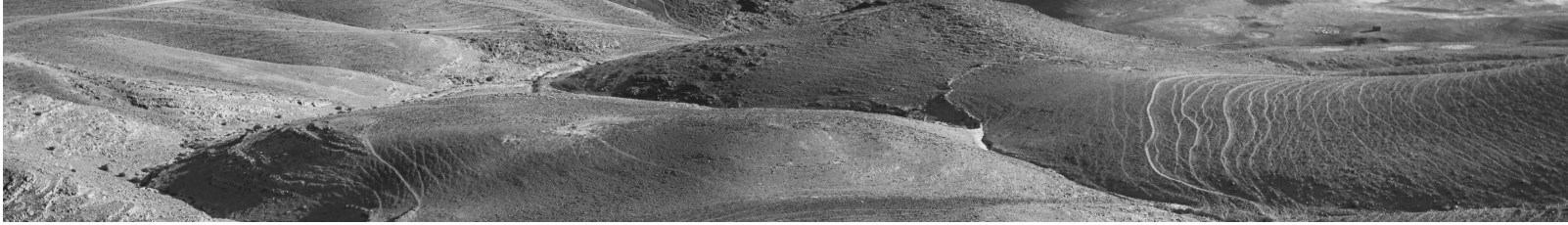


WEEK 2: A NEW KIND OF PEOPLE

WITH JEWISH PEOPLE GATHERED FROM ACROSS THE REACHES OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, THE HOLY SPIRIT EMPOWERED THE APOSTLES TO SPEAK IN MANY DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. FROM THIS DYNAMIC START, THE DAY OF PENTECOST WOULD GIVE BIRTH TO A NEW TYPE OF COMMUNITY, A NEW KIND OF PEOPLE.

Read Acts 2:14-36

1) Peter took his time to fully explain the gospel to his Jewish audience in terms that they would understand. What are some elements/themes in this sermon that a Jewish audience would connect with?



2) What Jewish references does he use in his sermon?


Read Acts 2:37-41

3) At the end of Peter's gospel declaration, the crowd is ready to respond. What do the apostles instruct the people to do? How can they become part of this new community that acknowledges the resurrected Jesus as Lord?

Read Acts 2:42-47

4) The church quickly forms in the days following the day of Pentecost. According to Luke, what actions and attitudes characterized this new Jesus-centered community?

5) How does your Chi Alpha community resemble the church in Acts 2? What do they have in common? What is different?



Now that we have established the foundations of Christ's new church that the Holy Spirit will continue to build throughout the book of Acts, let's jump ahead and look at some critical moments in the development of the Church. As you can guess from the first two chapters, the very first Christians came entirely from the Jewish people (even though some lived very far away and were from different ethnic and language groups); however, God's plan included the ends of the earth. It will be important to note how the Holy Spirit integrated the Gentiles (non-Jews) into this extremely Jewish Christian community.



HEBREWS & HELLENISTS

Over three hundred years before Christ, the Macedonian general Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East with his Greek armies. His successors imposed Greek language and culture upon the entire Eastern Mediterranean world. Although eventually the Greek-speaking world was conquered by the Roman Empire, the Hellenistic language and culture was there to stay.

Jews in the first century could be divided primarily into two culture groups. The first were the Hebrews. These were Jews from Judea who would have spoken Aramaic as their first language and felt a deep connection to the local and historic Jewish culture. The other were the Hellenists. These Jews were most likely born outside of Judea, more comfortable speaking Greek, and sometimes seen as lesser Jews by native born Judeans.

Read Acts 6:1-7

6) Why do you think the early church decided it was important to provide food for widows? What status did widows have in ancient society?

7) Here, in one of the early conflicts recorded by Luke, we witness the unequal treatment of the Hellenist widows. Why do you think the Hellenist widows were overlooked while the Hebrew widows went home fed?



8) How did they resolve to fix this problem?

9) All the men selected to oversee the food distribution have Greek names, implying that they were most likely Hellenists. Why would it be important to have Hellenists involved in leading the food distribution?

10) After they resolved this problem, what does Luke hint in 6:7 was the result of their skillful and Spirit-led handling of the conflict?

11) Are there any people or culture groups in your local Christian community that may be getting overlooked? Think of your group's leadership, both staff and students. Are all the people/culture groups in your ministry represented in leadership?

12) How can your Christian community follow the early church model to affirm skillful leaders from those on the fringe to ensure that no group is left out?

WEEK 3: THE GOSPEL SPREADS

Acts 7 closes with the murder of Stephen – one of the men appointed to serve the widows – and introduces a new villain, Saul. In Acts 8 we learn of Saul's aggressive persecution of the early church in Jerusalem. What appears to be a setback is actually the beginning of what Jesus prophesied back in Acts 1, that the apostles would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Read Acts 8:1-13

1) In response to Saul's persecution, to where was the church scattered? What did they do in these new places?

2) Philip is the first person recorded preaching the gospel outside of Judea. He goes to Samaria while the Apostles stay back in Jerusalem. What do you remember about the Samaritans?





3) What signs accompanied Philip's preaching?

4) How did the Samaritan people respond to Philip's message?

Read Acts 8:14-25

5) How did the apostles back in Jerusalem respond to the news about the Samaritans embracing the gospel?

6) From what you know, how important were Peter and John in the Early Church?

7) Why was it important that the Samaritans not only be baptized but have hands laid on them to receive the Holy Spirit?



8) Why would Simon the Magician want to buy this power for himself?

9) What did Peter and John do after their visit to Samaria?

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

As we just read, the first group of people outside the Jews to receive the gospel was the Samaritans. Despite the fact that Jews and Samaritans hated one another, they shared much in common pertaining to culture, language, religion, geography, and ancestry. But now, a different kind of person is about to hear the gospel through a specially orchestrated meeting.

Read Acts 8:26-40

10) After the angel of the Lord calls Philip to a desert road, what kind of man does he run into? How does Luke describe him?



11) The Greek word for “Ethiopian” was a general word for dark-skinned peoples that literally meant “burnt-face.” Luke identified the eunuch as belonging to Candace, queen of the Kingdom of Kush, a powerful African kingdom on the Southern Nile that successfully resisted the Roman Empire for centuries. Why might it be significant that the first person to be baptized in the name of Jesus outside of Judea and Samaria was an Ethiopian?

12) According to Luke’s account, where was the eunuch going? What might have happened when he got to his destination now that he had embraced the gospel?

13) By the end of this chapter, we have seen Philip teleported north to the capital of Judea and the apostles head back to Jerusalem. Why do you think the Holy Spirit used a Hellenist, Philip, to be the first to carry the gospel outside of his own people group and not the apostles?

WEEK 4: A CHANGE OF HEART

So far in our study, we've seen visiting Jews from across the world believe in Jesus, as well as many Samaritans and an influential Ethiopian. Now, in Acts 10, we will see the Church of Christ grow to include the military rulers, the Romans.

ACCORDING TO GOOGLE MAPS, IT TAKES 43 HOURS TO DRIVE FROM CAESAREA TO ROME, ITALY. CORNELIUS WAS A LONG WAY FROM HOME.

Read Acts 10:1-8

1) Out of all the possible Romans in Judea, what about Cornelius attracted God's attention?

2) What authority over others might a Roman centurion have had, as evidenced by this passage?



3) How would Peter, a Jewish commoner who grew up under Roman rule and witnessed Jesus' crucifixion at the hand of Roman soldiers, feel about a Roman officer?

Read Acts 10:9-23

4) The laws of Moses held dietary restrictions against pork, shellfish, crabs, reptiles, amphibians, insects, worms, bats, eagles, vultures, camels, hares, and hyraxes. After a lifetime of avoiding these unclean animals, how would Peter feel about seeing these animals three times in a row?

5) What point was God trying to get across to Peter in preparation for Cornelius' messengers?

6) Why do you think the Holy Spirit himself personally instructed Peter to receive these men? What might his reaction have been to Roman agents otherwise?

7) What was Cornelius' reputation among the Jewish people? Why might he be a good bridge for the gospel?

Read Acts 10:24-48

8) How has Peter's perspective on foreigners changed since his three visions?

9) How would a centurion feel hearing that the Savior of the world had been hung on a tree and executed by Roman-style crucifixion, something that was typically carried out by a centurion and his men against the worst of criminals?

10) To a Roman household that pledged allegiance to Rome, what would it mean that a crucified man rose from the dead?





11) What is significant about the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the Gentiles?

12) Take a minute to look back at Peter's speech in Acts 2. What are the differences between Peter's proclamation of the gospel to a Roman household in Acts 10 and his proclamation to a Jewish audience back in Acts 2?

13) Based on Peter's example, how might you convey the gospel message differently to an ethnic group other than your own?

WEEK 5: THE CHURCH RECEIVES THE GENTILES

After the introduction of the gospel to Samaritans and a single Ethiopian, the Early Church experienced its first big influx of Gentiles who did not share in Jewish ancestry with the conversion of the household of Cornelius. This was alarming to many Jewish Christians who worried that it was a threat to their own culture and traditions.

Read Acts 11:1-18

1) Why was it a problem that Peter ate with Cornelius' household who were Gentiles and "uncircumcised men?"

2) What evidence does Peter present to the concerned Jews that the Holy Spirit was at work through the Gentile believers?



Read Acts 11:19-30

3) What happened as a result of Stephen's execution?

4) It's time to look up some more locations. What are the corresponding modern countries to the following places mentioned in Acts 11?

Phoenicia:

Cyprus:

Antioch on the Orontes:

Cyrene:

5) At this time the island of Cyprus and the North African city of Cyrene were Greek colonies under Roman rule. How did these men in Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene first receive the Gospel?

6) Why did the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch?





7) Why did the Greek Christians in Antioch send Barnabas back to Jerusalem?

8) Why is it significant that Luke mentions that the people of the Antioch church made up of both Jews and Greeks were the first to be called Christians?

Read Acts 13:1-4

9) The Antioch church had five members who served as the prophetic and teaching leadership of the community. Where in the modern world was each of these leaders most likely from?

Barnabas (Acts 4:36):

Simeon (nicknamed “Black” in Greek):

Lucius of Cyrene:

Manaen (friend of Herod Antipas):

Saul of Tarsus:

10) Why do you think the Holy Spirit determined that the first multi-ethnic church recorded in the Bible had a team of leaders from all over the ancient world?

11) How did the first church-sponsored mission trip get started?

12) Why did the Holy Spirit choose the Antioch church to send a team to Cyprus and not the Jerusalem church where the Twelve Apostles were?

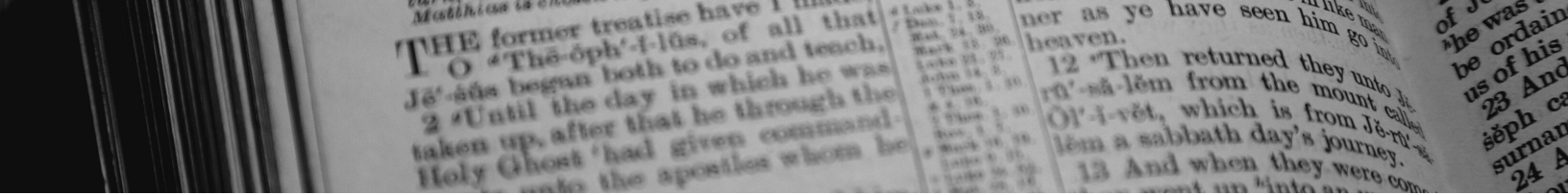


WEEK 6: MISSIONARIES IN ANOTHER WORLD

WHEN WE FIRST MET SAUL HE WAS APPROVING THE STONING OF STEPHEN, THE HELLENIST JEWISH LEADER, BECAUSE OF THE THREAT HE POSED TO HIS RELIGIOUS FAITH. NOW HE IS PAUL, THE FIRST APPOINTED MISSIONARY TO THE HELLENISTIC WORLD, SAILING TO THE GREEK ISLAND OF CYPRUS. THIS NAME CHANGE SHOWS THAT HE USES A JEWISH NAME SAUL OR A GREEK NAME PAUL DEPENDING ON HIS CULTURAL CONTEXT (SEE ACTS 13:9).

1) Describe the following:

- Saul's attitude toward Christians and Gentiles before his conversion:
- Paul's attitude toward Christians and Gentiles after leading the Antioch Church:



Read Acts 13:4-12

2) Who was Bar-Jesus and what was he trying to accomplish?

3) How is the experience of Bar-Jesus (Elymas) similar to Saul's experience on the road to Damascus in Acts 9?

4) Proconsuls were members of distinguished patrician class families in Rome and served lucrative three-to-five year terms as provincial governors before returning to Italy. What is the significance of a Roman proconsul becoming a believer?

5) On Cyprus, a Gentile ruler believes while a false Jewish prophet is blinded. What is the Holy Spirit's power demonstrating here?

After Paul and Barnabas finished their journey on Cyprus, they eventually make their way to a different Antioch over in Asia Minor in modern day Turkey.

Read Acts 13:13-40

6) Who does Paul address his message to throughout his gospel proclamation?

7) This is the first gospel message recorded given to audience of both Jews and Gentiles. What is different about Paul's proclamation to a mixed audience than from what we heard in Peter's proclamations?

8) How do you think his past experience in the Antioch church helped prepare Paul for this type of audience?

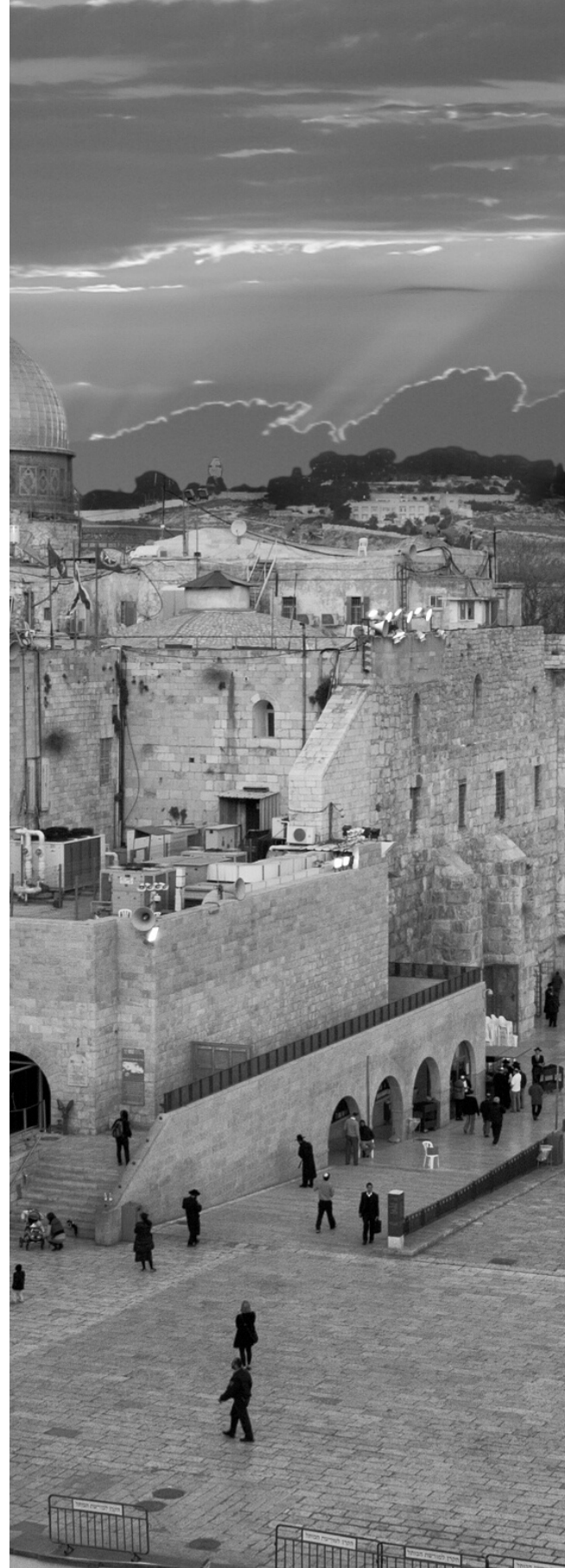
Read Acts 13:41-52

9) According to Luke, how did the Jews respond to Paul's message?

10) How did the Gentiles respond to Paul's message?

11) What was different about the hearts of the two groups, Jews and Gentiles?

12) Paul's own people rejected this gospel even as Gentile foreigners embraced it. If the Holy Spirit asked you to preach the gospel to a new culture group that might make your own culture group uncomfortable, how would you respond? Who might those groups be?



WEEK 7: SETTLING CULTURAL CONTROVERSY

Back in Acts 11, we saw the formation of the first mixed-ethnicity church in Antioch, a mix of Hellenist Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene and Greek Gentiles. However, there was a growing faction of Judean Jews who felt that these Gentiles were polluting the Christian faith by not following the laws and traditions of the Jewish people.

Read Acts 15:1-5

- 1) Why would the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem want the Gentile Christians to be circumcised according to the Law?

- 2) Why did Paul and Barnabas dispute and debate this idea?

3) If Gentiles had to be circumcised and practice Jewish law and customs in order to become Christians, what would that say about Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the Cross?

Read Acts 15:6-21

3) What is Peter's argument for Gentiles remaining as they are?

4) What evidence did Paul and Barnabas have that the Holy Spirit had already approved of Gentile Christians, even without them following Jewish customs first?

5) What does the apostle James decide?



6) How do you think the faction of people who wanted Gentiles to practice Jewish ways felt about this decision?

Read Acts 15:22-35

7) Why do you think the church leaders in Jerusalem chose to send a letter?

8) To whom did they choose to deliver the letter and why?



9) What important caveats did they include in the letter? How did these caveats relate to continued Jewish/Gentile fellowship?

10) Reflecting on this early controversy, what parts of our culture should we give up when we become a Christian? What parts of our culture should we keep? How do we decide these? How do we decide what the ethnic culture of a multi-ethnic ministry should be?

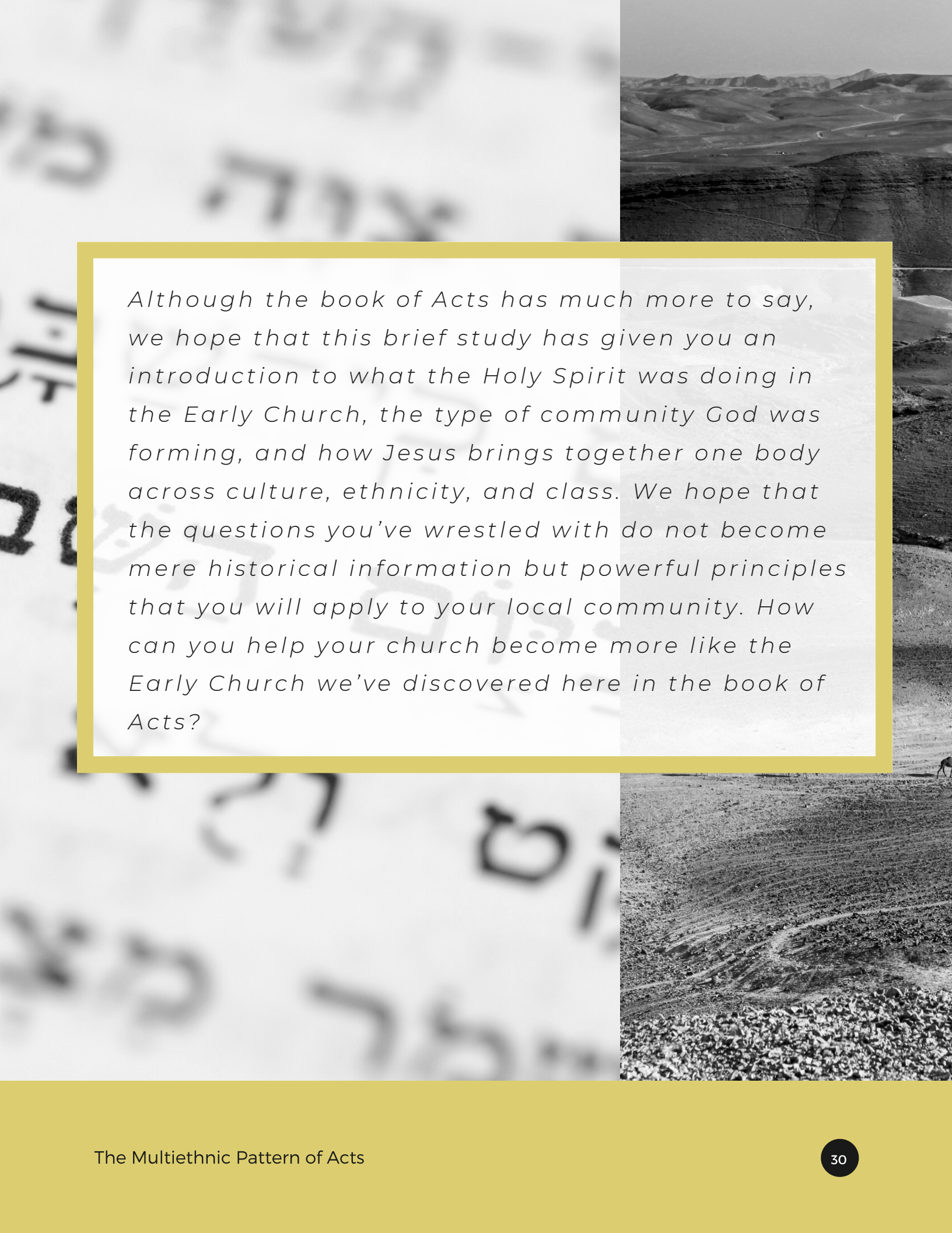
11) Are there any cultural things in your local Christian community that seem normal to you but may be a barrier to other ethnic groups?

12) When controversy arises, do you keep silent or are you willing to speak up on behalf of those that are different than you?

Read Acts 15:36-41

13) What did Paul and Barnabas have a disagreement about?

14) When Paul and Barnabas disagreed and parted ways, what happened to their missionary work as a result?



Although the book of Acts has much more to say, we hope that this brief study has given you an introduction to what the Holy Spirit was doing in the Early Church, the type of community God was forming, and how Jesus brings together one body across culture, ethnicity, and class. We hope that the questions you've wrestled with do not become mere historical information but powerful principles that you will apply to your local community. How can you help your church become more like the Early Church we've discovered here in the book of Acts?



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A SMALL GROUP STUDY:
LEADER'S GUIDE

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WEEK 1: LEADER'S GUIDE

OPENING QUESTION

What do you think of when you hear “Holy Spirit”?

There may be a diversity of answers and backgrounds here.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- With the coming of the Spirit, the apostles were transformed from withdrawn and waiting to brave and proclaiming. What does this tell us about the power of the Holy Spirit? What's the implication for us?
- Judea. Samaria. The ends of the earth. As the spiritual descendants of this First Church, how do we fit into this call from Jesus?
- The gift of the Spirit was not just for the church in Acts. Where do you see the fruit of the Spirit in our community? How can we expect to see more?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

We are all here today as Christians because of the work of Jesus on earth, and the continuation of that work by his apostles. As disciples of Jesus who also have the Holy Spirit with us, ask the Lord this week to help you be more open to Him to equip you, refresh you, and move you to complete the global mission to which God has appointed us all. Expect Him to speak!

WEEK 2: LEADER'S GUIDE

OPENING QUESTION

What does it look like to get along with or collaborate with someone who is different from you?

What does it take and why can it be hard?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- How does your Chi Alpha community resemble the church in Acts 2?
- What is different?
- Discuss how a modern community could seek to be more like the first church in Acts 2.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

After the pattern of the Acts 2 church who relied so deeply on each other, seek concrete ways this week through radical love to fill a need that is expressed by a brother or sister. Some examples are taking up an offering for someone struggling to pay rent, starting a meal chain, devoting time and emotional resources to make a visit to someone who is alone, providing transportation to someone who has none; there are many needs, both material and immaterial. Stay in tune with the needs of people inside and outside your core group, and elect a need that you all could serve this week!

WEEK 3: LEADER'S GUIDE

OPENING QUESTION

Name a time you've felt like an outsider.

This can be as inane or as deep as you'd like to go.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- What would it look like for a people or culture group in your community to be “overlooked” in the modern day? How does this look on your campus and community?
- How can your Christian community ensure that every people group is valued, included, and raised up?
- Continuing God's vision for Heaven on earth in the multi-ethnic church is challenging, but rewarding. What are the beautiful benefits of a multicultural church? What are some of the challenges we may face?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Many may struggle with the idea of a multiethnic or multicultural church, because the church has been segregated for so long. Reflect this week on this passage in tandem with Revelation 7:9-10, as well as the picture of restoration in Revelation 22:1-2. Meditate on these pictures. Consider what God had in mind upon the creation of the world, and how it will be resolved, by the “healing of the nations”. Consider how we as a church can come together to make earth look a little more like Heaven.

WEEK 4: LEADER'S GUIDE

OPENING QUESTION

Who's not here? Who lives around us, works around us, or exists in our community that we are not inviting to know Jesus, the Messiah who is for all people for all of time?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- Are any people groups or demographics that exist at the university underrepresented in your Chi Alpha? In your small group?
- Using your answer to the last question, what impact might it have for more people from those groups to be brought in? (You can use this week's passage as a reference.)
- What can you do to bring people in or be more welcoming to "who's not here"?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Like the apostles followed Christ's call to different racial and cultural groups, ask the Lord to put on your heart a person you know from a different background (racial, cultural, socioeconomic, etc.) than you. No one is a project to complete; it is the love of Christ that compels us (2 Corinthians 5:14) into inviting others into our lives and into the life abundant he offers. Make it a point to love that person with the love Jesus puts on your heart, listen to them, learn from them, and share your resources (time, energy, food, etc.) with them, not because they need it, but because you do!

WEEK 5: LEADER'S GUIDE

OPENING QUESTION

When have you been a guest in someone else's home, church, or somewhere unfamiliar? What made it feel hospitable to you (or inhospitable)?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

The first thing Peter does after the visions from God is invite Cornelius's messengers into his home. He too is received into Cornelius's home. Practicing hospitality as a both a discipline and a way to love people is essential to reconciling the world to God, and Christians of different races and cultures to one another.

- How can we be hospitable to people OUTSIDE the Church to reconcile them to God?
- How can we be hospitable to people INSIDE the Church to be reconciled to one another?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Jesus made himself nothing to bring us into the fold (Phil. 2:6-8) and to make a home for us (John 14:2, Hebrews 11:16, Psalm 23:5-6). This week, consider what it looks like for our fellowship to be a home for everyone. Practice just one of the acts of hospitality you discussed above. Giving of our resources is not always easy, but it could be as simple as making dinner for a friend or learning a new style of worship song, or as high-energy as hosting a core group game night in your dorm that is highly invitational to your hallmates!

WEEK 6-7: LEADER'S GUIDE

OPENING QUESTION

What is culture?

What are some fun aspects of how you see your culture?

DISCUSSION

As we see expressed by the church leaders in our text, Jesus is the King, we are His citizens. This means that we are a part of a different country, a new people group, a new way of living. There is a culture to the Kingdom of God, and God alone has set the bounds for that. No single earthly culture has it all right when it comes to how God wants us to live. There is no culture that perfectly expresses Kingdom culture. We must examine in humility where our upbringings fall short in gospel expression, and work towards a common understanding of what Kingdom culture is, as the Jerusalem Council did here.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

- How do we decide what parts of our culture we can keep? How do we decide what parts need relinquishing?
- What does it look like to have a multicultural community?
- What cultural things do you see in your own upbringing or community that are not Kingdom culture? What things do you see that are?
- Are there any cultural things in your local Christian community that seem normal to you but may be a barrier to other ethnic groups?
- When cultural controversy arises, are you willing to consider where your culture might fall short, and advocate for others around you?

NOTES

LEADER'S GUIDE

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

This week, attend a church gathering where your ethnicity, culture, language, or upbringing is not the majority (feel free to take a buddy!). Prepare yourself beforehand by letting down some internal walls, examining your preexisting notions, and praying that the Lord would soften your heart towards your brothers and sisters. Approach the gathering with humility and excitement that our God is one of many peoples -- that is, in fact, why you're here today!

Afterwards, talk through with someone in your small group what aspects of the gathering stuck out to you as expressions of God's Kingdom. What aspects have you not experienced before? In what ways could those aspects be a different expression of the same gospel of Christ? What aspects could you see your community incorporating to make everyone's experience more Kingdom-centric, and not majority-centric?