



STUDY GUIDE

acts

**WEIRD
DANGEROUS
COMPELLING**

st bart's

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overview

Whilst western Christianity can often look very similar to western culture, the very first followers of Jesus—along with their communities—were extraordinarily distinctive. Perhaps even a little weird! These new believers who were part of a new movement deviated from so many of the cultural norms and societal expectations. And in a culture in which everyone was ‘religious’, Christians still stood out as strange.

As Nijay Gupta puts it,

“I don’t think the first Christians were trying to be weird in order to be weird. They weren’t anti-conformist as some sort of intellectual political or cultural ideology. In fact, as much as possible, they wanted to prove themselves to be respectable, “good” society members. It was more the case that the person of Christ, the work of the Spirit, and the fundamental dynamics of the gospel themselves changed their orientation toward God, God’s world, God’s creatures, and God’s good end. They had unusual ways of talking about the divine and about spiritual matters, odd patterns and practices of worship, and suspicious social habits and behaviours.”¹

Yet whilst distinctive, these first Christians were also *strangely compelling*. As people witnessed their lives and heard their message, some were offended, others were confused, but many came to believe. In this eight-part series, we’ll explore some of the earliest accounts of the church in Acts to see how the Gospel distinctively transformed these very first believers, also considering how the Gospel should continue to transform the lives of believers today.

Acts

- **Genre & Audience:** Acts is written as a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke. The genre of Acts is *historical narrative*, forming one of the best accounts that we have of those who first followed Jesus after his ascension to the Father.

¹ See Nijay Gupta “Strange Religion: How the First Christians were Weird, Dangerous, and Compelling”.

- **Date:** Acts covers a period of more than 30 years (from the resurrection of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome).
- **Purpose:** Where the Gospel of Luke is primarily concerned with the life, death, resurrection, and teaching of Jesus, the Book of Acts focuses on the life and witness of Christ's church empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus' ascension (and sending of the disciples) is the hinge that connects the life of Jesus to the beginnings of the life of his church and the continued proclamation of the Gospel.
- **Structure:** Broadly, the structure of Acts can be considered in three 'movements' of the Gospel's outward progression:

Movement 1 *In chapters 1-12 we witness the apostles proclaiming the Gospel to the Jews.*



Movement 2 *In chapters 13-20 we witness Paul's missionary journeys proclaiming the Gospel (predominantly) to the Gentiles.*

Movement 3 *In chapter 21-28 we witness Paul's eventful journeys, trials, and incarceration in Rome, as the Gospel reaches the epicentre of the Roman world.*

Outline

Week 1	<i>Followed a Crucified King</i>	Acts 1:1-11
Week 2	<i>Possessed by the Spirit of God</i>	Acts 2:1-21; 8:9-24
Week 3	<i>Enjoined as a Household of Faith</i>	Acts 2:42-47
Week 4	<i>Reckoned Time Strangely</i>	Acts 3:11-26
Week 5	<i>Cared for the Least</i>	Acts 4:32-37
Week 6	<i>Transformed but Imperfect</i>	Acts 15:36-41
Week 7	<i>Worshipped without Blood or Smoke</i>	Acts 17:16-34
Week 8	<i>Proclaimed Good News</i>	Acts 20:17-38

General Resources



- *Read (book):* "Strange Religion" by Nijay Gupta. 
- *Read (commentary):* "The Challenge of Acts" by Tom Wright. 
- *Read (book):* "Why the Gospel" by Matthew Bates.
- *Read (advanced commentary):* "Acts: Witnesses to Him" by Bruce Milne.

- *Watch (video):* “Acts” by the Bible Project:
<https://bibleproject.com/videos/acts-1-12/>

St Bart’s Resources (including for families)



For the series overview, weekly sermons, small group material, and weekly children’s curriculum, visit: www.stbarts.com.au/sermon-series/earlychurch

Also for families:

- *Read (book):* “Acts: A Visual Guide” by Kevin DeYoung. 
- *Watch (video):* God’s Story: Acts by Crossroad Kids.
The book of Acts is all about what happened after Jesus died and came back to life. Learn more about that in God’s Story: Acts. This video gives a great overview for kids and families.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rts3luHunzM>
- *Read (books):* “Adventures in Acts Vol. 1 & 2” by David Luckman. 
These books depict the exciting adventures of the Early Church, as found in the Acts of the Apostles. Designed for seven to eleven-year-olds, Adventures in Acts helps the reader engage with the breathtaking events of the Early Church in a totally new way.

ADAM LOWE

St Bart’s Toowoomba, July 2025

-  Summaries by Adam Lowe (AL), Amy Norman (AN), and Daniel Rouhead (DR).
-  Available to borrow from the St Bart’s Church Library (stbarts.com.au/library)

how to use this series overview

For each week in the series, a Bible reading, “the big idea”, some reflection questions, and a prayer is provided.

- **PRAY**

Begin with prayer, for example:

Gracious God, please enlighten our minds, enliven our hearts, and shape our wills according to your life-giving Word. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

- **READ from Acts**

Read the part of Acts that we are focusing on for that week. Some key verses (from that reading) are also printed — you might even like to memorise these!

- **REFLECT**

Read the ‘big idea’ and use the questions to reflect on the Bible passage. This will help prepare for the sermon and the following week’s small group questions (provided on the St Bart’s website).

- **PRAY**

Each day a prayer is provided that you may like to use. Of course, you need not to be limited to this prayer.

Week 1

Followed a Crucified King

Acts 1:1-11

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8

READ ACTS I:I-II

REFLECT. Christians have been considered *weird* from the earliest of times because of how they *behaved*, the *priorities* they adopted, the *message* they proclaimed, and—most fundamentally—because of who they *worshipped*: a crucified King. In fact, one of the earliest depictions of Jesus is a graffiti that was etched into a wall on the Palatine Hill in Rome (the Alexamenos Graffito). In the image, a person is depicted as worshipping a crucified, donkey-headed figure, with the accompanying inscription reading, “Alexamenos worships [his] god”. A crucified Messiah was foolishness to the Greeks and a shameful stumbling block to the Jews (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18). Yet, despite the strangeness of the claim, the early Christians never deviated from the proclamation that Jesus was the crucified and risen King. Why? Because many had *encountered the Risen Lord Jesus* themselves, whilst others had been *convinced* by the testimony of those who had witnessed Jesus’ resurrection firsthand. That’s what we read of in Acts 1 as Jesus appears to the Apostles, teaches them of what is ahead, commissions them to be his witnesses, and promises that they will receive the Holy Spirit. The strange, surprising, and spectacular Good News is not only that Jesus has rescued us from our sins, but that he is alive and will also be returning to reign. AL

- By what authority are the disciples sent? What message do we proclaim?

PRAY

Father, thank you that Jesus is the crucified and risen King! Help us to confess with our hearts and declare with our lips this glorious news. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Week 2

Possessed by the Spirit of God

Acts 2:1-21 (8:8-24)

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Acts 2:3-4

READ ACTS 2:1-21 (AND 8:8-24)

REFLECT. In the Roman Empire, you needed to know *where* the gods you worshiped “lived” (where their temple or statue was) because that was the only place you could engage with them. Statues were not believed to be the gods themselves, but could be filled with the presence and power of the god. Christians were considered *weird*, as they had no *special place* to go to to meet with God, yet claimed that they (not a statue!) were *indwelt by the very Spirit of God*. This was what Jesus had foretold and promised (cf. Acts 1:8) and what they experienced in an unmistakable way at Pentecost. With the noise of a violent wind and tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit came on the disciples, enabling them to declare the wonders of God in all different languages! This was such a weird occurrence, that people hearing their native language came to investigate. Peter explained that this wasn’t just a drunken party trick, but the fulfilment of what God had promised through the prophet Joel, that “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (2:17, cf. Joel 2:28). The Spirit is given *by God, freely and equally to all*. Many at the time (like Simon the Sorcerer) were used to wielding power for their own boasting, but the Spirit of God is distinct, enabling signs and wonders so that people may call on the Lord and be saved. AN

- What critical role does the Spirit play in how we relate to God?

PRAY

Gracious Father, thank you for the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, given to all who trust in Jesus. Help us not to forget or disregard this gift of yourself. Amen

Week 3

Enjoined as a Household of Faith

Acts 2:42-47

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Acts 2:46

READ ACTS 2:42-47

REFLECT. In a world shaped by individualism, personal success, and consumer-driven relationships, the early church presents a radically different vision of community. The early church, guided and sustained by the Spirit, stood in stark contrast to the values of Roman society and our modern world. When the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”, this wasn’t a casual gathering or a once-a-week obligation - it was a way of life. The early Christians lived out a *shared identity* as a spiritual family, “enjoined as a household of faith”, where belonging was not based on blood, status, or ethnicity, but on their unity in Christ. They held everything in common, sold property to care for one another, and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. In a society that prized hierarchy, wealth, and patronage, this was subversive. The rich ate with the poor, Jews embraced Gentiles, and leaders served rather than ruled. Today, this passage calls us to reclaim the communal, counter-cultural heart of the Gospel. DR

- Are you deeply committed to one another's flourishing?
- What would you give up for the sake of belonging, sacrifice, and shared mission?

PRAY

Gracious Father, form us into a household that reflects your love. Where we are tempted to isolate, draw us into deeper fellowship. Where we hoard, teach us to share. Where we compete, help us to serve you in unity. Amen.

Week 4

Reckoned Time Strangely

Acts 3:11-26

Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. Acts 3:21

READ ACTS 3:11-26

REFLECT. When the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799, it provided a key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. These hieroglyphs had remained a mystery to scholars, but because the same text on the stone was repeated in three different scripts, it provided the key to show how the languages were connected. In a sweeping review of the history of God's people, Peter demonstrates how Jesus is not only the key to make sense of time, but that he is the lynchpin who holds time together! Peter not only proclaims that Jesus is the *fulfilment of the promises made in the past to God's people* (especially Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), *the one whom the prophets foretold*, but that our future is *bound up in him* (by putting our trust in him) as we await his return. That means that those who follow Jesus are caught up between the now-and-not-yet. Just like the first Christians, we can with confidence proclaim all that God has fulfilled in the first coming of Christ and look forward with certainty to when his return (in God's timing). We don't just live for today. Christians live with a strange reckoning of time: we have a hope that is anchored to what God *has done*, we live *presently* in the power of the Holy Spirit to serve the reigning King, and we eagerly await his return when the *fullness of time* will come. *Jesus is Lord of the past, present, and the future.* AL

- In what way is our hope anchored to Christ's first coming?
- How should a certainty of Christ's return transform how we live today?

PRAY

Almighty Lord, thank you that you are the author and redeemer of time. Help us to live in recognition of what Christ has done and in anticipation of his return. Amen.

Week 5

Cared for the Least

Acts 4:32-37

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. Galatians 4:33-34a

READ ACTS 4:32-37

REFLECT. One of the most distinctive features of the early church was their generosity towards those in need. The Roman society was highly stratified, with a complex web of patronage, where any help or support would come with strings attached. In stark contrast, the early church had a radically different approach. Rather than helping only those who could help you, the early church helped those *who had need*. Proceeds from selling property were given to those within the community who had need, without expecting anything in return. This was not the initiative of just a few, but represented a shared attitude of generosity towards the family of God, united in “one heart and mind” in sharing everything they had. Timothy Keller puts it, “The early Christians were promiscuous with their charity.” It was not a requirement to sell everything to belong to the early church, but instead the common pattern of those in the community *voluntarily* offering their property for the benefit of those in need, reflected the culture of generosity in the early church. This radical generosity eliminated extreme inequality and expressed the vision of God’s people where there is no poor among them (Deut 15:4-5). Importantly, the early church prioritised *both* care for the least and proclamation of the Gospel, both of which come from following Jesus. AN

- Who is someone that has a specific need that you can help this week?

PRAY

Father, thank you for the generosity of Jesus to us that we can freely give without return. Help us to see the need on our frontlines and respond generously. Amen.

Week 6

Transformed but Imperfect

Acts 15:36-41

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Acts 15:39a

READ ACTS 15:36-41

REFLECT. Even though God was at work in extraordinary ways in the early church, it was still far from perfect! As these Christians sought to work out what it meant to *live in the wake of the resurrection, follow Jesus, and proclaim the Gospel*, they made mistakes, got off course, and—at times—disagreed! Yes, the Holy Spirit was at work shaping them, ripening fruit in them, and causing Christ's image to bear upon them more-and-more, but they were still imperfect human beings: *they were works-in-progress. Like us!* The process of sanctification is gradual—*sometimes painful for us and for others*—and will only be made complete when Christ returns. As Paul longs to revisit places where they had formerly ministered he was understandably reluctant to take Mark because he had previously let them down and deserted them. We don't have much detail about what happened, but you can imagine Paul's *hesitation*, the *possible hurt* he carried, and the *concern for further harm* that could be caused. But that was not the end of the story! Not only did God use their disagreement for good (i.e., there were now two missionary teams!), but it's clear—from *Paul's greeting in Colossians 4 and his call for Mark to join him in 2 Timothy 4*—that they left room for reconciliation. Christians are not distinctive *because they are perfect* but *because of how they approach their imperfections*. We do so with a humility that is willing to recognise our sin and a submission to God's grace through a reconciliation of one another. AL

- What makes the modelling of reconciliation distinctive in our world?

PRAY

Gracious Father, please help us to be quick to forgive and love one another as you have loved us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Week 7

Worshipped without Blood or Smoke

Act 17:16-34

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.” Acts 17:24

READ ACTS 17:16-34

REFLECT. In the ancient world, whether in Paganism or Judaism, worship was a messy and bloody business involving the making of sacrifices. Whilst in Greco-Roman religions, sacrifices were typically made to gain favour or to appease the gods (like the multitude represented by idols in Athens), in Judaism, sacrifices were made in response to God's instructions. The sacrifices instituted by God (cf. Leviticus) varied in purpose but particularly focused on atoning (making amends for wrongdoing) for sin. As Jews made these sacrifices, they were not only made more aware of the ways that they had fallen short of God's commands, but also *who* they had ultimately sinned against (God) along with the costly *consequences* for that sin (death). But Christians worshipped in a radically different way: without the need for the Temple nor its sacrifices. How is this possible? *Because the perfect offering for our sin had been once-and-for-all through Jesus' death.* Because of Jesus, God's dwelling place with his people was in them in the very power of the Spirit. Because the pagan idols in Athens only pointed to counterfeit gods, their attempts to approach god were futile. But in Jesus, he has opened up the true and living way in which all can come in repentance to God and have confidence our sin has been paid for. It's why in Christian worship, the only sacrifice that is offered, is the living sacrifice of our lives in God's service. AL

- What does it mean to know *that Jesus had paid for your sin once-and-for-all?*

PRAY

*Thank you Jesus that you have opened up the way to be forgiven and know life!
Please help us to daily offer our lives as a living sacrifice for you. Amen.*

Week 8

Proclaimed Good News

Acts 20:17-38

“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” Acts 20:21

READ ACTS 20:17-38

REFLECT. The history of the early church described in Acts is characterised by: an outward trajectory of the Gospel, *in the power of the Holy Spirit*, and *in response to Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples* (cf. Acts 1:8). Geographically, we witness that movement as the Gospel goes out from Galilee to Jerusalem (in Luke), and then from Jerusalem to Rome (in Acts) — the figurative ‘ends of the earth’! That process was often anything but smooth sailing, as the apostles (and other witnesses) faced persecution, trials, imprisonment, death, and even *literal ship wrecks*. At the heart of the message was not only the declaration that Jesus is Lord, but a call to respond to that proclamation through repentance and faith in Jesus. Paul, like many of the first disciples, were so convicted by this good news, (vv.20-21) that they not only put their lives on the line to proclaim it, but they were also willing to hold up their lives as an example. Whilst some think it arrogant that Paul appeals to the elders in Ephesus by way of his own example (vv.17-21), it’s actually an incredible act of humility and accountability. The first disciples knew that the most important way that they could deploy their lives—*whatever the cost*—was by testifying to the grace of God made available to us in Christ. AL

- How was Paul’s life a witness by both word and example?
- What are other examples of disciples who testified to God’s grace?

PRAY

Gracious Father, we thank you for the faithful proclamation of the Gospel—through Word and example) throughout the centuries. Please help us to testify to the beauty and reality of God’s grace through every aspect of our lives. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.