

Lesson 9 | January 28, 2024

Origins of the Church

Study Text: Deuteronomy 4:9–14; Psalm 22:22–25; Acts 1:1–5, 12–26; 7:37–38

Central Truth: The Church has always been part of God’s plan.

Key Verse: Acts 1:4

Being assembled together with them, [Jesus] commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father (KJV).

Once when he was eating with them, [Jesus] commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will discover the Church’s Old Testament roots to better understand the purpose and ministry of the Church.
- Students will explore and appreciate the value of waiting in prayer, just as the apostles did in Acts 1.
- Students will commit to regular prayer for their own church as it carries out the Great Commission.

Introducing the Study

Say: Abraham Lincoln famously said, “All I am or can be I owe to my angel-mother.”¹ Almost all of us can point to someone like a parent or teacher and say, “They made me who I am today.”

Opening Activity—They Made a Difference

Ask: *Who has made a real difference in your life?* There is a wide array of possible answers, because we can be impacted positively in many ways by the people in our lives. We are each a product of our emotional, relational, social, or spiritual surroundings.

Say: Each of us is shaped by our history. As we begin our study of the Church, we will focus on its origin—specifically how both the Old and New Testaments record God’s plans for the Church. From those beginnings, God formed a community in which His people could learn, grow, and thrive. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

When we talk about the beginnings of the Church,² our minds quickly move to the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. These are certainly

1. George Alfred Townsend, *The Real Life of Abraham Lincoln: a talk with Mr. Herndon, His Late Law Partner*, Lincoln Miscellany, Vol. 8 (New York: Publication Office, Bible House, 1867), 6.

2. We use “Church” (capital C) when referring to the universal, worldwide body of Christ and “church” (lowercase c) when referring to a local body of believers or the building where they meet.

milestones, but God’s plan for the Church began long before the New Testament. Throughout Scripture, He revealed how His people would come together and live in community. By the time we arrive at Acts 2 (which we’ll cover in Lesson 10), we will better understand what God intended the Church to be.

Part 1—Old Testament Roots

People of Knowledge and Worship

Deuteronomy 4:9–14; Psalm 22:22–25

Say: The Church is meant to be a place of training, mentoring, growth, and fellowship in the two complementary areas of Christian life: right belief and right practice. Throughout the New Testament, we find a lot of instruction on both. Yet God’s desire that His people believe the right things and behave the right way actually began much earlier. As the nation of Israel was taking shape, God called His people throughout the Old Testament to know His Word and live accordingly. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Christian faith is intended to be experienced. It is personal and life-changing. But genuine faith must be accompanied by knowledge, including knowledge of who God is, what He is like, what He is not like, what He has done, what He will do, and what He expects of His people.

Moses’ instructions in Deuteronomy 4:9–14 begin with a strong warning that the people should not forget what they have seen—that is, what they have experienced as they followed God’s leading in the desert. This was important, because unlike every other religion around them, Israel did not have idols to hold, look at, or trust. Instead, they trusted in a God they had never seen. The supernatural, life-altering acts of God they had witnessed were to be passed down through the generations.

But in verse 10, Moses abruptly changed his focus. The people also were not to forget God’s instructions received at Mt. Sinai. Moses described these events in vivid terms (verses 11–12). God manifested himself in fire that shone brilliantly against the dark mountain and then spoke to them “from the heart of the fire” (verse 12, NLT). This unique encounter with God was not to be forgotten, in large part because of what He said. He gave them the Law through Moses, enabling future generations to know what it means to fear the Lord. (That is, they would understand who He is and what He can do.) It would also teach them to obey the Lord, following His decrees and regulations as they entered a land that was hostile to anyone who would follow the one true and invisible God.

This idea of fearing the Lord—a product of knowing His Law—is repeated throughout the Old Testament. One example is a familiar messianic psalm. After a long expression of grief mingled with thanksgiving to the Lord for provision and expressions of trust, David announced in Psalm 22: “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters. I

will praise you among your assembled people” (verse 22, NLT). Proclamation and praise are fundamental to the right practice of any community dedicated to serving God.

This way of living—both proclaiming the Lord’s name and praising Him together—is demonstrated by other actions like fearing the Lord (verse 23) and compassionately caring for those in need (verse 24). Reminders of God’s faithfulness, as described in the first portion of the psalm, prompted David to emulate that faithfulness and fulfill his promises to God (verse 25).

While we know from the New Testament that this psalm is ultimately about Christ, its words also directly applied to David and the rest of God’s people at the time of its writing. Following the Lord is a lifestyle of real-time obedience and faithfulness, rooted in God’s enduring commands that guide the way. With this Old Testament foundation, we are able to better understand the identity and function of the Church in the New Testament.

Resource Packet Item 1: A Christian View of Deuteronomy

Distribute the worksheet and have students complete it in groups or individually. Then discuss the questions as a class.

Discuss

- ? What happens when a Christian lacks adequate knowledge of God’s Word?
- ? How does a Christian go from simply knowing God’s Word to living it out?

Life-Giving Words to Pass Down

Acts 7:37–38

Say: In John 6:63, Jesus said: “The very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (NLT). God’s words are transformational and life-giving, leading to abundant life here on earth and eternal life one day in heaven. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Acts 7:38, Stephen made an interesting statement about the Law: “Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us” (NLT). God’s commands to His people were intended to carry them through their challenges and preserve them as His chosen people. This pattern continued for centuries, preparing the way for Christ, whom Stephen identified as the Prophet whom Moses had foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15. By not listening to Jesus, the Sanhedrin were rejecting the teachings of Moses.

The Old Testament Israelite community foreshadows the New Testament Church. God established a community of people to coexist with—but in many ways be separate from—the world around them. The community was to live according to the Lord’s instructions. Deviating from His commands would bring consequences to individuals and the community, but following His commands would bring God’s abiding presence and blessings. As we study the development of the Church, we will see how this model provides its framework.

Discuss

- ? How is today's Church like the Old Testament nation of Israel? How is it different?
- ? Why do you think God chose the pattern of community (not solitary) worship for both Old Testament Israelites and New Testament followers of Christ?

Part 2—Prayerfully Awaiting the Father's Promise Instructed through the Spirit

Acts 1:1–3

Say: Since we know the Book of Acts records the beginnings of the Church, it stands to reason the opening verses of Acts have much to say about the Church's priorities. The Church is to be founded on the instructions of Jesus given through the Holy Spirit. Already we can see Christians are intended to be people of the Word and people of the Spirit. The Word instructs us while the Spirit empowers us. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The message of Acts 1:1–3 regarding the Church is twofold. The first message emphasizes the Holy Spirit's work among His people. Jesus' final charge to His apostles was given "through the Holy Spirit" (verse 2, NLT). Many scholars note that this verse sets the tone for the entire Book of Acts, emphasizing the cooperative relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus was anointed by the Spirit (Luke 3:22; Acts 10:38). And at the end of His earthly ministry, He commissioned His disciples by breathing on them and saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22, NLT).

In the next phase of the Spirit's anointing, the apostles will act on Jesus' behalf. The Book of Acts records in detail all that was accomplished through the Holy Spirit's power during this time. It has been said that the book might be more accurately called The Acts of the Holy Spirit rather than The Acts of the Apostles. Both then and now, God's people function properly only by the power of the Holy Spirit—both outwardly in terms of mission and inwardly in terms of personal spiritual growth and community discipleship.

The second message from this passage regarding the Church emphasizes its Kingdom message. Jesus spent forty days after the Resurrection teaching His apostles about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). From the beginning, God had been the true King over Israel and all His people throughout the earth (Psalm 103:19). It is no coincidence the Book of Acts begins and ends with the Kingdom being taught and proclaimed (1:3; 28:30–31). That is the central work of the Church. Sharing the good news of the Kingdom is sharing the good news of Jesus—who He is, what He taught, and why He came to earth. As we live out His teachings in community and take the gospel beyond the four walls of our church buildings, everything we do is held together by the inspired Word of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Resource Packet Item 2: Jesus' Teachings on the Holy Spirit

Distribute the worksheet and review its content as a class. Encourage students to complete the Personal Reflection section on their own during the week.

Discuss

? What are some examples of “things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3, KJV) that Jesus may have talked about during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension?

? What should be the Holy Spirit’s role in a Christian’s life? In a church community? Is that the role He currently holds in your personal life? In your church?

Do Not Leave Jerusalem

Acts 1:4–5

Say: Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His followers to wait in Jerusalem until they received the gift of the Spirit as He had promised. Clearly, this was more than a general promise of the Holy Spirit’s abiding presence and help. A specific event was about to happen that would bring about a unique outpouring of the Spirit’s power. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The gift Jesus spoke of in Acts 1:4 (see also Luke 24:49) was not a new promise but had been foretold in Joel 2:28–32. As the Church took shape, the Spirit’s power would be integral to believers’ function and identity as the people of God. With miraculous continuity, the Old Testament community of faith would transform into the Church as more and more Jews came to believe in Christ and the Kingdom expanded to include Gentiles as well. All the while, the Holy Spirit unified and empowered the community.

In Acts 1:5, Jesus compared the baptism in the Holy Spirit to the kind of baptism His followers were already familiar with: water baptism. It’s worth noting John the Baptist had said Jesus would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11; NLT), but Jesus did not mention a baptism of fire in Acts 1. Fire refers not to blessing, but to the judgment awaiting those who reject Christ; therefore, the time of that baptism with fire has not yet come.

What are we to make of Jesus’ contrast between water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism? And what does this tell us about the Holy Spirit baptism that was about to take place? The answer lies in the spiritual condition of those to whom the promise was given. Although the disciples had not yet been empowered by the Spirit, they had already been born of the Spirit (John 3:5). They had been taught by Jesus and accepted Him as Messiah (Matthew 16:13–17). They had been pruned and purified by His message (John 15:3). They had partaken of Communion with Him (Luke 22:19–20). He had breathed on them with the promise they would receive the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). And they were gathering together in community (Acts 2:1). All of these criteria signify throughout the New Testament that someone is part of the Church. It was on this unified body of believers the Holy Spirit was about to descend.

Discuss

? How is the prophecy of Joel 2:28–32 still being fulfilled in the Church today?

? Discuss the similarities and differences between water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism.

Part 3—The Twelve Apostles Constantly United in Prayer Acts 1:12–14

Say: Many of the most memorable times of fellowship and worship the people of God experience together are marked by a sense of supernatural unity. This was certainly the case in Acts 1:12–14. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Acts 1:12, the apostles made the half-mile journey west to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension from the Mount of Olives. They "went up into an upper room" (verse 13, KJV) of the house where they were staying. The Book of Acts includes instances where upstairs rooms were places of prayer (10:9) and preaching (20:7–8). Because the room in Acts 1:13 was larger than most upper rooms of that day (able to hold over a dozen people), it is possible this was the room where Jesus and the disciples had shared the Last Supper (Luke 22:12). If so, it is fitting that some of the earliest business of the Church was conducted there.

Acts 1:13 lists the eleven apostles who remained after Judas Iscariot's death. They were joined in the room by Jesus' mother, several other women, and notably, Jesus' brothers (verse 14)—named in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 as James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. Although they had earlier rejected Jesus' ministry (John 7:3–5), they began to believe in Him at some point. Now they joined the apostles and His other followers in constant, united prayer.

Discuss

? Imagine taking that half-mile walk from the Mount of Olives to the upstairs room in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. What do you think the conversation and mood was like among Jesus' followers?

? Why do you think Jesus' brothers didn't believe in Him at first? What may have changed their minds?

Matthias Is Chosen

Acts 1:15–26

Say: Have you ever struggled to make an important, life-altering decision? The apostles faced such a decision in Acts 1:15–26. Their immediate response was to pray for God's will and then trust His guidance. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Acts 1:15–26 offers several vital details about the Early Church as these believers searched for Judas's replacement. The group of eleven had grown to 120, all of whom had obeyed the command to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism in the Holy Spirit (verse 15). Peter identified the Holy Spirit as the source of inspiration of Scripture (verse 16).

Judas, the disciple who had betrayed Christ, was dead (verses 18–19). David’s words in Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 had been prophetic and would lead them to choose a replacement for Judas from the other followers who met a certain set of criteria (Acts 1:20–22).

The apostles then prayed for God’s will to be done and cast lots to decide between Barsabbas and Matthias. The lot settled on Matthias (verse 26). This was the first and last time the Early Church cast lots to make a decision. After the baptism in the Holy Spirit took place and His guidance and power became accessible in an unprecedented way, church leaders sought direct divine guidance through prayer.

Resource Packet Item 3: The Twelve Apostles

Distribute the information sheet and review what Church tradition holds regarding the ministries and deaths of the twelve apostles.

Discuss

- ? What process (if any) do you follow when you are seeking God’s guidance?
- ? What happens if we try to operate as the Church without prayer or the presence and power of the Holy Spirit?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: From these beginnings, God’s people took hold of the Great Commission, and the Church began to spread. They focused on prayer and depended on the Holy Spirit’s guidance and empowerment. As part of the Church today, we would be wise to follow their example.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Ask your pastor about new ways you can bless or serve your church.
- Think of someone who has been seeking God’s help or answer for a long time. Commit to pray for their need and offer regular encouragement.
- Pray daily for the Holy Spirit to guide and empower you.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

God’s Glory Fills the Tabernacle.
Exodus 40:34–38

Tuesday:

God’s Glory Fills the Temple.
2 Chronicles 7:1–6

Wednesday:

Corporate Worship Restored in Jerusalem.
Ezra 3:1–7

Thursday:

Jesus Builds the Church.

Matthew 16:13–18

Friday:

Jesus Loves the Church.

Ephesians 5:25–27

Saturday:

Jesus Directs the Church.

Colossians 1:15–18