

THE WAY, SESSION 1

You Shall Be My Witnesses

The Acts of the Apostles 1:1-26, The Ascension, the Upper Room, and the Office That Would Not Die

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that the Ascension is not Jesus leaving the story but Jesus taking the throne, and that His Church's first recorded corporate decision while waiting for the Spirit, after devoting herself to prayer, is to fill a vacant office. The group finds for themselves, in the text, that the apostles treated apostleship as an office that outlives the man who held it.

Catholic Touchstone. Apostolic succession. When Peter calls for Judas's replacement, his warrant is Scripture itself: "His office let another take" (Acts 1:20, citing Psalm 109:8). Luke uses *episkopēn*, the root of *episkopos* (bishop or overseer, 1 Timothy 3:1), and the Church has long understood Acts 1 to reveal the transferable and enduring character of apostolic office that later finds its full expression in the episcopate (CCC 861). The Church's teaching that bishops succeed the apostles is not a medieval development; its seed is planted in the first chapter of Acts.

What You Need to Know

Acts is volume two. Luke opens by pointing back to "the first book," his Gospel, which covered all that Jesus *began* to do and teach (Acts 1:1). The word *began* is doing quiet, heavy work: if the Gospel is what Jesus began, Acts is what Jesus continues to do, now through His Body, the Church. Nothing in this book is merely the apostles' initiative. The risen Christ remains the acting subject.

The forty days (Acts 1:3) place the disciples inside a familiar biblical rhythm of formation before mission: forty days of rain, forty years in the wilderness, forty days on Sinai, forty days of Jesus' fast. Israel is always prepared before Israel is sent.

Acts 1:8 is the table of contents for the entire book: witness in Jerusalem (chapters 1 to 7), in Judea and Samaria (chapters 8 to 12), and to the end of the earth (chapters 13 to 28). Keep this verse in front of the group all study long; every session sits somewhere on this map.

The Ascension itself is told twice by Luke (Luke 24, Acts 1), which tells you it is a hinge: the ending of one volume and the engine of the next. Read alongside Daniel 7:13-14, the cloud is not scenery. It is the enthronement of the Son of Man, who comes on the clouds *to* the Ancient of Days and receives everlasting dominion. From earth it looks like departure. From heaven it is a coronation.

In the upper room, Luke names the Eleven, the women, and "Mary the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). This is Mary's final named appearance in the Bible, and Luke has placed her doing what she was doing when he introduced her: consenting in faith as the Holy Spirit comes. At the Annunciation she said yes and the Spirit overshadowed her; here she is at prayer with the Church as the Spirit prepares to descend. She who was there when Christ's physical body was conceived is there when His mystical Body, born from His pierced side on the Cross, is about to be manifested to the world.

The Matthias episode (Acts 1:15-26) is where this session's touchstone lives. Prepare it carefully, including the steelman chain in Part 2. Note the qualifications Peter lists (an eyewitness from John's baptism to the Resurrection), the scriptural warrant he cites, the prayer, and the lots. Be ready for the honest question of why lots were used; the Dig Deeper box covers it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

2 Kings 2:9-15. Elijah is taken up into heaven while his disciple watches; Elisha receives his master's mantle and a double portion of his spirit, and the watching community declares, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." This is the closest scene in the Old Testament to Acts 1 and 2: the master ascends, the spirit descends on the

successor, and the mission continues through him. The disciples on Olivet stand in Elisha's line: a different place entirely, since Elijah was taken up beyond the Jordan, but the same handover. Let the group discover this parallel themselves; do not announce it.

Daniel 7:13-14. The Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven and is presented before the Ancient of Days, receiving dominion, glory, and a kingdom that shall not be destroyed. The Church has long read Daniel's night vision as the Ascension seen from heaven's side of the cloud. Jesus took this title, "Son of Man," as His own, and Acts 1:9 begs to be read with Daniel 7 open.

Psalms 69:25 and Psalm 109:8. Peter's two citations concerning Judas. The second is the touchstone: the psalm treats the wicked man's *office* as something that survives him and must pass to another. Peter reads the psalter as the Church's script.

The number twelve. Jesus promised the apostles they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28), and the heavenly Jerusalem rests on twelve foundations bearing the apostles' names (Revelation 21:14). Twelve is not sentimental. It is the architecture of the renewed Israel, which is why the vacancy left by Judas could not simply be left open before Pentecost.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Leo the Great, Sermon 74 on the Ascension (5th century)

St. Leo preached that our Redeemer's visible presence has passed over into the sacraments. What the disciples could once see and touch in Christ, the Church now touches in her mysteries. The Ascension, for Leo, is not a loss of presence but a change in the mode of presence, so that faith might be nobler and stronger than sight.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, Homily 3 (4th century)

Preaching on the Matthias episode, St. John Chrysostom observes that Peter always acts first among the brethren because the care of the flock was entrusted to him, and yet he does nothing by mere personal power: he stands up in the midst of the community, grounds the decision in Scripture, and involves the whole body in prayer. Primacy and communion, together, from the Church's first week.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book III, 3.1 (2nd century)

St. Irenaeus argues against the Gnostics that the apostles publicly handed on their teaching and their churches to successors, so that anyone who wishes can trace the succession of bishops from the apostles down to his own day. For Irenaeus, succession is not a theory; it is a public, checkable fact, and it is how the true faith is recognized.

Catechism Connection

CCC 659-664. The Ascension marks the definitive entrance of Jesus' humanity into God's heavenly domain; Christ is seated at the Father's right hand, inaugurating the Messiah's kingdom, the fulfillment of Daniel's vision of the Son of Man.

CCC 857-860. The Church is apostolic because she is built on the apostles, keeps their teaching, and continues to be taught and guided by them through their successors, the bishops. The apostles took care to appoint successors precisely so that the mission entrusted to them would continue after their death.

CCC 965. After her Son's Ascension, Mary aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers, joined in prayer with the apostles and the women, imploring the gift of the Spirit.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name (master thread). Notice something odd: in Acts 1 this movement has no name. It is not called Christianity, not called the Church by outsiders, not called anything yet. Plant the question tonight, lightly: what will the world end up calling this? Do not resolve it. Luke will give this movement a strange and beautiful name, and the group should meet it in the text when it comes.

Thread 2, The Map (Acts 1:8). Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then the end of the earth. Post this verse somewhere the group can see it every week; each session, ask where tonight's passage sits on the map.

Thread 3, Peter First. Begin quietly counting: whenever the Church acts, who speaks or moves first? Tonight it is Peter who stands up among the brethren (1:15). Track this without commentary and let the pattern accumulate.

Sealed Guess (Take-Home 1). The take-home sheet asks each participant to write a sealed guess: where and how will Luke end this story? They fold it, keep it, and do not change it. It is opened in Session 14.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain why Luke says the Gospel is what Jesus *began* to do, and what that implies about Acts.
2. Participants discover the Elijah and Elisha pattern behind the Ascension and can name its meaning: the master ascends so the spirit may rest on those he leaves to carry the mission, a pattern the Church's tradition loves to trace.
3. Participants can read Acts 1:9 through Daniel 7:13-14 and articulate the Ascension as enthronement rather than absence.
4. Participants find Mary in the upper room and can say why her presence at the Church's first hour matters.
5. Participants can walk through the Matthias episode and explain, from the text, why the apostles treated apostleship as an office to be filled, and how a Catholic answers the strongest Protestant objections to succession.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If you are running long, make these cuts in this order: (1) drop the second Win question, (2) drop the Dig Deeper box on Theophilus, (3) compress question 5 (Daniel 7) into your own 60 second explanation rather than group discovery. Do not cut the steelman chain in question 7; it is the heart of the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. Lord Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father, you promised that we would receive power to be your witnesses. As we open the book of your Church's birth, open our eyes to see what you began then and continue now, in us. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a time you had to wait for something important, with no control over the timing. What did the waiting do to you?
2. Has someone ever handed you a responsibility that felt far too big for you? What was your first move?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 1:1-3 aloud. Luke says his first book was about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach. Sit with that word. If the Gospel of Luke is only the beginning, what is Acts?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Acts is what Jesus *continues* to do and teach, now through His Body. Luke has quietly told us who the main character of this book is, and it is not Peter or Paul. Every healing, every sermon, every mile of travel in Acts is the ongoing action of the risen Christ through His Church. This is why the Church can never be reduced to a human institution carrying a dead founder's memory: the Founder is alive and still acting.

2. Jesus stays with them forty days (1:3). Where else in Scripture do you remember the number forty? Brainstorm as many as you can. What does forty seem to signal each time?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Forty days of the flood, forty years in the wilderness, Moses' forty days on Sinai, Elijah's forty day journey to Horeb, Jesus' forty days of fasting. Again and again, forty marks a period of trial, formation, or transition before a mission or a new beginning. The disciples are being prepared, the way Israel was always prepared, before they are sent.

3. Read Acts 1:6-8. The disciples ask whether Jesus will now restore the kingdom to Israel. Look carefully: does Jesus tell them the question is wrong?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

No. He corrects the *timetable*, not the hope. It is not for them to know times or seasons, but He does not deny that the kingdom is being restored. Instead He tells them how it will happen: power from the Holy Spirit and witness in expanding circles, Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the end of the earth. The kingdom is restored, but it spreads by testimony rather than by armies. Verse 8 is the entire book of Acts in a single sentence, and it is worth memorizing this week for exactly that reason.

4. Live discovery. Somewhere in the Old Testament there is a scene that looks remarkably like what happens next in Acts 1:9-11. Turn to 2 Kings 2:9-15 and read it aloud. What parallels do you find?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The master is taken up into heaven while his disciple watches; the successor receives his master's spirit and his mantle; the watching community recognizes that the spirit of the master now rests on the disciple, and the mission continues. The apostles on the Mount of Olives are in Elisha's position: the disciples left behind, watching the master go, waiting for the spirit to fall. The place is different, since Elijah was taken up beyond the Jordan; the pattern is the same. The parallel invites us to expect what Elisha received: the Spirit of the ascended Master falling on those He leaves behind to carry the mission. Luke never spells the typology out, and at Pentecost the Spirit falls on the whole gathered company, not on office holders alone; the Church's tradition has long traced the pattern anyway. That is the cliffhanger this chapter leaves us on, and it is why the Ascension and Pentecost can never be separated.

5. One more Old Testament window. Read Daniel 7:13-14. From whose vantage point is Daniel watching this scene? Now reread Acts 1:9. What is the cloud actually telling us?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Daniel's night vision shows the Son of Man coming *with the clouds* into the presence of the Ancient of Days to receive everlasting dominion, and the Church has long read the Ascension in its light: Acts 1:9 as the same mystery seen from the ground. The cloud is not weather; in Scripture it is the veil of God's presence and here it is the vehicle of enthronement. From earth the Ascension looks like departure. From heaven it is a coronation. Jesus has not left the story; He has taken the throne from which the whole story will now be directed.

6. Read Acts 1:12-14 and slow down over the names. Who is in the upper room? Whose name might surprise you, and why is she here?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The Eleven, the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus. This is the last time Mary is named in the Bible, and notice what she is doing: praying, with the Church, as the Holy Spirit prepares to come. Luke began his Gospel with Mary receiving the Spirit's overshadowing and consenting in faith as Christ's physical body was conceived. He begins Acts with Mary at prayer as the Spirit prepares to descend on Christ's mystical Body, the Church, born from His pierced side and about to be shown to the world. She is not an accessory to the story of the Church. She is present at its conception, doing what she always does: interceding and saying yes (CCC 965).

7. Read Acts 1:15-26, the choosing of Matthias. First, gather the facts from the text: who initiates, what Scripture is cited, what qualifications are required, and how the decision is made?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter stands up among the brethren and initiates. He cites the Psalms: "His office let another take" (1:20, from Psalm 109:8). The candidate must have accompanied the apostles from John's baptism through the Resurrection, a firsthand witness. The community puts forward two men, prays, and casts lots, and Matthias is enrolled with the eleven apostles.

Build the steelman. Before pressing further, present the strongest Protestant reading of this passage, at full strength, as many thoughtful Evangelical scholars actually argue it:

First, the qualifications in verses 21-22 can never be met again. Once the eyewitness generation dies, no one on earth can qualify, so the apostolic office is by definition unrepeatable and dies with the apostles. Second, when the apostle James is martyred in Acts 12, no one replaces him, which suggests even the apostles did not treat apostleship as a perpetual office. Third, some go further: the choice of Matthias happened before Pentecost, without the Spirit, and Matthias is never heard from again, while Paul, whom God chose directly, becomes the true twelfth apostle. On this reading, Acts 1 teaches the opposite of apostolic succession. Give this argument honestly. Let it land. Then press into the text together.

8. Press question one. Look again at Peter's warrant in verse 20: "His office let another take." What is Peter assuming about apostleship when he reaches for that psalm?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

That it is an *office*, a position that exists independently of the man who holds it and survives his loss. The Greek word is *episkopēn*, the very root the New Testament later uses for the office of bishop, the *episkopos* (1 Timothy 3:1). Peter does not say Judas's ministry was a personal calling that evaporated with his betrayal. He says the office stands vacant and Scripture commands that it be filled. Their first corporate decision while waiting for the Spirit, taken after they had devoted themselves together to prayer, acts on the principle that apostolic office is transferable. That principle is the seed of everything the Church means by succession.

9. Press question two. Then why is James not replaced in Acts 12? What is different about how Judas and James each left their office?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Judas defected; James died faithful. Acts gives no explicit reason why no one replaced James, so what follows is an inference from the shape of the text rather than something Luke states. Judas abandoned and betrayed his office, so his place among the Twelve stood vacant and had to be filled for the foundation to be complete at Pentecost. James died a martyr *in* his office, and a faithful death does not vacate a place in a number that Scripture treats as permanent, eschatological architecture: twelve thrones for the twelve tribes (Matthew 19:28), twelve foundation stones bearing the apostles' names in the heavenly city (Revelation 21:14).

Foundations are laid once. Keep the distinction clean: the Twelve as eyewitness foundation are unique and unrepeatable, while what the apostles hand on is the episkope itself, the office of oversight, which the Church teaches passes to the bishops by divine institution (CCC 860-862; Lumen Gentium 20). That handover is visible on the page: Paul tells the Ephesian elders the Holy Spirit made them overseers of the flock (Acts 20:28), instructs Titus to appoint presbyters in every town (Titus 1:5), and tells Timothy to entrust the teaching to faithful men who can teach others in turn (2 Timothy 2:2). The eyewitness role was unrepeatable; the office of oversight was handed on, deliberately, in the New Testament itself.

10. Press question three. Does the text give any hint that choosing Matthias was a mistake, or that Paul was meant to be the twelfth?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

None. Luke reports the decision without a whisper of censure: it follows Scripture, prayer, and communal discernment, and Luke, who was Paul's own traveling companion and had every motive to promote Paul's standing, immediately counts Matthias in, writing that Peter stood "with the eleven" at Pentecost (2:14) and that "the twelve" summoned the disciples (6:2). Paul himself never claims a seat among the Twelve; he calls

himself an apostle "untimely born" (1 Corinthians 15:8) with a distinct commission to the Gentiles. The "Matthias was a blunder" reading has to be imported into the text; it cannot be found there. And a fair honesty note for your group: the Church has not dogmatically defined every detail of how the office of the Twelve maps onto later bishops. What she teaches definitively is that bishops succeed the apostles by divine institution (CCC 857-862; Lumen Gentium 20), and Acts 1 is where the logic of that teaching first appears in action.

DIG DEEPER: WHY CAST LOTS?

Lots feel strange to modern readers, but they carried deep meaning in Israel: the high priest cast lots on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8), and Proverbs 16:33 says the lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord. The apostles narrowed the candidates by discernment, prayed, and then handed the final choice entirely to God.

Now notice something remarkable: this is the last casting of lots in all of Scripture; Acts never records the Church using the lot again. When the Spirit chooses Barnabas and Saul, He speaks through the praying Church (Acts 13:2), and the council in Jerusalem can write, "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). The lot was the tool of the waiting Church; the indwelling Spirit is the guide of the sent Church.

DIG DEEPER: THEOPHILUS

Both of Luke's volumes are addressed to Theophilus, perhaps a real addressee and patron, addressed as "most excellent" in Luke 1:3. But his name means "lover of God," and the Fathers delighted in the double meaning: every lover of God is Theophilus, and both books were written for you.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Acts 1:8 gives witness in expanding circles, starting at home. What is your Jerusalem, the nearest place where your witness has to begin? Name one person or one place, concretely, for this week.
2. The apostles' first response to an impossibly large mission was ten days of prayer, together, in one room. Where in your life are you trying to wait alone that you should be waiting with others?

Live It This Week

Catholic devotion has always honored the days between the Ascension and Pentecost as the Church's first novena: prayer, with Mary, begging for the Holy Spirit. This week, make it yours. Commit to nine consecutive days of one short prayer to the Holy Spirit, morning or evening: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love." Put it somewhere you will see it. If you miss a day, do not restart; just continue. And once this week, at Mass, watch for the moment the priest speaks and acts in the person of Christ, and remember that an unbroken chain of hands stretches from that altar back to the upper room.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, enthroned above every power, you did not leave us orphans. You gave your Church your mission, your Scriptures, your Mother, and the promise of your Spirit. Teach us to wait the way the first Church waited, together and on our knees. Make us witnesses in our Jerusalem, and when you send us further, give us the courage to go. Mary, Queen of Apostles, pray for us. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 1, in order of appearance. Flag these in your Bible before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 1:1-3 (the first book; what Jesus began to do; forty days)
2. Acts 1:6-8 (kingdom question; the map of the whole book)
3. Acts 1:9-11 (the Ascension)
4. Acts 1:12-14 (the upper room; Mary at prayer)
5. Acts 1:15-26 (Peter stands; Psalm citations; Matthias)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. 2 Kings 2:9-15 (Elijah ascends; Elisha receives the spirit)
7. Daniel 7:13-14 (Son of Man enthroned with the clouds)
8. Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8 (Peter's warrant; the office)
9. Leviticus 16:8 and Proverbs 16:33 (lots, Dig Deeper)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

10. Matthew 19:28 (twelve thrones)
11. Revelation 21:14 (twelve foundations)
12. 1 Timothy 3:1 (the office of bishop, episkopē)
13. Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:2 (oversight handed on)
14. Acts 2:14; Acts 6:2 (Matthias counted among the Twelve)
15. 1 Corinthians 15:8 (Paul, untimely born)
16. Acts 13:2; Acts 15:28 (the Spirit guides the sent Church)
17. Luke 1:3; Luke 24:49-53 (Theophilus; Luke's first ending)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 659-664; CCC 857-862; CCC 965; Lumen Gentium 20