

*Introducing the Bible*  
Worksheet for Week 7  
God Forms a New People

This week, we will take a look at the Book of Acts and the formation of the early Christian communities. We'll be introduced to Paul and the letters he wrote to many of the young Christian churches. This worksheet will introduce you to the material we'll talk about in class this week and provide you with a structured set of daily Bible readings.

*God Builds His Church*

The Book of Acts is the second-half of a two volume work by Luke. In it, he tells the story of the first 30 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. An important key to understanding Acts is to see that the key driver in the story, the one who makes things happen, is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes in great power to Jesus' disciples on Pentecost (Acts 2), when Jews from all over the empire were in Jerusalem for an important Jewish festival. From the story of Pentecost, Luke goes on to tell us about the establishment and growth of the church in Jerusalem and how Jewish leaders began their attempts to stamp out this blasphemous cult. Three or so years after Jesus' resurrection, Saul/Paul was visited by the living Christ while on his way to round up Christians in Damascus (Acts 9). Paul emerges as a leader in the early church and becomes the missionary to the Gentiles. Acts tells us of three missionary journeys Paul made over a period of eight years or so (50AD-58AD); one trip in Asia Minor and two trips through Greece. Many of Paul's letters in the New Testament were written to churches he founded on these trips - 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, and so on. The Book of Acts closes with Paul in Rome under house arrest as he awaits trial before Caesar. This was probably about 62AD.

*The People of God*

Who are the people of God? Who will spend eternity in loving communion with God? Who will see God's face (Rev 22:4)? The Jews of Jesus' day rightly understood that they had been chosen by God to be his agents in the renewal of all creation - the Jews were YHWH's people. But . . . who was a Jew? The people of God were those who lived in covenant relationship with God and submitted themselves to the obligations of that covenant. If you kept God's law you were a Jew; you were part of God's people. Ruth was not an Israelite, but because she chose to follow YHWH and keep his law, she became part of God's people and was the great-grandmother of King David! When the Jews understood this correctly (they sometimes forgot!), they knew that Jewish-ness was not a matter of DNA, but of keeping God's law.

Thus, we should not be surprised that many of the first Christians<sup>1</sup>, all of whom were Jewish, believed that one had to become a Jew first, in order to become a Christian. Some early Christians, like Paul, disagreed. In practice, this became an argument over circumcision. For many Jewish Christians, including Peter, the circumcision of male children was a sign of God's covenant and if a male gentile wanted to become part of God's people, he had to be circumcised. Paul saw this very differently. He argued that because of Jesus, the "badge of membership" in the people of God had changed. No longer were God's people marked out by their keeping of the Law, but by their faith in Jesus Christ. If a Jewish Christian wanted to keep the law, that was fine; but it was not required. The only "marker" of God's people was to be faith in Jesus Christ. If you placed your trust in Jesus, you were part of God's people; if you did not place your trust in Jesus, you were not part of God's people. In about 50AD, this debate was settled in the Christian community at a council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The council affirmed the admission of gentiles into the church without any requirement of circumcision.

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<sup>1</sup>This can all get terribly confusing if you do not remember that ALL the first Christians were Jews. It was perhaps 10 years after Jesus' resurrection before a non-Jew became a Christian. Most Jews did not become Christians. They did not accept Jesus as Messiah, much less as God himself. It is not hard to see why. Jews in Jesus' day awaited a Messiah who would come in power and might and wonder and glory. To them, the idea that the Messiah would end up crucified on a Roman cross was absurd. Indeed, in their mind, any "would-be" Messiah who got himself crucified was, quite obviously, not the Messiah after all!

## Bible Readings for Week 7

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. What do you find most surprising in these readings?

<p><b>Day 1 Acts 2 The Holy Spirit comes to the Disciples on Pentecost</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2 Acts 7 The martyring of Stephen; be sure to read his telling of the Old Testament story</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3 Acts 9 The conversion of Saul, who would become Paul</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4 Acts 15:1-35 The council in Jerusalem considers Gentiles and circumcision</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5 Acts 17 Paul visits Thessalonica and Athens on his second missionary journey</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>