

# introduction

Welcome to the *Listen Up! Bible Study* of the book of Acts! This resource has been prepared by the UCC Stillspeaking Writers' Group for use in congregations. We hope you enjoy using it as much as we have enjoyed preparing it!

You're holding in your hands the first of three Bible studies on the book of Acts, each one consisting of six lessons. This one, written by Anthony B. Robinson, covers Acts 1–6. The second is based on Acts 7–15 and written by Lillian Daniel. The third, written by Martin Copenhaver, covers the remainder of Acts, chapters 16–28.

You may use one, two or all three of the Acts Bible Studies. Because many congregations will be using this material for a Sunday morning class, each lesson is designed for a 45 to 50 minute session. Sessions can easily be lengthened for a 90-minute session, but probably not so easily shortened. Sessions may take place at your church or in homes. There is a homework assignment for participants, and we encourage you to enrich your experience by taking time during the week for this "homework." For Bible translations, we recommend New Revised Standard (NRSV), New International (NIB), or Revised Standard (RSV).

## What's a *Listen Up! Bible Study* and why is it unique?

God's word is alive. God will always have something new to say to us. That's why the purpose of the *Listen Up! Bible Study* series is not simply learning information about the Bible. It is hearing God speak. There is a difference. In these Bible studies, you will be encouraged to listen: listen to the Bible, listen to your own questions and responses, and listen to the honest sharing among participants in your study group. Trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, we believe that in that mix of biblical text, personal engagement, and honest speaking and listening, God's word may be heard, speaking words of challenge and words of comfort.

To hear the God who is still speaking today, it is important to study whatever biblical passage may be our focus with an eye towards its original setting. For example, when we come to the second chapter of Acts, it will be helpful to know something about the history and background of the holiday of Pentecost. Or when we turn to the eighth chapter, it is helpful to know something about the region of Samaria and the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Paying attention to what we might call "the now of then," or the original setting and background of a passage, is important. Insofar as we are able, it is useful to understand the text we are studying in its original context.

But there's a danger there, too. We can become so preoccupied with the "now of then," that we don't get to the "now of now," what God is saying to us today through the biblical passage we are studying. We begin to think of the Bible as only "back then," and not "right now." To study or listen to Scripture with the conviction that *God is still speaking* means that though we do well to be informed about the background and setting of a particular Bible story or passage, we should not get stuck there. The point is to ask, in community together, what is the God who is still speaking saying to us today through this passage? What is God's message to us, the church and followers of Christ, right now?

The concept of "God is still speaking" further impacts our study of Scripture by reminding us that God speaks through human instruments—through you, and me, and those who are in the

group with us. It is the listening and speaking of the gathered community, a community that seeks God's way together, that God's will and the mind of Christ are best known. Moreover, we never know through whom the Holy Spirit will choose to speak! The Holy Spirit may speak through someone who is ninety, or someone who is nine years old. The Holy Spirit may speak through someone who is barely literate or through someone who has a doctoral degree. The Holy Spirit may speak through someone who doesn't have two quarters to rub together or through someone who owns their own business. Therefore, an important part of a *Listen Up! Bible Study* is careful listening for the Spirit's guidance in the words of those with whom we share the experience. This also means that our own honest and fully engaged participation is key.

# why the book of acts?

In the last two generations, since the mid-twentieth century, much has changed in our society and the role of the church. Christianity no longer enjoys the kind of taken-for-granted support in and from the society that it once did. Today American society is an officially secular, religiously pluralistic, and ethnically diverse one. In many ways, *this is also the world of the Acts of the Apostles*, a world where Christianity was not socially sanctioned nor mandated by the government. Christians were a minority and the church was more of a mission movement than an established social institution. As we negotiate these changes in our social role, Acts will be helpful to us.

Beyond these factors of cultural change that make Acts particularly timely, Acts is a book that is focused on a dynamic church guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus instructs his disciples to return to Jerusalem and wait for “the gift from on high,” that is the gift and empowerment of the Spirit. In Acts 2, the Spirit comes with wind and flame, empowering the new church to tell the story of God in all the languages of the known world. During the Christendom period, when the church was an established social institution, many churches did not pay a great deal of attention to the Holy Spirit. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that we trusted in our own power and did not always feel the need for God’s power or the Holy Spirit.

For example, it was not uncommon in our decision-making within a congregation to simply ask “what is the will of the majority?” or “what do we want to do?” rather than asking about or seeking to discern the Spirit’s leading to us. In Acts we will find an exciting church where the gift of the Spirit and the guidance of the Spirit are crucial. It is a church where God is doing a new thing, and the church often seems to be running to catch up with the Spirit. Moreover, we will see a church where this gift of the Spirit is shared by all believers, not just some.

As we study Acts we see a church that is dynamic and alive, not static or stuck. The gospel message and movement did not come to an end with Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. There was a whole new beginning, one that no one could have predicted. In so many ways, Acts is the perfect book for a God is still speaking Church. Here more truth and light breaks forth from God’s Holy Word each new day as the movement of faith spreads like wildfire. All of this may be important encouragement, and a challenge, for us today!

One consequence of this dynamism is that the church experiences conflict. There’s internal conflict, for example, in Acts 6 over leadership issues. There’s more internal conflict in Acts 15 as the church faces cultural diversity and questions about its mission. We witness the church facing and resolving internal conflict. There’s also external conflict as the church confronts religious and political authorities that are not much interested in the transformation of life. As early as Acts 4, the apostles find themselves on trial. In Acts 5 there is the first of several Spirit-led jail breaks, and the apostles boldly assert, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” (5:29) In Acts,

the church is feisty and alive. Preaching is consistently described as “bold,” and Christian witness disturbs some even as it delights others.

There are many other issues and questions in Acts that are important for us in the church today. Among the matters to which Acts pays attention, in addition to leadership and conflict, are cultural diversity and the encounter with people who are not of our race or culture; the use of wealth and possessions; the role of women in the church; the relationship between church and state or between Christians and civil authorities; and the challenge of persecution. Beyond that, Acts is full of rollicking good stories and adventures.

Wouldn't it be great if the Book of Acts helped churches today recapture a sense of excitement and adventure in being followers of Jesus? Watch out—it could happen!

# an overview of the acts of the apostles

## Acts 1–6

Where does Acts come in the overall story of the New Testament? If the four gospels tell the story of Jesus' life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection, Acts is the next act—because the story does not end when Jesus' ministry on earth ends. It continues in surprising ways. Acts tells the story of a new and emerging church, led by the apostles. As noted earlier, there are three parts to the Acts *Listen Up! Bible Study*. Part one covers Acts 1–6. In this section, the new church is located in Jerusalem. As Acts goes on we see the church spread outward from Jerusalem, throughout the Mediterranean, until the final chapter (28) ends in Rome. Written by Luke, the author of the third gospel, Acts 1 takes up where Luke left off. In Acts 1–6, the new community of the church is born in Jerusalem when the gift of the Spirit comes on Pentecost. Before that, we see the apostles being prepared for their new mission. After Pentecost, Acts takes us into the life of the early church, a community of shared goods. In this community people share prayers, possessions, food, and more. Moreover, the church begins to challenge established authority in the name and spirit of the Jesus whom God raised from the dead. It's not long, however, before issues and challenges begin to crop up. Acts 1–6 concludes with the resolution of a leadership crisis and the call of a new group of leaders, the first Deacons of the church.

## Acts 7–15

In Acts 7-15 the outward expansion of the church beyond Jerusalem begins, partly in response to repression in Jerusalem. Even in the face of persecution and violence, the Spirit cannot be stopped and the apostles preach "boldly," a favorite word in Acts. We see the apostle Peter challenge the magician, Simon, and the new Deacon, Philip engage an Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. In Acts 9, God transforms an enemy, Saul, into a friend and gives this onetime enemy a key role. In Acts 10, Peter is stunned to find himself led by the Spirit across the great cultural divide of that time and into the home of a Gentile, Cornelius. The outward movement to the Gentile, non-Jewish world begins here. But this is not welcomed by all. Conflict ensues and a Council is called in Jerusalem.

## Acts 16–28

Acts 16 through 28 follows the footsteps of Paul and those who traveled and taught with him. We see Paul teaching by the stream in Philippi and the emergence of Lydia and the church at her home. We see Paul starting a riot among the silversmiths in Ephesus. We hear his charge to future leaders of the church in Acts 20 and his encouragement to them to "not shrink." All the while, the church spreads. As Acts draws to a close Paul returns to Jerusalem to face his opponents there, and then sails through choppy seas to the city of destiny, Rome.

## The Place of Acts in the Bible

Take a look at the Table of Contents of your Bible or of the New Testament. Notice that Acts stands at a crucial hinge point in the New Testament. First, Acts follows the four gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's portraits of Jesus all flow into Acts and shape the early church. Then second, notice that after Acts, the New Testament branches into two collections of letters, the letters of the Apostle Paul (Romans through Hebrews) and then another collection of letters (James through John), traditionally called "the catholic (meaning "universal") epistles." Paul's letters are written to specific churches in Rome, Corinth, Philippi and other cities and towns. The catholic epistles are written to all churches, hence the term "catholic." But here's the point: in the unfolding story of Acts we get the stories of all of these leaders of the church, Paul and Peter, James and John. Among these different people and writers, we find different, often very different, theologies and understandings of the Christian life. But all are part of the story of Acts, all of them and their different viewpoints are valued and depicted in Acts.

So what we see in Acts is a richly diverse and dynamic church. It is formed and informed by the four gospels, four different portraits of Jesus. From Acts, we move to the different theologies and ways of being church found in Paul and Peter, James and John. Acts stands as a fulcrum between the gospels and the epistles. In doing so, Acts witnesses to both the diversity and the unity of the church, another vitally important matter for us today. The church here is diverse and it possesses unity. Our own United Church of Christ motto, "That they may all be one," points us toward a unity that is not uniformity, toward a diversity that is not factionalism.