

4 BUILDING ON FIRM FOUNDATIONS

REVISED EDITION



TEACHING NEW BELIEVERS: ACTS

Trevor McIlwain

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Building On Firm Foundations: Volume 4: Teaching New Believers: Acts – Revised Edition
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Part 1



Preparations and Guidelines for
Teaching Phase 3

1

Phase 3 of the Chronological Teaching Outline

Phase 3 is an overview of the book of Acts, telling the ongoing story after Christ's ascension, showing the fulfillment of all the promises concerning the Holy Spirit and giving the historical background necessary for understanding the Epistles.

Chronological Teaching Outline			
Old Testament	Gospels	Acts	Epistles
Phase 1 Unbelievers Mixed groups (of unbelievers and believers) Believers			
Phase 2 New believers			
		Phase 3 New believers	
			Phase 4 New believers
Phase 5 Maturing believers			
		Phase 6 Maturing believers	
			Phase 7 Maturing believers

Designed for new believers

Phase 3 has been prepared to teach to new or older believers to whom you have just finished teaching Phase 2.

Purpose of Phase 3 teaching

1. To continue the story of the Lord Jesus Christ following His ascension.

The Holy Spirit guided Luke to write the Acts of the Apostles as the sequel to his account of the life of Christ (Acts 1:1).

In Phases 1 and 2, we told the story of the Bible only as far as the ascension of Christ. In Phase 3, we will continue the story by teaching the main events in the Acts of the Apostles.

Because Phase 3 covers the next stage in the story, continue on from the last lesson in Phase 2 without any interruption.

2. To provide the historical and geographical background for the remainder of the New Testament.

Acts plays an indispensable part as the bridge, or link, between the Gospels and the Epistles. Acts gives the only account that we have of how the Gospel broke down the barriers and bridged the seemingly impassable chasm between believing Jews and Gentiles. It also provides the story of how the Gospel spread geographically from Jerusalem – the capital of the nation of Israel – to Rome – the capital of the Gentiles in the then-known world. Therefore, as we taught the Old Testament to provide the necessary foundations and background for the New Testament, we will now teach the book of Acts as the introduction and foundation for the Epistles.

This story of the origins, problems and rapid growth of the first Christian churches will prepare your hearers for Phase 4 (Romans through Revelation) by giving them an understanding of the historical, geographical and political atmosphere of the Epistles.

3. To introduce the authors and the remaining books of the New Testament.

The different books and their authors will be introduced at the time and place where it is most commonly accepted that the books were written. In particular, the new believers will come to know and appreciate Paul, the Lord Jesus' apostle to the Gentiles and the major writer of the New Testament Epistles.

4. To use the infant church in Acts as a model for the infant tribal church.

As we follow the growth and development of the newborn church through the story of Acts, we will apply the early church's practices and experiences to the fledgling tribal church. The new church you are teaching will readily identify with the struggles and growing pains of the early churches and of the individual believers in those churches. The tribal believers will discover, just as those in Acts did, that the Lord Jesus has

definite objectives, not only for His universal Church but also for the local church and each member in it.

Activities at the Jerusalem church as a model

When you teach about the activities of the Jerusalem church at the end of Acts 2, you will be able to refer to those activities when instructing the new believers about baptism, the Lord's Supper and giving to the work of the Lord. As you teach these subjects, take into account the culture and circumstances of the local church as well as what the Scriptures teach.

When you teach about giving, be aware that there is no command in Scriptures for a continuous weekly collection of money. Therefore, it isn't mandatory that a church take a weekly offering.

When we began our ministry in Palawan, giving had already been established as a practice in all the churches. At some stage in each church service, an empty glass jar or can was passed around to collect the people's monetary offerings. Each member contributed a very small amount of money. Sometimes, if a person had a bill, he would tip all the coins that had been collected to that point into his lap; and while everybody watched and sometimes helped, he would laboriously count out his change. Giving money should not have been the main emphasis in the Palawan church. The majority of people had very little money. Only occasionally were they able to get work for monetary payment. This reality was not taken into consideration when the initial teaching on giving was presented.

Giving should not be taught as a perfunctory duty but rather as a joyful response to legitimate needs. The believers should be taught to lovingly respond, in the best way they can, to the personal needs of fellow believers and to the needs of the church. This may be a simple act of collecting firewood for the aged or sick. Later, as the church develops, there will probably be the added need to support elders, evangelists and church planters. This may be done through giving money, garden produce, or by planting and tending a garden for those engaged full-time in the Lord's work.

When you teach about the Lord's Supper, it should be taught simply as a time when the believers will remember and worship the Lord Jesus for His death on their behalf.

Don't fall into the trap that many have of teaching the Lord's Supper as a time when believers are to inspect their own lives and get right with the Lord. Through a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 11:28-29, believers have often been taught that, before they eat and drink, they must examine themselves to be sure that there is nothing in their lives which makes them "unworthy" to eat and drink. Because of incorrect teaching, some Palawanos lived in fear of the Lord's Supper and deliberately avoided it. This has also been the experience of believers in other areas of the world.

It is clear from 1 Corinthians 11:27 that believers are to examine themselves when observing the Lord's Supper. But the examination that is commanded is not their lives. 1 Corinthians 11:27 teaches that they must not eat and drink "*in an unworthy manner*" like many of the Corinthian believers did. Believers should be taught to come to the Lord's table humbly (admitting their unworthiness), reverently (realizing that it is the "Lord's table") and thankfully (acknowledging the greatness of the sacrifice that Christ made in dying for them). The disciples who sat with Jesus on the night when He instituted this remembrance feast were far from perfect. Peter would soon deny the Lord Jesus, and all the others

would run away and leave the Lord to the mercy of His enemies. Although Jesus knew this, He told them to eat and drink in remembrance of Him.

Believers should be taught to keep “short accounts” with God at all times, and to deal with sin immediately after they are aware of it. If they don’t, the Lord will chastise them, even if they withhold from partaking of the Lord’s Supper.

Another issue that may arise when you teach about the Lord’s Supper is what symbols are to be used for the body and blood of Christ. Since the Scriptures say the Lord Jesus used bread and wine, the people may wonder if it is permissible to use something else. After all, we will be emphasizing that all things must be done according to the Word of God. If bread and wine are not available in the area where you are teaching, it is important that you make it clear that in no way does it make the church’s worship unacceptable. I explained to the Palawanos that since neither bread nor wine were available, we would use rice to symbolize Christ’s body and water to symbolize His blood.

It’s important that the new believers be set at ease right from the beginning regarding the matter of what symbols are permissible. Their first time of remembrance needs to be a relaxed and joyous occasion and conducted reverently and without confusion or embarrassment. Paul told the Corinthians that the Lord’s Supper should not be eaten or drunk “in an unworthy manner” and that all things should be “done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 11:27; 14:40). So, while we must not misinterpret Paul’s instructions about this matter, it is vitally important that we give adequate guidance so the believers are able to eat and drink in a worthy manner to the honor and glory of the Lord.

Testimonies regarding Phase 3

George Walker, who previously worked in Papua New Guinea, wrote of the blessings received by the Bisorio Christians through being taught the book of Acts:

“We used Phase 3 for the overview of Acts. I don’t know exactly how long it took us. I would guess maybe four months or so. We followed your outline right along with a few minor changes here and there to meet some of the needs of the Bisorios. As we taught Acts in Phase 3, the Apostle Paul emerged as a hero in the Bisorios’ eyes. Thanks to teaching the Book of Acts before the Epistles, Paul has walked into the hearts of the Bisorios.”

Ron Jennings, working with the Higaonon tribe in the Philippines, found Acts to be a tremendous book to teach in the developmental stages of the Higaonon church because it experienced many of the things which the early Church experienced. For example, like the believers in Acts, the Higaonon believers were under severe persecution and even faced death because of their testimony for Christ. They were able to identify, not only with the trials and struggles of the church in Acts, but also with the power, grace and strength of the Lord, evidenced by the church in Acts, enabling them to stand firm in every situation.

After teaching Phases 1 and 2 to older believers in the Pwo Karen tribe in Thailand, George Pierce taught them Phase 3. As they learned about God’s work through the church in Acts, the believers began to see their responsibility to take God’s Word to others. Chi, a Burmese Pwo Karen, was challenged to begin teaching two other fellows, and another Burmese Pwo Karen expressed a desire to go back to his village in Burma to tell them the truth from God’s Word.

The method

In keeping with the principles of the chronological approach, we will point back to the Old Testament and the Gospels, building Phase 3 on the foundations we have already laid.

Each of the books from Romans through Revelation will be introduced at what appears to be the most appropriate time in the story. However, no cross-references from the Epistles will be taught to the people while teaching the Acts of the Apostles.

Old Testament	Gospels	Acts	Epistles
←	←	— Pointing backward to the Old Testament — Pointing backward to the Gospels Pointing forward to introduce each of the Epistles —→	

Information from the Epistles added to Acts

At some points during the teaching of the Old Testament, we included details and information not included in the Old Testament Scripture text. These added details, gleaned from the New Testament, shed more light on the story and provided a better interpretation of the words and actions of the characters.

In a similar way, we will use limited doctrinal information from the Epistles to interpret some of the events in the early Church. For example, when we read in Acts 2 of the coming of the Holy Spirit, we will tell the new believers that the Lord Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to live in the bodies of believers so that they would become God’s house, or temple, here on earth. Although Acts 2 does not say this, we know from the Epistles that this is what actually did happen at that time. While we will give information such as this, so the new believers will understand the details of what took place, we will not give any cross-references to the Epistles. New doctrines, which will be introduced in Phase 3 on the basis of the experiences of the early Church, will be expanded and fully established in Phase 4, when we teach the Epistles.

Don’t get bogged down

Sufficient time should be given so that Phase 3 will accomplish the goals already mentioned but, as in Phase 2, it is important not to spend too much time in the book of Acts. It is essential for the growth and maturity of the church and individual believers that you move on into Phase 4 – Romans to Revelation – where you will teach them truths which are only introduced in Phases 2 and 3.

Although there are parts of Acts which we will not teach during Phase 3, we will return to the book and teach it in greater detail in Phase 6.

Remember to review at the start of each lesson

Luke wrote the book of Acts to be read and understood as one continuous story. Because we will be reading and teaching it in sections, it is extremely important to link every new part of the story to the parts of the story which have already been taught. Without a continuous effort on your part to bind the story together as one, the Christian Church's beginnings, its spiritual growth and geographical expansion, and the ministry of the Apostle Paul will be seen as disconnected and unrelated events.

Reviewing the questions from the previous lesson will help you maintain the continuity of the story of Acts.

In Phases 1 and 2, each lesson began with a time of review. The Phase 3 lessons also begin with a time of review. At the beginning of each lesson, you will see this familiar reminder.

? Review Questions from *[previous lesson]*.

Do not disregard these review questions. They are a vital part of each lesson. Not only do they ensure continuity in the people's understanding of the story, but they will also give you the opportunity to assess what the people understood regarding the previous story.

Use questions throughout the lesson

In addition to asking the review questions at the beginning of each lesson, ask the questions that I have included throughout each lesson. By asking questions as you teach the lesson, you will be able to:

- Hold the people's interest.
- Ascertain if you are clearly communicating.
- Determine who among your hearers understands, who needs immediate explanation and who needs supplementary teaching at home.
- Continue giving the people the opportunity to ask further questions and express their own thoughts.

Some questions review points or stories that the people have already studied in prior phases or in earlier lessons from Phase 3. For example:

- **A light shone around Saul.**

We learned previously about this light. One day when Jesus was still here on earth, before He died on the cross, He took three of His disciples up onto a mountain.

? What happened to Jesus as the disciples watched?

Jesus' face began to shine like the sun, and His clothes became white and shone like light from the sun.

On that day, Jesus' deity showed through His human body.