

Session 13

Baptism in Acts

The promise is to you and to your children: what the apostles actually did.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what the apostolic Church did with everything this study has traced: the urgency of water in Acts, forgiveness and the Spirit attached to the washing, and whole households baptized on the spot. The rail laid in Session 4 arrives at its station: the covenant sign given to children, and the question of infant Baptism answered from covenant grammar, apostolic practice, and the earliest Church's own memory.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that from the very day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism (CCC 1226), that the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism (CCC 1250), and that the practice is an immemorial tradition of the Church, with explicit testimony from the second century on, and quite possibly from the apostolic households themselves (CCC 1252).

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study leaves the upper room of doctrine and walks into the street of practice: what did the apostles actually do? The book of Acts answers with a pattern so consistent it becomes almost comic: someone hears the Gospel, and within hours, sometimes minutes, somebody is looking for water. Three thousand at Pentecost, baptized that day (2:41). The Ethiopian official, mid-chariot-ride: *See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?* (8:36). Saul of Tarsus, three days blind, and Ananias's first imperative: *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name* (22:16). The Philippian jailer, baptized *at once... the same hour of the night* (16:33), wounds still wet. Cornelius's house, where the Spirit falls before anyone reaches the water, and Peter's conclusion is *not well then, no need*, but *Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people?* (10:47). Whatever the apostles believed about Baptism, they believed it was urgent, and urgency is doctrine wearing work clothes: notice, throughout, what the texts attach to it: sins washed away, forgiveness, the Gift.

Listen to what Peter attaches to the water in the Church's very first sermon, because it is everything this study has traced, in apostolic shorthand: *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (2:38). Forgiveness and the Gift: Ezekiel's clean water and the Spirit within, John's water and the Coming One's Spirit, the Lord's water-and-Spirit birth, now offered from a Jerusalem porch to a crowd that asked *what shall we do?* And then the next verse, the one this session turns on, and Peter chooses covenant grammar to say it: *For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him* (2:39). To you and to your children: at the very first proclamation of the Gospel, before the first font has dried, the promise is declared generational. Every Jewish hearer knew that grammar; it is Genesis 17's.

Then the households, which the group will discover: Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened, *baptized, with her household* (16:15), and the jailer, told *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*, then *baptized at once, with all his family* (16:31–33). The text records Lydia's opened heart, then her household's baptism; for the jailer, the promise is spoken over him and his house, the word is preached to all in the house (16:32), the family is baptized, and the house rejoices at his belief (16:34). Acts never pauses to tell us the ages in these houses, and tonight's steelman will make honest use of that silence. But the *oikos*, the household, is not a random sample of individuals; it is the Bible's covenant unit since Abraham circumcised *all the men of his house* the day the sign was given. When Luke says household, his Bible-formed readers hear the covenant word.

Tonight's steelman deserves its very best presentation, because it is held by Christians of deep seriousness, and because a version of it lives in many Catholic pews too: every explicit conversion in Acts is an adult who repents and believes; infants can do neither; the household texts never mention a baby, so the argument is from silence; believer's baptism guards the sacrament's meaning; and even Tertullian, this study's own Session 1 voice, counseled delaying children's baptism. All of it must be said at full strength, including the Tertullian point, because honesty about our sources is this study's signature. The answer then comes in waves: Acts is missionary literature, so first-generation converts are adults by definition, and the real question is what the apostles' churches did with the children of the converted, which Acts answers in covenant grammar (2:39) and household practice; the silence argument cuts backwards, because a Church of converted Jews whose children had been covenant members from eight days old for two thousand years would have erupted if the apostles had suddenly excluded children from the covenant sign, and Acts, which faithfully records the explosive controversy about circumcision (chapter 15), records no controversy about children at all; Colossians 2 (Session 4) names Baptism the new circumcision, the sign whose previous administration was, by God's command, infant-inclusive; and the earliest Church's memory is unembarrassed: Origen calls infant baptism a tradition received from the apostles, the ancient church order under St. Hippolytus's name has parents answering for little ones who cannot speak, and St. Cyprian's council of sixty-six bishops debated only whether to baptize infants *sooner* than the eighth day. Even Tertullian testifies against his own advice: one does not argue for delaying a practice that does not exist; his objection was prudential caution, not sacramental denial.

Underneath the apologetics, keep the theology warm, because it is the study's own deepest lesson: an infant at the font is the purest picture of everything the group has learned. Birth is received (Session 10). The verbs are passive (Session 11). The sea was crossed by Israel's children alongside their parents (Exodus 12:37). The eight-day-old of Genesis 17 contributed nothing and was given everything. The Catechism says it without blushing: the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism (CCC 1250). Believer's baptism intends to honor faith; infant baptism displays grace: and the Church, requiring the parents' and the Church's own faith around every font, refuses to make the two compete. The baptized infant will spend a lifetime doing what every one of us is doing: growing into what was given.

Pastoral notes, and tonight needs them: your room may include parents whose adult children have left the faith (Acts 2:39 is a promise to pray, not a mechanism that failed); grandparents anxious about unbaptized grandchildren (equip them with gentleness: an invitation opens more doors than an alarm, and Session 14 will give God's freedom its full hour); and possibly someone baptized in a Protestant community wondering about their own baptism: tell them plainly, and joyfully, that the Catholic Church recognizes as the one Baptism every Baptism conferred with water, the Trinitarian formula, and the

intention of doing what the Church does, and never repeats a valid Baptism. That fuller conversation is next week's; plant the reassurance tonight wherever it is needed.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations...

Genesis 17:12 (RSV2CE)

The covenant grammar of the old sign reappears, on the Church's first morning, attached to the new one:

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him."

Acts 2:38–39 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Origen of Alexandria • *Commentary on Romans*

Origen, whom the group has met at the sea and the Jordan, writing in the early third century, heir to churches of apostolic foundation, teaches that "the Church received from the apostles the tradition of baptizing infants," and he reasons from the practice: those entrusted with the divine mysteries knew that there is in all persons the stain the water washes.

Leader note: Same honest caveat as always with Origen, and note what makes this testimony strong: he states infant baptism not as a party position to defend but as a received apostolic tradition to explain: the practice was the given; the theology followed.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage • *Letters*

St. Cyprian, with a council of sixty-six bishops gathered at Carthage in the year 253, answered a bishop who wondered whether infants should wait until the eighth day, as circumcision had: they teach in substance that the mercy and grace of God are to be denied to no one born, and that the infant, newly born, having contracted no sin of his own, should be brought to the washing without delay. When a council of that century took the question up, the debate was over whether eight days was too long to make mercy wait.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Apostolic Tradition • *the ancient church order under the name of St. Hippolytus*

The ancient Roman church order handed down under the name of St. Hippolytus, a document whose date, provenance, and authorship scholars debate (it is commonly placed in the early third century), directs in substance: baptize the little children first; those who can speak for themselves,

let them speak; and for those who cannot, let their parents or someone from their family speak for them. The rubric is unargued, the tone administrative: the rubric legislates for infants as a matter of course: an administrative witness to settled practice, whatever remains debated about the document itself.

Leader note: Honesty about the source: the attribution to Hippolytus and the document's exact date are debated by scholars; its witness to early practice is why we cite it, and we label it as the tradition labels it.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1226 anchors the whole night: from the very day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism, and the paragraph quotes Peter's Pentecost imperative as its evidence: always Baptism is bound to faith, and always it was administered, not postponed into pure inwardness. CCC 1250 gives infant Baptism its two feet: children, born with a fallen nature, need the new birth; and the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism; the Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.

CCC 1251–1252 completes the frame: Christian parents recognize the practice as their role of nurturers of the life God entrusts to them; and infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church, explicitly attested from the second century on, while it is quite possible that from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole households received baptism, infants may also have been baptized. Notice the Catechism's own careful honesty about the household texts: quite possible, may also: the Church does not overclaim the silence, and neither does this session. The argument never rested on the nursery census of Lydia's house; it rests on the covenant, the grammar of 2:39, and the unbroken early memory.

Paragraphs for this session: 1226, 1250–1252

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Given to infants (planted Session 4: RESOLVED TONIGHT): the study's longest apologetic rail. Genesis 17:12's eight-day-old, seen with the group's own eyes nine weeks ago, is tonight's foundation. Let them lay the rail's last section themselves at Q4.

Eighth day (Sessions 2 and 4: RESOLVED TONIGHT): eight persons, eight days, and Cyprian's council ruling that even eight days was too long to make mercy wait.

Acts 19 callback (Session 8): the same book that gave John's disciples Christian Baptism baptized whole households: Acts's precision about who needs what water is exactly why its household grammar carries weight.

Grace before (Sessions 10–11, applied tonight): birth received, verbs passive: the infant at the font is the study's whole theology in eight pounds. Name it once, warmly.

One baptism, never repeated (planted tonight, resolved Session 14): the reassurance to Protestant-baptized members is next week's doctrine; plant it wherever pastoral need appears tonight.

Session Goals

1. The group can describe the apostolic pattern in Acts: urgency, water, forgiveness, the Spirit, households.
2. The group has read Acts 2:38–39 aloud and heard the covenant grammar: to you and to your children.
3. The group has discovered the household baptisms of Acts 16 themselves.
4. The steelman (believer's baptism as the apostolic pattern) has been given at complete strength, Tertullian's hesitation included, and answered in waves: covenant grammar, the dog that did not bark in Acts 15, Colossians 2, and the early Church's memory.
5. The group can state why infant Baptism displays the study's deepest lesson: sheer gratuitous grace.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: the pattern of Acts (2:37–41; 8:36; 22:16; 10:44–48); Q1–Q3

10 min • Live discovery: the households of Acts 16

20 min • Steelman: believer's baptism, at full strength, answered in waves

5 min • Build: the infant as the study's theology; Q5

5 min • Send questions

15 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q2 (the Ethiopian and Ananias texts can be leader-summarized) and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut any wave of the steelman answer; tonight's objection is the one your group will meet most often in real life.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, on the morning of Pentecost your Church was born preaching, and by evening she was baptizing. Give us tonight the apostles' urgency and the apostles' welcome: for ourselves, for our children, and for all who are far off, every one whom you are calling. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Think of the moment you most wanted to act immediately on good news: a job offer, a birth announcement, a reconciliation. What does urgency reveal about how much we believe something?

QW2. What is something precious you were given as a child, long before you could understand it, that you spent years growing into? Who decided you should have it early, and are you glad they did?

Build • into the text

Set the scene: Pentecost morning, the Spirit poured out, Peter preaching to the crowd. Have a reader take Acts 2:37–41, and tell the group to listen for the crowd's question and every single thing Peter attaches to his answer.

Q1. The crowd is *cut to the heart* and asks: *Brethren, what shall we do?* List everything in Peter's answer (2:38): the actions he commands, and the gifts he promises. Where has this study heard each element before?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Two commands: repent, and be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ. Two gifts, attached: the forgiveness of your sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The group has spent thirteen weeks meeting every element: cleansing from sin (Ezekiel's sprinkling, Naaman's washing), and the Spirit given through water (the whole counted pairing, the Baptist's promise, the Lord's sentence). Peter's first sermon ends by offering, at a font, exactly what the study traced: and note that he does not say baptism merely pictures these things; the forgiveness and the Gift ride with the washing, which is why about three thousand people got wet that day (2:41).

Q2. The pattern holds across the whole book: the Ethiopian shouts *See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?* (8:36); Ananias tells blind Saul, *why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins* (22:16); the jailer is baptized the same hour of the night, wounds just washed (16:33). What does the sheer urgency of Acts tell us about what the apostles believed the water did?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Urgency alone does not settle the question: a commanded sign can be urgent too, and our separated brethren obey it urgently. But watch what Acts attaches to the urgency: *be baptized... for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.* The book does not say hurry and testify; it says hurry, and names

what the washing brings. The apostles moved at the speed of what they believed the water carried.

Q3. Cornelius's house complicates the sequence beautifully: the Spirit falls on the whole household while Peter is still preaching, before any water (10:44–48). If baptism were dispensable, this is God's moment to dispense with it. What does Peter conclude instead, and what does that teach about God's freedom and God's sacrament?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized. God's surprising freedom (the Spirit ahead of the font, Naaman's lesson from Session 6, next week's full topic) does not cancel the appointed means; it accelerates them. Where the objector reasons the Spirit came, so the water is unnecessary, the apostle reasons the Spirit came, so bring the water at once. God's freedom serves his sacraments; it does not compete with them.

Now the verse this session turns on. Read Acts 2:39 aloud twice: *For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.* On the Church's first morning, before the first font is dry, Peter declares the promise generational, in grammar every Jewish hearer knew from Genesis 17: covenant promises run to you and your children. Hold that, and go hunting.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: when Acts shows us the Gospel entering Europe, it shows us two baptisms in one chapter, and neither is of an individual. Find both in **Acts 16**: the businesswoman by the river (16:11–15) and the jailer at midnight (16:25–34). Read both aloud and answer: in each case, whose faith does the text record, and who gets baptized?

Lydia: the Lord opened her heart, and she was baptized, with her household. The jailer: believe... you and your household, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. Have them note vv. 32 and 34 too: the word preached to the whole house, the house rejoicing. Let the group notice the pattern's shape without forcing a conclusion yet; the steelman is about to contest it, and the answer will use what they just found.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at complete strength, held by serious Christians who love this sacrament: every explicit conversion in Acts is an adult who hears, repents, believes, and is then baptized: repent AND be baptized; the Ethiopian believes and is baptized; the jailer believes and is baptized. Infants can do none of this. The household passages never mention a single infant: building infant baptism on them is an argument from pure silence: for all we know, every member of those houses was a believing adult. The apostolic pattern is believer's baptism, which guards the sacrament from becoming an empty cultural rite performed on the unconsenting; and the early Church itself was not unanimous: Tertullian, this very study's Session 1 voice, explicitly counseled delaying children's

baptism until they could know Christ and ask for him. Infant baptism honors family sentiment; believer's baptism honors what baptism means.

Q4. Concede first, honestly: what is true about the pattern of Acts, and about Tertullian? Then ask the question the objection skips: in a missionary book, who could the first converts possibly be?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede the surface freely: yes, every narrated conversion in Acts is an adult, and yes, Tertullian counseled delay: this study does not hide its sources' complexities, and it will not start tonight. But the adult pattern is exactly what missionary literature must show: Acts records the Gospel's first arrival in each place, and first-generation converts are adults by definition, in every era: the missions in Africa and Asia in living memory baptized adults first too, and their churches baptize infants today without contradiction. The believer's-baptism reading answers a question Acts's conversion stories were never asking. The real question is the next one: what did the apostolic churches do with the children of the converted? And Acts does answer it: in Peter's covenant grammar (the promise is to you AND TO YOUR CHILDREN), and in its household shape, where Lydia's recorded faith issues in her household's baptism, and the jailer's promised salvation is spoken over him and his house before his family is baptized at midnight, the word preached to all in the house and the house rejoicing (16:32, 34). Silence about ages, yes, and the texts are compatible with infants present rather than proof of them: but the *oikos* was Israel's covenant unit since the day Abraham's whole house received the sign, and Luke chose the covenant word.

Now the weightiest consideration: the dog that did not bark. Picture the first churches: overwhelmingly Jewish, whose sons had entered God's covenant at eight days old for two thousand years by God's own command (Genesis 17:12, the group's Session 4 discovery). If the apostles had taught that under the new covenant children must now wait outside the sign until adult profession, they would have been announcing a demotion of children unprecedented in Israel's history: and the New Testament, which faithfully records the ferocious controversy over whether Gentiles needed the OLD sign (Acts 15, Galatians entire), records not one syllable of controversy over children losing access to the new one. That silence is evidence to weigh rather than a formal proof: the absence of the very controversy the theory predicts, in a book that records covenant controversies in detail. Add Colossians 2 as Session 4 argued it: Paul joins the circumcision of Christ to Baptism so closely that the Church has always read Baptism as the covenant sign's fulfillment: a sign whose previous administration was, by God's command, given to covenant-born infants: and the weight of the argument shifts. The question was never why would the apostles baptize covenant children; it was who told the apostles to stop, and no one did.

The early Church's surviving memory, fragmentary as early sources are, runs the same way: Origen, raised in a Christian home in the generations after the apostles, calls infant baptism a tradition received FROM the apostles; the ancient church order under St. Hippolytus's name queues the little children first and has parents speak for those who cannot; and when a third-century council takes the question up, St. Cyprian's sixty-six bishops debate only how soon, ruling that infants need not wait even eight days: while the period's one recorded hesitation, Tertullian's counsel of delay, argues prudence about timing, not that the Church cannot baptize her little ones. Even Tertullian, read honestly, testifies for the practice while advising against it: no one campaigns to delay what no

one is doing; his worry was prudential (sponsors answering for a future they could not guarantee), not a denial that the sacrament works. And to the objection's best instinct, that baptism must not be an empty cultural rite: the Church agrees so fully that she celebrates every infant Baptism in the faith of the Church (CCC 1253), professed aloud at the font by parents and godparents who solemnly undertake the child's formation. The infant is not baptized without faith; the infant is carried by the Church's: as Israel's children were brought through the sea in the nation's crossing. Believer's baptism means to exalt faith. Infant baptism, the Catechism dares to say, is where the sheer gratuitousness of grace shines most: the recipient contributes nothing, achieves nothing, earns nothing, and receives everything: which, after thirteen weeks, your group can recognize as not the exception to how God saves, but the clearest picture of it.

Q5. Step back from the argument into the theology. After everything this study has taught: birth that is received (Session 10), verbs that are passive (Session 11), a sea Israel's children crossed with their parents: why is an infant at the font not an embarrassment to explain, but the study's whole lesson in miniature?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because an infant can only receive: and receiving is the entire posture this study has watched God require and provide, from the sea Israel could only walk through, to the circumcision made without hands, to Ezekiel's string of I wills, to a birth no one performs on himself. Every adult at the font is trying to become what the infant already is: someone with empty hands. The eight-day-old of Genesis 17 grew into what he was given; so does every baptized baby; so, if we are honest, does every baptized adult, for the rest of their lives. Grace before understanding is not a concession the Church makes to families. It is the Gospel's own order.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Luke 18:15–17: *Now they were bringing even infants to him... Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God.* Luke's word is *brephē*: babies in arms. Ask: the disciples' instinct was to make the children wait until they could approach properly: whose instinct in tonight's debate does that resemble, and what did the Lord do with it? (Mark's parallel adds that he was indignant at the hindering and took them in his arms, laying hands on them (Mark 10:13–16); and he made their empty-handedness the kingdom's entrance shape for everyone.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. The promise is to you and to your children. Who are the children, literal or spiritual, whose place in the covenant you are responsible for: and what is one concrete step (a baptism long delayed, a conversation, a persistent prayer) this promise asks of you?

QS2. Three thousand people asked *what shall we do?* and did it that day. Where has God already answered that question in your life, while you have been scheduling the obedience for later?

Live It This Week

- If there is an unbaptized child in your family's orbit, commit this week to one gentle step: a conversation with the parents, an offer to help, or begin praying for that child by name daily.
- Thank your own godparents this week if they are living; pray for them by name if they are not. Someone once spoke for you.
- Read Acts 2 straight through in one sitting and count the verbs of urgency.
- If you were baptized in another Christian community and questions stir tonight, bring them next week: the study's final session is built for them.

Memory Verse

For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.

Acts 2:39 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, your Church was baptizing by her first sunset, and she has never stopped. Thank you for every hand that carried us to the water before we could walk to it, and every voice that answered for us before we could speak. Keep the promise running down our generations: to us, to our children, and to all who are far off. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Acts 2:37–41 • Pentecost: repent and be baptized; forgiveness and the Gift; three thousand; memory verse at v. 39

Acts 8:26–39 • The Ethiopian: see, here is water

Acts 22:16 • Ananias to Saul: be baptized, and wash away your sins

Acts 10:44–48 • Cornelius: the Spirit first, and the water commanded at once

Acts 16:11–15, 25–34 • Live discovery: Lydia and the jailer; the households

Genesis 17:12 • Session 4 rail: the covenant sign at eight days

Colossians 2:11–12 • Baptism the circumcision of Christ: the reversed burden of proof

Acts 15 • The controversy that did happen: and the one that did not

Luke 18:15–17 with Mark 10:13–16 • Dig Deeper: bringing even infants to him